**Planning in Northern Native Canadian Communities**

Still faces many of the same challenges that it did a decade ago, despite the political, social and economic development that has taken place. Some of these issues—such as small communities with barriers to expansion, substandard and overcrowded housing, limited private-sector housing and employment—are systemic in nature and beyond the scope of planning alone to resolve. Yet, as Jackie Wolfe has argued, there is another, more holistic perspective that deals with many of the interconnected challenges of community development by means of a distinctive planning approach—an approach in which community priorities predominate.

**Principles for Successful Community Planning**

in Northern Native Canadian Communities

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This community-based approach, which pays as much attention to the environment and process of planning and capacity-building as it does to the attainment of community goals, is especially applicable to northern native communities and to the principles upon which this article is based. Before discussing these principles in detail, however, it is essential to understand the context in which community planning is currently practiced in the Western Arctic.

**Context**

• In an area of Canada where spending by federal and territorial governments is still the mainstay of the economy,2 community planning is primarily a responsibility of the territorial government, exerted through the regional offices of the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs. The regional offices are driven by the economic imperative to provide free collective service (engineering, municipal administration, planning, subdivision design, and capital development) to the non-tax-based communities in the region that do not have the resources to provide these services independently.3 Planning legislation is basic and geared towards ensuring that each community has a zoning by-law and an approved land-use or community plan to guide and control local development.4 This type of planning meets the needs of most non-tax-based communities where the rate of expansion—typically residential—is generally slow

and on the periphery of the settlement. Commercial development is only significant in the tax-based communities that have populations exceeding 3500. As a result, one planner is often able to manage the planning and development needs of as many as six or seven small communities.

• The development needs,5 however, are a multidisciplinary mix that includes not only planning but subdivision design and summer-time lot development, as well as workshops for community councillors and staff on all aspects of the community development process.6 The latter function is particularly important in helping to empower community councils by making them more knowledgeable in and responsible for development decisions that affect their community.

• Of the wide array of services organized by community planners (land use planning, subdivision planning and design, capital program management, development site plan review, as well as training and mentoring), many activities are delegated to consultants who work under the direction of the planner or community council.

• The land tenure pattern tends to vary from community to community. Except for tax-based communities, which have a significant amount of fee-simple land and a developed market for the sale or community council. The land-use plan or subdivision design “north of 60.”

1. Recognize and respect the native context from the start: “This is our land as long as the sun shines and the river flows.” It is often forgotten that many native groups and bands feel that their land has been taken away from them by others working for the federal or territorial government. This sense of injustice is very strong in the north, and has coloured the relationship between First Nations and other levels of government. A land-use planning...
process is one opportunity for native people to reassess control over their space and remind all concerned that they have the final say in what happens on their land. Great reverence is attached to treaty commitments, and the feeling of many native leaders that these have either been broken or not respected by governments has hardened their resolve to press forward with land claims. This can turn a land-use plan into a significant political event. Any planner contemplating work in a northern native community would therefore be wise to do some basic research on political context. In what treaty area is the community? Are land claims settled? What other policies affect the leasing and control of land within the community?

2 Patience and understanding of the local culture/situation are as essential as listening skills. These elements go together: you cannot understand if you don't listen. In combination, they form a crucial yardstick by which you can measure whether what has been said by the community has been sensitively interpreted by the community planner. Did the planner listen, for example, when the community said that it wanted more housing not in the heart of the community, but beside the river, where the cool summer breeze keeps the bugs away and people can watch their boats? The relationship between man, water, and land is crucial in the north. The summer fishing season is thus something both the elders, presentations to different groups, and the involvement of children, especially teenagers, who can take on the concept of planning their own community as a school project. This active and inclusive approach is generally more amenable to the northern aboriginal culture than the conventional technocratic approach in which a consultant advises a council or select group while missing out on what people really want their community to be in the future. It is also a lot of fun.

5 Timing is everything when it comes to starting a community plan in a small northern community. While a small community has intrinsic advantages when it comes to planning, it can also have disadvantages. Internal problems, divisive community issues, and competing political priorities can make it difficult if not impossible to discuss a land-use plan in any detail. Many of these problems become magnified in northern communities because of the small size of settlements, the oral character of aboriginal politics, and the perpetual conflict between immediate social issues and long-term development imperatives. In short, the timing may not be right. It may be that there are significant political divisions in the community, or that the band council is unprepared with land claim negotiations, housing for a teacher, or the appointment of a band manager — or more simply, that there is little interest because many people are burnt out from doing too much for too long. If this is the case and you have a choice, don’t push your agenda. Be patient. Come back later in the year and discuss it again when

The territorial capital of Yellowknife, NWT looking towards Old Town

people have more time and are more focused. The best land-use planning processes start when the community requests it and the band council wants it, not when a government planner decides or finds it convenient to start. Of course, sometimes you do not have a choice, in which case you need to work harder to sell the community on the idea of a land-use plan by talking to elders and councillors informally. But even then, if the council is too busy with other meetings and significant leaders or elders are away from the community on business, finding space in the community's calendar for serious discussions on a land-use plan will be a difficult task, one which you may find yourself leading instead of facilitating, with problematic results.
6 Be willing to let go. Try not to control the outcome or you may be disappointed. It is quite common to start work on a land-use plan with a "control" mentality based on a fixed (and often tight) budget, the imperative to finish as soon as possible, and the need to simplify and rationalize differences over land use and space. This mentality is magnified when the community is not the other side of town but rather an hour and a half away by air or three hours away by road. And by focusing more on the outcomes than the process, the planner may overlook the need to slow down in order to allow local residents the freedom to come up with their own suggestions, local solutions and goals. For people whose surroundings have been developed and to a great extent controlled by outsiders, the opportunity to consider and directly influence where and when development takes place can be intoxicating. Thus, you need to be prepared for surprises: residents may want to relocate a noisy diesel power plant (something they have complained about for years but of which you are unaware because you don't live in the community). That's fine. It's the community's plan after all, and if that is the local consensus then it becomes a future development objective written into the land-use plan. How to fund the proposal is a debate for another day.

7 Informal land-use planning in a poster format is something that everyone can understand. In the sixties and early seventies, engineered town planning in the Northwest Territories resulted in thick book-style reports by consultants. Later, in the eighties, there was an imaginative period that produced photo-illustrated Kevin Lynch-style book plans. Now, the format for plans for small communities in the territories has evolved into colourful display posters, one side of which are the existing and proposed land uses along with aerial photographs, and on the other side the texts of land-use policies combined with photographs of significant landmarks such as old churches and colourful highway signs. Young and old like this style because it is visual — they can see what the community is like today and better appreciate where (for example) new housing may be developed in the future.

8 Much of life in the north still has a tempo set by nature. This can make any significant planning activity a seasonal process with windows of opportunity to get things done. Typically, December and August are holiday months to be avoided, and early fall is moose-hunting season. There are other, less predictable months in winter when a scheduled meeting might have to be postponed for a week or two because the caribou are near the community. All this can make the period between September and November, and the one between January and May, the time to get things done. Once the snow has vanished, however, and the ice on rivers and lakes has melted away, the thoughts of the community members turn to the land and the water, and they become less keen to attend community meetings to engage in extensive debate on serious long-term issues. Delays must therefore be viewed philosophically, and not measured in the more emotional terms of frustration and lost time.

9 Do not study the community too much "experts" and curious outsiders have studied some of them to death, leaving residents tired of surveys. There is a subtle but important difference between studying the community before you go in and studying the community excessively after you go in — by, for example, launching a land use planning process with the words "Well, maybe if a survey was carried out to determine people's attitudes we could look at some options." Aboriginal leaders often face a fundamental conflict when they have to make big decisions by using the results of scientific inquiry (made up of theory, survey data, and analysis) and the traditional knowledge based on collective experience and the wisdom of native elders. A careful study of the community before you go in should tell you what has happened in recent times (e.g., the past five years) and what surveys, if any, have been done to date. Once you arrive in the community you will be faced with a tricky balancing act in which you must avoid making premature judgments or expressing strong opinions and, at the same time, resist pressures to produce quick results. But once the community understands that you are there to help them produce their plan, and not to do the plan for them — that you are "their" expert and not a government hack — you will be on your way to subsuming your ego in favor of the community's self-esteem and pride in producing the plan themselves.

10 Be ready for suspicion and cynicism: the community has seen many a non-native expert come and go. Gaining the trust of any small native community takes time and commitment. They know they cannot afford to have a planner and engineer on staff and must depend on outside expertise to deal with the technology of growth and development. But this dependency can make them feel uneasy. They may also have negative memories of another expert they trusted who has since moved on, leaving them more dependent than before and impatient for a replacement with the plans and expertise to make "it" happen, whatever "it" is. Job turnover is high in the north, and it requires a certain amount of luck and determination to see a land-use plan through from start to finish. The golden rule, therefore, is never to promise more than you can personally deliver. Be honest if you don't think something can be done or if the community wants something that you know will take a lot of time to deliver (a new recreation center, for example). Community leaders are very savvy politically and know that any significant new expenditure will require lobbying of your boss or minister. What they will expect from you is an explanation of the technical advantages and disadvantages of certain options — an explanation that empowers them to make the final decision themselves.

Conclusion
The above principles may seem confusing to some planners in that they are less about the technical aspects of planning than about an empathetic philosophical approach. They have less to do with planning methodology than with aspects of dealing with people from a different culture. I feel that it is the quality of this relationship which makes for a happy and productive experience for both planner and community. It can also contribute to the planner's reputation as an accurate interpreter of aboriginal community needs.

Planners and community development specialists, whether working for territorial or regional governments or as planning consultants in the private sector, are going to be needed for years to come in the north. They should not, therefore, be put off by thinking that they are in for tough and frustrating working conditions in an unstable political environment. The work can involve a lot of fun, unforgettable landscapes, and dynamic people, all of which can open up new vistas and opportunities that the planner will never regret.

Acknowledgments
I wish to express my appreciation to the Government of the Northwest Territories, Department of Municipal and Community Affairs, as well as to the communities of the South Slave, Delta (Oin and North Slave, for the planning experience on which this article is based). I am also grateful to Professor Jackie Wolfe Keddie for her helpful comments in revising this article.
Résumé

L'aménagement communautaire dans le Nord canadien demande une approche particulière donnant la priorité aux besoins de la communauté. Cette approche peut être énoncée sous forme de principes ou de règles de l'aménagement du territoire. Ces principes réservent une place importante à la culture et à l'environnement des communautés pour lesquelles les décisions sont prises.

Afin de mieux comprendre ces principes, il faut également comprendre le contexte dans lequel l'aménagement communautaire se pratique dans les Territoires du Nord-Ouest, où il s'agit essentiellement d'une responsabilité gouvernementale territoriale administrée par les urbanistes dans la région même au nom des petites communautés autochtones exemptes d'impôts.

Les principes dont il est question dans cet article, reflètent la conviction de l'auteur quant au fait qu'une attitude sympathique et de l'entretient ont autant d'importance que les connaissances techniques lorsqu'il s'agit de comprendre et interpréter les attentes des populations autochtones au nord du 60ème parallèle.

Summary

Successful community planning in northern Native communities requires a distinctive approach that ensures the predominance of community priorities. This approach can be stated in principles or rules which pay close attention to the aboriginal culture and environment in which community planning and development decisions are made.

In order to appreciate these principles fully, one also needs to understand the context in which community planning is practiced in the Northwest Territories, where such planning is principally a responsibility of the territorial government, and is administered by regional community planners on behalf of the small non-tax-based aboriginal communities in the immediate region.

The principles discussed in the article reflect the author's belief that a sympathetic attitude and intuitive interpersonal skills are just as important as technical skills in understanding and interpreting the preferences of aboriginal communities when carrying out a land use planning or development exercise north of the 60th parallel.