

Urban planning interview



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Yesterday the American Planning Association proudly released the results of a recent poll entitled Planning in America: Perceptions and Priorities, which it commissioned indicating that Americans are overwhelmingly supportive of community planning. Given the state of national politics, it's no wonder that Americans are reserving their passions for local issues. Boss Tweed and Mayor Quimby are looking like angels by comparison.

Some of the results are beyond obvious -- such as the fact that 77% of Americans "agree that communities that plan for the future are stronger" -- while others could, if heeded, foretell profound changes for the profession. Let's parse the obviousness. The report's lead finding is that 79% of Americans "support community planning." What the other 21% have in mind, I have no idea. It's hard not to check "yes" to a question as dazzlingly broad as that one. I'm trying to figure out what it means to "support community planning" -- or what role actual urban planners would play in this process.

First, "community planning" is not the same as "urban planning." Everyone loves communities, and they particularly love their own communities. But "community" extends to all sorts of formal and informal institutions: schools, organized religion, sports, businesses, ethnic and demographic connections, and indelible social networks. Professional urban planners, such as those who belong to the APA, can affect these institutions only indirectly. And it's certain that most stakeholders would not want planners to influence them.

More importantly for planners, this idea of "support" is hopelessly value-neutral. KKK members in the backwoods are probably equally passionate about their communities as hipsters in Williamsburg are. Stefanos Polyzoides

can " support" community planning just as strongly as Ron Paul can. It's just that each are in favor of vastly different results. So, if you're an urban planner and you're looking to capitalize on all of this " support," then you'd better hope that you're working in a homogeneous community whose stakeholders feel exactly the same way as you do. Likewise, when over 60% of Americans across the political spectrum and in every type of settlement say that they want " more" planning. I'm not exactly sure what " more planning" looks like. Planning isn't measured in volume, like cake or gasoline. It's an set of approaches that are intended to lead to certain results. Even so, you really need to ask what kind of planning they want. The poll's more substantive results reveal attitudes that may, I think, be unsettling most planners.

In case planners think that their job is to shape the built environment, they should think again. Out of either desperation or misunderstanding, the public thinks that their number-one job priority should be to effect job creation. Seventy percent of respondents said so. The next four priorities are as follows: Safety: 69 percent Schools: 67 percent Protecting neighborhoods: 64 percent Water quality: 62 percent Unfortunately, only one of these things relates directly to urban planners, and that one thing suggests a rejection of progressive planning principles.

The idea of " protecting" neighborhoods -- as opposed to developing, improving, or enlivening them -- implies a conservative desire to maintain the status quo. Stakeholders are certainly entitled to maintain their respective status quos, but I can't think of a planner worth his or her salt who would accept the status quo in 90% of the communities in this country. Like

Clint Eastwood says, America has a lot of work to do. The poll even says so: 84% of respondents believe that their communities are getting worse or holding steady compared to five years ago.

There's a contradiction afoot. It seems that Americans really want two things that planners aren't necessarily inclined, or equipped, to create: stagnant communities and more money. Seventy-two percent of respondents say that their local communities aren't doing enough to encourage economic growth, and 75% say that "engaging citizens through planning is essential to job creation." In other words, they're putting responsibility for a national economic crisis on to their local officials. (I suppose that's not surprising given that the rancor in Washington, D. C. , has stifled national action.) In some sense, the public has a point. Ever since the publication of Jane Jacobs' *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, study after study has suggested that certain types of urban forms can create jobs. Those forms tend to center on density, diversity, transit, and interaction. In other words, Manhattan. But, time and again, social and political conservatives -- the type who prefer the status quo -- have rejected policies to make places more dense and vibrant.

So even if planners were to accept this burden, it's unlikely that the public would embrace the job-creating urban strategies that are most likely to foster jobs. Some of America's desires, however, are not so fanciful and are within planners' powers. Asked what makes an ideal community, half or more of respondents said having locally-owned businesses nearby (55 percent); the ability to grow old in the same neighborhood (54 percent); availability of sidewalks (53 percent); energy-efficient homes (52 percent); and availability of transit (50 percent).

Interestingly, these desires are a far cry from "preserving neighborhoods," since most neighborhoods have few or none of these components. After attending April's APA conference and going to session after session about innovative planning techniques, I'm surprised that APA would publicize a report that, in many ways, undercuts the dreams of so many planners who are eager to implement contemporary planning ideas into their respective urban fabrics.

The tone of the report suggests that APA is willing to follow popular sentiment, but I hope they don't give in to passivity. This desire for "more planning" -- and even for economic growth -- invites planners who can forcefully, and passionately explain what sort of planning can work best and how that approach can, directly and indirectly, create jobs. If they can pull that off, then maybe those other 21% will come around. This piece also appears on Planetizen's Interchange blog.