Sustainable Urban Development for Ottawa: Planners Can Make a Difference

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an exposition of a positive professional planning experience. In retrospect, it appears that this has been possible due to the strong professional planners' commitment to professional ethics and values, and in greater public interest in community planning. The planners of the City of Ottawa Official Plan review team seized the opportunity to become the leaders in incorporating sustainable development principles in the City's new Official Plan. Planners here have played the pivotal role as catalysts in mobilizing the community through a very open, extensive, community-based participation process.

RéSUMÉ

Cet article décrivait une expérience professionnelle positive rendant possible grâce à des urbanistes qui ont mis en pratique l'éthique et les valeurs professionnelles. Elle est aussi due à un plus grand intérêt de la population à l'endroit de l'urbanisme. Les urbanistes chargés de réviser le plan officiel de la Ville d'Ottawa ont joué un rôle de chef de file en intégrant les principes du développement viable au nouveau plan. Ces urbanistes ont servis de catalyseurs en mobilisant la collectivité par le biais d'une participation active et ouverte. Orientée à des processus rigoureux de consultation et de partage d'information, les urbanistes et la collectivité se sont donnés mutuellement des pouvoirs et ont surmonté beaucoup d'obstacles pour finalement adopter une nouvelle approche urbanistique. Ainsi, les professionnels et la collectivité ont mis en pratique le principe de « pensée globale » — action locale exemplaire et de garantir un développement viable pour aujourd'hui et pour demain.

Introduction

After five intense years of review, public consultation, political debate and revisions, Ottawa's Official Plan was finally approved by City Council on May 28, 1991. Without a doubt, this Official Plan is a virtually unique and precedent setting in Canada. It is a "green" land use planning document that integrates the environment throughout every sector of the Plan. It demonstrates a strong commitment to making urban development as environmentally sustainable as possible. This commitment is shown in several ways: in the Guiding Principles, the philosophical underpinning of the Plan and in its Vision for Ottawa; in the Mission statement on "sustainable urban development"; and by the inclusion of Environmental Management chapter, as a key component of the Plan.

With the development of environmental management policies and with the declaration of its intention to practise the principles of sustainable development through land use planning, Ottawa has pioneered a new approach to municipal planning. As declared in the Plan's Mission Statement:

City Council accepts that change is an ongoing phenomenon in cities which must be managed within the parameters imposed by the overriding aim of preserving a lasting habitat for humanity and wildlife. It recognises that preservation and restoration of the environment and careful stewardship of finite resources, and the conservation of the City’s natural resource base. By such an approach it is anticipated that the economic and social quality of life will be sustained for now and for the future generations in the 21st century. Overall, the plan's contents constitute a major departure from traditional land-use planning.

The New Official Plan and its Environmental Focus, Aims and Objectives

The concept of "Environmentally Sustainable Urban Development," reflected first in the Mission Statement, permeates all chapters of the Plan. In particular, the Environmental Management chapter details the environmentally sensitive mandate of the Plan in three general issue areas: environmental quality, environmental constraints, and environmental evaluation. Its main thrusts are the following:

- The practice of environmentally sustainable urban development through sound land-use planning that is focused on environmental considerations.
- The enhancement of the quality of the environment by taking proactive measures to sustain and enhance natural processes within the system. An example of this is the designation of a Greenway System to provide a continuous network of lands and related waters that connect all parts of the city.
- The facilitation of a healthy ecosystem by attempting to achieve a balance between the growth pressures and the natural biological elements that form the environment. For example, policies to protect and enhance the urban forest were included in the Plan.
The recognition that the non-human forms of life have a right to co-exist with humans, even in an altered setting (viz., the inclusion of a Wildlife Habitat section).

The establishment of measures to minimize, and, where possible, prevent the adverse effects of development on the environment, water management and flood plain control.

The creation of a safe and healthy environment by identifying various constraints on land resources and by taking appropriate action (e.g., contaminated sites, unstable slopes).

The broadening of the tools available for assessing development and related activities for their impacts on the environment, by incorporating and implementing a Municipal Environment Evaluation process.

The Environmental Management chapter is not meant to be a stand-alone, isolated or peripheral set of policies. Rather, all chapters of the Plan (housing, employment, transportation, etc.) reflect the principles and objectives of the Environmental Management chapter. For example, in the context of Urban Design, the principles of design incorporate the objectives of conservation, better environmental quality and sustainable development. The policies not only consider the focused interests of those directly involved, but look to future generations — the quality of urban environment which we will bequeath to them.

A major reason for better environmental management is a genuine recognition that it is more rewarding and cost-effective to "anticipate and prevent" problems than to "cure and mitigate" after the fact.

The Official Plan Review Process

The shift in thinking, policy development and decision-making did not occur overnight. Rather, it was the result of a long, arduous process, stretching over five years. It was an evolutionary process, where both positive and negative factors had an impact on the outcome. Timing, in itself, was of crucial importance. For instance, during the Plan's review, the general public's environmental awareness and knowledge grew exponentially, from a few to a majority. A poll conducted in 1989 showed that 86% of all Canaadians thought that environmental issues were crucial and should receive the highest level of political attention. They ranked the environment with the country's economic planning, and had a substantial influence on the thrust and direction of the City's new Plan.

The City of Ottawa initiated a review of its Official Plan in 1985. The existing Plan was 38 years old, with numerous conflicting and confusing amendments. It was out-of-date and unable to address emerging issues in a proactive manner. Discussions were launched on a variety of issues which would eventually affect future growth and land uses within Ottawa. A series of background research, discussion and issue papers on residential, commercial, institutional and industrial development, and on transportation, utilities and leisure resources, were prepared as part of the Official Plan review process. Extensive public consultation, according to the City's approved public participation policy, was undertaken to allow for public review and comment on various papers and reports. Initially, the community reaction to the series of discussions and issue papers released during 1986/87 was limited. There was no apparent interest in the community to broaden the scope of the Plan in terms of environment; beyond its focus on constrained areas such as the flood plain and unstable slopes.

The preparation of the Environmental Management Policy Report in 1988 coincided with an awakening in the community and among key staff to the fact that the Official Plan could have a profound effect on a broad range of environmental issues. Also, the community realized that by participating in the consultation process designed by the planners to determine public interest, it could have a major influence on a planning document that would have far-reaching effects on Ottawa over the next many years. The policy report on Environmental Management in 1989 went well beyond the traditional focus of official plans, and introduced new measures that focused on environmental quality and the "sustainable development" concept, while introducing the notion of municipal environment management and an urban conservation strategy for the implementation of the policy directives.

This policy report was well received by the public and received considerable media and professional attention as being of immense interest and importance. The role and scope of programs and planning professionals who were working in related fields applauded environmental management's focus on environmental quality in the context of land-use planning. Policies for the first draft of the Official Plan were developed based on that earlier Environmental Management report and other up-to-date information on issues, including ongoing input from the citizens of Ottawa, many of whom wanted the Official Plan to "go further" than it initially did. On September, 1989, the first draft of the Official Plan was finally released.

The surge of public interest regarding the environment continued. New information regarding research, as well as initiatives by public and by various levels of government, were continually improving. The draft Plan's policies did not satisfy the public's demand for more and better environmental protection and quality. During the public consultation process on the Official Plan, when over 160 written submissions and over 200 presentations were made to the City's Planning Committee, it was clear that the public wanted the politicians and planners to do even further on environmental management and the integration of environmental policies. At that point, the community was leading the way for an even more diligent attempt to improve the quality of the environment through the Official Plan. The planners were ready to make a more determined effort to "green" the Plan and gain community support to forward such policies to the elected representatives for their consent. Environmental management moved from being a "stand-alone" concept in the Plan to being integrated throughout the Plan. The result is a substantially improved, better focused, and more visionary land-use planning document.

Recently, Ottawa's Official Plan was nominated for an Environment Canada Achievement Award for its thrust on the environmental management, urban forest and wildlife sections, and its integrative approach. This nomination was significant, because it was made by a local umbrella organization of environmental interest groups in the Ottawa area, many members of which reviewed the evolution of the Plan. Contrary to the common belief that the general public rarely gets excited about planning and its implications, except when groups feel that their interest may be threatened, the citizens of Ottawa participated in every stage of policy formulation, and have made a significant contribution to shaping the Plan into its present form. They held the decision-makers, their elected representatives, accountable for the development of an Official Plan that was "environmentally sensitive," and in the process provided the needed support and mandate to the professional planners to develop a "green" Plan.
tection, conservation and rehabilitation. It also signalled that it favoured a free market economy, in that the public wanted the government to leave as many decisions as possible in the hands of individuals. It was very clear that preserving individual freedom (e.g., property rights) without sacrificing long-term environmental and resource management goals, was one of the central challenges facing the policy-makers.

Another clear message from the community was that they definitely welcomed and made use of the improved consultation/communication between the public and the political/bureaucratic structures, especially the extensive public participation process designed and implemented by the planners to ensure an equitable, cross-sectional representation, not only the vested interests.

As a professional planner, the drafting and steering a new concept in the Ottawa’s Official Plan was an intense, very challenging and satisfying experience. I feel fortunate to have been one of the six Official Plan Team members, and in charge of developing the Environmental Management chapter of the Plan. It was a very exciting experience to have worked through all the stages—from setting out to review and update the City’s old Official Plan, to the evolution of a whole process, which gradually shifted towards the realization of an environmentally conscious Plan reflecting public values and desires in shaping the City’s future.

The beginning of setting the new course was difficult, mainly due to the absence of a clear mandate and scope of Environmental Management in the Plan. Conflicting interests, the ever-increasing public concerns over the environment in general, the inundation of new information, the various interpretations of “sustainable development” and the lack of an accepted definition at the time, all contributed to a challenging situation. Moreover, there was the pressure of the Official Plan development schedule to contend with. Planners accepted the challenge, and work was proceeding at a frantic pace. Along with being on top of the evolving interpretations and scope of concepts, and keeping abreast of the changing perspective of the planning profession itself, planners used every opportunity to inform, consult and educate co-workers, the decision-makers and the public regarding the principles and implications of “sustainable development.” Numerous presentations, workshops, and public meetings where held to discuss issues and to receive public input. Information-exchange meetings were held with professionals working on similar concepts/projects at all levels of government, and with various agencies. Rapid progress was made in crystallizing the new vision of a sustainable urban development, and in developing the policies towards achieving that vision.

Conclusion

My personal experience gained through the Ottawa Official Plan preparation process leads me to believe that planners at all levels can take a leadership role in working towards achieving sustainable urban development and that yes, they can make a difference. Certainly, they can take the initiative, and play a significant role in carrying through, a process of developing an innovative concept and related policies. I believe that planners can help to reverse the trend of a decaying ecosystem, and can be at the leading edge of bringing “sustainable development” to our communities. As Nigel Richardson has stated in his pioneering report, “Land Use Planning and Sustainable Development in Canada,” planners and planning should be at the core of effort to integrate environmental and economic objectives.

The experience of the Ottawa Official Plan preparation demonstrated that there are certain essential factors which contributed towards the making of sustainable urban development Plan.

First, it is necessary to have a vision and to believe in it. This vision has to be focused, precise and shared by others.

Second, it is necessary to arrive at this shared vision by working with the public, the politicians, professionals and with various agencies. Co-operation derived through consultation across jurisdictions and planning levels is essential if the Plan is to succeed.

Third, it is crucial to be continuously in touch with the new developments in the field, i.e., research, studies, innovative initiatives, etc. and to communicate those ideas/policies to co-workers, professionals, and others working in related jurisdictions. Convincing professional colleagues is essential for gaining their support. As the concept of sustainability is increasingly being accepted as the intent and central operating principle of planning, advocacy for “sustainable development” is expected to receive support from practising planners and their professional organizations such as the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP).

Fourth, it is vital to keep decision-makers, in this case politicians, informed of new developments and initiatives in other municipalities or other countries, which may then encourage them to make similar decisions or to go that one step further.

In the final analysis, it can be said that planners can make a difference in the outcome if they have confidence in their values, practice professional ethics and have a commitment in the cause. Every project may not enjoy support and approval from decision makers, and there might be opposition from vested quarters at times. In such cases, planners can advance their cause and objectives by working with the community. This is a process of mutual empowerment to achieve common objectives. In the case of Ottawa, the community responded to the dissemination of information by the planners. Through community input and support, front-line planners could go further ahead in incorporating proactive and progressive policies in the City’s Official Plan, and in putting them forward to the decision-makers. At that point, there was enough demand created by the community for the adoption of such a Plan. Thus, in a constrained environment, through the process of mutual empowerment, planners overcame reluctance or resistance and accomplished the desired objectives.