Plan

by Bill McMillan
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The most noticeable example is that boomers still believe that transportation expansion is the gateway to the future, while youth are increasingly embracing connectivity and telecommuting.

3. The generation gap is back. This time the "Boomer" generation is holding the reins of society, and a significantly different set of expectations in younger generations is going unrecognized.

5. Efforts to address the problems of today are creating the problems of tomorrow. We can look at the way we have planned for cities to grow and see that we are trouble accepting the possibility that a plan can be a sketch that will change according to learning and experience. We are used to the plan becoming formal too quickly. As a society, we have trouble accepting the possibility that a plan can be a sketch that will change according to learning and experience.

En analyses : Les institutions publiques régionales, Bill McMillan en est venu à se demander si l'avenir n'a pour but que dé- tailer le plus possible le futur sur le présent. Il décrit les plus importants problèmes qu'il voit pointés à l'horizon.

Once We Get Over Y2K,
We May Have a Real Challenge

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For those of you who suspect that planning is nearly always overwhelmed by the desire simply to jump in and do something, the Y2K problem must have been a shock. I have the strange feeling that the things we did not do while we were thinking about Y2K are going to come back with a vengeance in the year 2000.

I am currently coordinating a major review of regional governance at the Alberta Capital Region. A review that contemplates the long-term future and the potential for twenty-two municipalities to adapt at a regional level. Not surprisingly, the challenges of the future are constantly intruding upon my thinking. We cannot help asking ourselves: "Are we really planning for 2020, or are we actually redesigning 1998?" Here are some of the changes that we feel most challenged by:

1. Uncontrollable external forces have great influence. Acting on municipalities, these forces make it extremely difficult to predict even short-term economic and demographic changes with much accuracy.

2. The democratic process is being re-examined. Canadians are currently caught between expectations that democracy be a direct process (i.e., ask the citizens) and expectations that it be a representative process (i.e., let the elected officials make the decisions). If it is the former, we need to invent ways to help citizens participate. In either case, we need agreement about what constitutes a "consensus" (simple majority? unanimity? lack of opposition?).

3. The generation gap is back. This time the "Boomer" generation is holding the reins of society, and a significantly different set of expectations in younger generations is going unrecognized.

4. Understanding of plans and policies is weak. Only a small percentage of the population (whether citizens or elected officials) is able to grasp the concepts that form the basis of many plans and policies. Like legal documents, plans have become esoteric.

5. Things change quickly. The act of producing a plan cannot be divorced from the actions that the plan is supposed to inform. Most often the plan and the action are not separated in time, but rather happen simultaneously. In a sense, a printed plan is obsolete at the moment it is produced.

6. Efforts to address the problems of today are creating the problems of tomorrow. We can look at the way we have planned for cities to grow and see that "a plan will always be congestion in the future." We take advantage of the relative cheapness of personal transportation today and create pollution and resource demand that will certainly arise as problems tomorrow.

7. There are wide differences between views of the future. Leaders vary in their opinions about the future's significance (is it a world of scarcity or of plenty?) and have no forum in which to discuss their different assumptions. When leaders spend less time discussing expectations of the future, they spend more time interpreting today's actions. Different views of the future suggest different actions today.

8. People are cynical about what they see happening around them. Yet they have few suggestions about how things could be better. The kind of atmosphere makes everyone unwilling to experiment with ideas and slow down adaptation to change. We have to accept failure in order to discover success.

9. Plans become formal too quickly. As a society, we have trouble accepting the possibility that a plan can be a sketch that will change according to learning and experience. We are used to the plan becoming either a by-law or a public commitment. Plans, like maps, have to change according to our actual experience.

Will the new millennium be different than the one that is ending? Only if we choose to make it so.

Bill McMillan is the project coordinator for the Alberta Capital Region Governance Review. His role is to work with twenty-two municipalities, the provincial government, 300 stakeholder groups, the media, and the citizens of Alberta in an effort to select the best way to respond, as a region, to global economic, social, and political forces.