A Northern Planner’s Perspective: One Opinion

By Ian D. Robertson, MCIP

The success of planning “north of sixty” is a question of perspective, attitude, and expectation. Planners come north by choice, bringing along their southern background, training, and perspective. If you move to Goose Bay, Yellowknife or Whitehorse, you find that these communities mirror the developed form, the attitudes to planning, and the land use policy found down south. However, when you work in Old Crow or Povungituk, it becomes apparent that traditional planning approaches don’t make sense. Reality starts to sink in when you add the elements of isolation, lack of choice, and the high cost of living. Social and economic issues become more pronounced and contradictions more apparent.

Northern communities can be divided into those that are accessible by road and those that are not. Communities accessible only by air and sea have their own special character and way of living. Here, costs are at least double those found in road-accessible communities, and the socio-economic development options are more limited. One would think the concept of planning would be easily understood, especially in communities where seventy-five to eighty percent of the goods and materials needed for everyday life must come in on the annual sea-lift. But it isn’t, even though we often use this analogy to help explain what it is all about. What may surprise many is that the physical layout and built form of many communities, whether isolated or road-accessible, look remarkably similar from coast to coast. The differences are hidden in the underlying social fabric.

Most of our planning has been reactive, traceable to specific political agendas ranging from confirmation of sovereignty (Grise Fiord, Resolute Bay) to ease of administration (the shift from nomadic to settlement culture, the relocation of capitals from Dawson to Whitehorse, Fort Smith to Yellowknife), and political evolution (division of the territories). Some planning was event-driven, ranging from the discovery of gold in the Klondike to the discovery of oil and gas in the Beaufort Sea.

Many southern Canadians view the north as an unoccupied, resource-rich larder to be exploited whenever the need arises. From the James Bay Hydro-Quebec project to the current diamond rush in the heart of the Northwest Territories, the driving force behind land-use change has involved external pressures over which the people of the north have little control. This “frontier” view has always been in direct conflict with the “homeland” perspective of First Nations.
From the viewpoint of First Nations, the pace of change since the 1960's has been overwhelming. In less than forty years many people have gone from living off the land and residing in igloos and tents clustered around the Hudson Bay Post to living in modern settlements with daily plane service, modern housing and satellite television - things which other Canadians take for granted.

The north is a land of contradictions, dilemmas, and paradoxes. The division of the Northwest Territories is an example. To all of us living north of sixty, events like the creation of Nunavut or the settlement of land claims are no less significant than the establishment of Confederation in 1867. On the one level, Nunavut is an attempt at empowerment which creates a new political structure and vision for an Inuit homeland. On a more pragmatic level, the cost involved is substantial, and there is little to suggest that the new structure can respond to the systemic problems of the north any more effectively than the present system has.

How are the planners doing? There are probably less than two dozen fully qualified planners actually living and working in the north. The rate of turn-over is high, with the majority either coming north on a project-specific basis or staying less than five years. Few stick around when the going gets tough - a situation which has to change. To my knowledge, there is only one graduate of a university planning program who was born and raised north of sixty. First Nations people often argue that we do not have the cultural training and experience to fully understand their world-view, yet few of them seem interested in pursuing "planning" as a career, even though they are sorely needed.

Do northern planners have the right skill-set? We may have skills in mediation, cross-cultural facilitation and public consultation. But often what is needed most involves other, less tangible personal traits, such as the ability to deal with isolation, stress and ambiguity. Perseverance, patience and commitment are essential because getting things done may hinge as much on our personal relationships as on our technical skills. Misjudge local politics or make a bad first impression in Paulatuk or Teslin and your project may never recover. How do you teach these skills when your planning schools are located in Vancouver, Calgary or Montreal?

We also have a credibility problem. The structure of the original Northern Land Use Planning Program (NLUP), approved in 1981 by the Government of Canada, illustrates this. The policy was partly a response to recommendations made by the Berger Inquiry and the Lancaster Sound Environmental Assessment, and partly a recognition that the current land management processes under the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) needed to change. DIAND originally proposed a centralised system of bureaucratic decision-making that gave only a minor role to territorial governments and Aboriginal people. Planning would be a technical exercise. After two years of negotiations, a compromise was reached in which Canada would retain control but the territorial governments would have greater influence. The role of the First Nations was still somewhat ambiguous because at that point, with claims unsettled, they lacked government status. Thus, it was argued that they could not be treated as equals.

The aim of the program was to assist the governments and First Nations in "applying social, cultural, economic and environmental policies to the management of renewable and non-renewable resources." The agreement called for the establishment of regional offices in Yellowknife and Whitehorse to provide technical support to the regional planning commissions, which now had stronger community representation. Three plans were completed (Lancaster Sound, Beaufort Sea, Kluane) at significant cost and without the full commitment from all of the parties needed for successful implementation. They are currently being used as "guidelines" or reference documents rather than as true management strategies.
Thus, the program faced a continuous series of difficulties, with the main participants experiencing political agendas, different approaches to power and control. The federal government proposed a paternalistic "top-down" planning approach, while the territorial government of Yukon and First Nations wanted a "bottom-up" or community-based approach. Without a shared vision, balanced power and measurable objectives, program expectations were in conflict and uncertain. By 1990, an evaluation concluded the program was not working and DIAND decided unilaterally to shut it down.

The main beneficiaries of the program were the First Nations, who used the information collected to further their land-claim negotiations. They also negotiated a new regional planning process for the Yukon in their 1993 Umbrella Final Agreement. However, since the resurrection of the program in 1994, little progress has been made and no new plans have been initiated - a fact which deepened the credibility problem.

At the community level, planners have had mixed success, with more innovation occurring in the Northwest Territories than in the Yukon. This is partly because there are more inaccessible communities in the NWT, so necessity has resulted in innovations like modular housing packages designed for sea-lift delivery. NWT planners also created custom training packages and pioneered the use of poster delivery. NWT planners also created custom training packages and pioneered the use of poster delivery. NWT planners also created custom training packages and pioneered the use of poster delivery.

The settlement of land claims throughout northern and southern Canada represents an important step towards a levelling of the playing field. Southern planners can learn from our experience in joint planning and co-operative management structures established under the land claim agreements. The contexts may be different, but many of the issues have similar roots.

After twenty-six years of work in diverse regions of Canada, this is what my experience in the north has taught me about our profession as a whole:

- Planning should be about finding balance and harmony, preserving the diversity of future choices through vision and planning. We have become followers, good bureaucrats rather than leaders or "change agents."
- Planners need more interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and community-empowerment training, especially when dealing with isolated, resource-based communities.
- Planners and their political masters rarely understand the issues of scale, geography and time. Canada is a big, complex country with many regional differences. Too often we are looking for solutions to neat, quantifiable problems that can be implemented within a specified time-frame. We need to take a long-term view that tackles, rather than ignores, the fundamental problems, and faces up to the often irrecconcilable differences. That is our job.

Thus, the program faced a continuous series of difficulties, with the main participants experiencing political agendas, different approaches to power and control. The federal government proposed a paternalistic "top-down" planning approach, while the territorial government of Yukon and First Nations wanted a "bottom-up" or community-based approach. Without a shared vision, balanced power and measurable objectives, program expectations were in conflict and uncertain. By 1990, an evaluation concluded the program was not working and DIAND decided unilaterally to shut it down.

The main beneficiaries of the program were the First Nations, who used the information collected to further their land-claim negotiations. They also negotiated a new regional planning process for the Yukon in their 1993 Umbrella Final Agreement. However, since the resurrection of the program in 1994, little progress has been made and no new plans have been initiated - a fact which deepened the credibility problem.

At the community level, planners have had mixed success, with more innovation occurring in the Northwest Territories than in the Yukon. This is partly because there are more inaccessible communities in the NWT, so necessity has resulted in innovations like modular housing packages designed for sea-lift delivery. NWT planners also created custom training packages and pioneered the use of poster delivery. NWT planners also created custom training packages and pioneered the use of poster delivery.

The settlement of land claims throughout northern and southern Canada represents an important step towards a levelling of the playing field. Southern planners can learn from our experience in joint planning and co-operative management structures established under the land claim agreements. The contexts may be different, but many of the issues have similar roots.

After twenty-six years of work in diverse regions of Canada, this is what my experience in the north has taught me about our profession as a whole:

- Planning should be about finding balance and harmony, preserving the diversity of future choices through vision and planning. We have become followers, good bureaucrats rather than leaders or "change agents."
- Planners need more interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and community-empowerment training, especially when dealing with isolated, resource-based communities.
- Planners and their political masters rarely understand the issues of scale, geography and time. Canada is a big, complex country with many regional differences. Too often we are looking for solutions to neat, quantifiable problems that can be implemented within a specified time-frame. We need to take a long-term view that tackles, rather than ignores, the fundamental problems, and faces up to the often irrecconcilable differences. That is our job.

Thus, the program faced a continuous series of difficulties, with the main participants experiencing political agendas, different approaches to power and control. The federal government proposed a paternalistic "top-down" planning approach, while the territorial government of Yukon and First Nations wanted a "bottom-up" or community-based approach. Without a shared vision, balanced power and measurable objectives, program expectations were in conflict and uncertain. By 1990, an evaluation concluded the program was not working and DIAND decided unilaterally to shut it down.

The main beneficiaries of the program were the First Nations, who used the information collected to further their land-claim negotiations. They also negotiated a new regional planning process for the Yukon in their 1993 Umbrella Final Agreement. However, since the resurrection of the program in 1994, little progress has been made and no new plans have been initiated - a fact which deepened the credibility problem.

At the community level, planners have had mixed success, with more innovation occurring in the Northwest Territories than in the Yukon. This is partly because there are more inaccessible communities in the NWT, so necessity has resulted in innovations like modular housing packages designed for sea-lift delivery. NWT planners also created custom training packages and pioneered the use of poster delivery. NWT planners also created custom training packages and pioneered the use of poster delivery.

The settlement of land claims throughout northern and southern Canada represents an important step towards a levelling of the playing field. Southern planners can learn from our experience in joint planning and co-operative management structures established under the land claim agreements. The contexts may be different, but many of the issues have similar roots.

After twenty-six years of work in diverse regions of Canada, this is what my experience in the north has taught me about our profession as a whole:

- Planning should be about finding balance and harmony, preserving the diversity of future choices through vision and planning. We have become followers, good bureaucrats rather than leaders or "change agents."
- Planners need more interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and community-empowerment training, especially when dealing with isolated, resource-based communities.
- Planners and their political masters rarely understand the issues of scale, geography and time. Canada is a big, complex country with many regional differences. Too often we are looking for solutions to neat, quantifiable problems that can be implemented within a specified time-frame. We need to take a long-term view that tackles, rather than ignores, the fundamental problems, and faces up to the often irrecconcilable differences. That is our job.

Thus, the program faced a continuous series of difficulties, with the main participants experiencing political agendas, different approaches to power and control. The federal government proposed a paternalistic "top-down" planning approach, while the territorial government of Yukon and First Nations wanted a "bottom-up" or community-based approach. Without a shared vision, balanced power and measurable objectives, program expectations were in conflict and uncertain. By 1990, an evaluation concluded the program was not working and DIAND decided unilaterally to shut it down.

The main beneficiaries of the program were the First Nations, who used the information collected to further their land-claim negotiations. They also negotiated a new regional planning process for the Yukon in their 1993 Umbrella Final Agreement. However, since the resurrection of the program in 1994, little progress has been made and no new plans have been initiated - a fact which deepened the credibility problem.

At the community level, planners have had mixed success, with more innovation occurring in the Northwest Territories than in the Yukon. This is partly because there are more inaccessible communities in the NWT, so necessity has resulted in innovations like modular housing packages designed for sea-lift delivery. NWT planners also created custom training packages and pioneered the use of poster delivery. NWT planners also created custom training packages and pioneered the use of poster delivery.

The settlement of land claims throughout northern and southern Canada represents an important step towards a levelling of the playing field. Southern planners can learn from our experience in joint planning and co-operative management structures established under the land claim agreements. The contexts may be different, but many of the issues have similar roots.

After twenty-six years of work in diverse regions of Canada, this is what my experience in the north has taught me about our profession as a whole:

- Planning should be about finding balance and harmony, preserving the diversity of future choices through vision and planning. We have become followers, good bureaucrats rather than leaders or "change agents."
- Planners need more interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and community-empowerment training, especially when dealing with isolated, resource-based communities.