As a guide to the choices and decisions facing professional planners, the CIP Code of Professional Conduct states that we have “a primary responsibility to define and serve the interests of the public.” The challenge expressed by the code is unique to us as professional planners. In our professional lives we are supposed to have regard for the broader public interest, with the former outweighing the latter. The CIP Code of Professional Conduct states that we have “a primary responsibility to define and serve the interests of the public.”

Within this ethical context, we should be planning with the community rather than focusing on individual interests. This would force us to adhere to the big picture rather than just to the “four corners” of the particular property we are working on at a given time.

Our problem is that we often appear to lack a professional moral agenda. We educate future planners to identify and analyze planning issues, decide upon a course of action, find a consensus, and then act. We had complicated lives. Each of us at a particular point in his or her career is involved in either procedural or substantive issues of planning policy and development regulation. We concentrate on a variety of geographic settings. We focus on seemingly esoteric subjects such as the environment, economics, natural resources, housing and transportation. Our clients are the private, public, institutional, non-governmental or community-based sectors. Our careers evolve and our views change, and we eventually become useful members of a community. To the outsider, we are seen as liberals in conventional, non-governmental or community-minded planning.

The Charter raises the expectation that individuals and freedoms are free and that government cannot interfere with the way in which people conduct themselves. It is this expectation, particularly with respect to property, that we as planners need to understand and reflect in the way we conduct ourselves. All of us are expected to justify our actions and make fair decisions if they interfere with a person’s rights or freedoms. A right is a relationship between the individual who holds the right and the elected government and its planners. The distinction between freedom and a right is that the state cannot interfere with freedom, but it may deprive one of rights if it is fair and just. Rights are not absolute and depend on the various relationships that will evolve and change.

There is no overriding document that protects the intent of planning goals, policies and decisions that may deprive individuals of certain property rights the way the Charter guarantees individual rights. Since every planning document must be fair and just to the individual, the onus is on us as planners to prove that the broader public interest is being served whenever an individual’s rights are being limited.

The “common good” case is the test for finding that balance of public and private interests at the political, social and administrative levels before entertaining the judicial process where winners and losers are created. Our dilemma is confronted with a changing public view of community and a desire to understand the spatial context and objectives of what we are planning. That context is also temporal, with widening political and economic forces driving it.

Resolving our ethical dilemma need not be complicated. In our practice, every person has a right to a hearing, unbiased adjudication, and a fair procedure. After hearing these views, our duty of political and constitutional duty is to prevent the violation of human dignity and freedom by imposing disadvantage, stereotyping or prejudice. The real balance in planning practice must then be defined between the broader public interest and the rights and freedoms of individuals.

Professionally, we are expected to look at the big picture while giving individual rights and freedoms greater sanction, it is time for the members of the institute to reconsider our primary responsibility under the Code of Professional Conduct.

I suggest that the planner’s primary responsibility is “to advocate for the interests of the public, the dignity and freedom of individuals and social harmony in communities.” This is how we should have due regard for the community and the tapestry that weaves us together as human beings. Thus, we advocate the big picture in our professional practice. Then, by adhering to this fundamental planning principle, we still respect human dignity, social harmony and economic freedom within our communities.