City Planning, Community Action, and Academic Research:
A Three-Way Intersection

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Abstract: *With Ottawa's Neighbourhood Planning Initiative as a backdrop, this paper explores the role of universities in supporting communities and cities in place-based planning. It argues that researchers can play a valuable role in collecting input, identifying lessons and sharing feedback.*

Introduction

Huddled in an elementary school library on a winter evening, city officials asked for feedback from community representatives on the reconstruction of Wellington Street, the main street corridor of an urban Ottawa neighhourhood. After a long silence, one local business person replied:

> *"My impression so far is that no one appears to know what they are doing —*
> *You   are   the   experts;   shouldn't   you   be   telling   us   what   to   do?"*

This rather candid question spoke volumes to us, as university researchers listening attentively to this Neighbourhood Planning Initiative (NPI) meeting. It spoke to our research interests in community capacity and empowerment. It hinted at the negotiation of power and control between city and community representatives. It seemed to challenge stakeholder expectations of the planning process. While giving us much to think about, the question also prompted Carleton University's Centre for Urban Research and Education (CURE) to consider our *own* role in this community engagement initiative—both as professionals and partners.

With the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative (NPI) in Hintonburg as a case study, this paper explores the role of universities in participatory, place-based planning. Since 2006, CURE's small team of faculty, staff and students has reflected on our contribution. In what capacity would we best serve the NPI, taking into account our collective skills and resources? How can our involvement be useful and relevant to the community, city and a wide-variety of other stakeholders? And more broadly, how can this action-research project nurture sustainable campus-city-community partnerships to lay the foundation for mutual learning and social change?

The Neighbourhood Planning Initiative: At a Glance

The Neighbourhood Planning Initiative is about stepping away from traditional methods of planning to experiment with a more integrated and inclusive approach to community development. Introduced in 2006, the City of Ottawa is testing the approach in urban, rural and suburban neighbourhood demonstration sites.

Starting in the urban neighbourhood of Hintonburg, city planners have set out to achieve three overarching goals (City of Ottawa, Legislative Agenda, 2006):

Enabling Community Connections

First, the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative intends to establish a structured point of connection to the city for neighbourhoods. The idea is to provide neighbourhoods with single-window access to a wide-range of departments and city service providers (police, community centres, etc.). Similarly, the pilot is designed to help city officials incorporate community knowledge and resources within the neighbourhood planning process to better reflect the needs, priorities and concerns of local citizens. In practice, the City is bringing citizens together in a systematic effort (e.g. meetings, open houses and surveys) to collect feedback on three separate, but interrelated projects focusing on street infrastructure (e.g. sewage, transit); community design (e.g. zoning, streetscaping); and other broader community issues (e.g. arts, heritage, environment, crime).

Strengthening Inter-departmental Collaboration

Second, the City of Ottawa hopes that a more holistic, place-sensitive approach to planning will lead to improved inter-departmental coordination. Multi-functional teams have been formed across the three key departments: Public Works and Services (PWS), Planning and Growth Management (PGM) and Community and Protective Services (CPS). Remarkably, this is the first time in the City of Ottawa's history that these departments have tried to work together in a more concerted fashion. The City expects to see results from the pilot in the pooling of budgets and the sharing of human resources, all of which can be tracked at the neighbourhood level.

Nurturing Citizen-Councillor Conversations

Third, the Neigbourhood Planning Initiative is establishing a mechanism for citizens to define their needs and priorities, and to package and present them to municipal politicians. City Councillors can also offer the process to constituents interested in rolling up their sleeves to get involved in community development, thereby contributing to a greater sense of civic participation. In addition, the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative is attempting to put the 'community-based planning' and 'collaborative community building' objectives of Ottawa's 20/20 plan into practice, and to more generally, develop innovative models for place-based planning and service delivery. If proven effective, the approach will be adopted across the city, starting with communities perceived to have the most pressing challenges (e.g. crime, poverty, infrastructure, etc.).

Carleton's Involvement in the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative

In 2004 Infrastructure Canada, a federal government department, challenged multidisciplinary research teams to foster evidence-based policy and decision-making on infrastructure and communities issues. Taking up the challenge, Carleton University's Centre for Urban Research and Education (CURE) was awarded a two-year contribution to study the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative as a case study. Our intention was to examine the roles of municipal government and voluntary organizations in promoting and facilitating community participation in decisions about local infrastructure. To conduct the case study, Carleton established a partnership with the City of Ottawa in 2006 to provide evaluation and research support. It is important to note that the City's pilot approach and CURE's case study were not initiated by the

Hintonburg community (though they were supportive). Thus, in both cases, the parameters of the projects were largely defined by city planners (e.g. terms of reference) and university researchers (e.g. research questions). Community involvement would increase as the projects got underway.

Box 1: CURE's Research Questions and Interests

Core Research Questions

- How do local governments and communities build decision-making capacity and facilitate learning?
- What is the substantive and symbolic value of community engagement?
- How is the tension between engagement, learning and project momentum managed?
- Can infrastructure provide a model for civic engagement in other areas of local decision-making?

Research Interests

- Degree of community involvement
- Power and control
- Representation and accountability
- Desirability of outcomes from the pilot
  - o Community capacity/resilience
  - o Utility to planners
  - o Horizontality (City)
- Sustainability and prospects

Theory and Practice: Place-based Planning vs. Community-based Research Approaches

There are several similarities between the City of Ottawa's place-based planning pilot and the Centre for Urban Research and Education's community-based research approach. First, both approaches emphasize the participation and influence of "local knowledge" in some or all stages of the planning and research process. "Local knowledge" emphasizes people's assets, needs and capacities based on their experiences or understanding of a 'place' or 'community'. Second, there are common underlying goals: to learn something, develop relationships, and solve problems. These goals apply to all stakeholders involved, including planners and researchers. Third, the key drivers of both approaches are shared, including the realization that complex challenges cannot be solved with a few people, looking at a few issues; and that engaging communities can result in more effective planning and policy as well as more useful research results. Finally, both place-based planners and community-based researchers hope that participants will find the process to be positive (if not empowering) so that, in the long-term, participants will contribute to social change and to building stronger communities (Bradford, 2005; Stoecker, 1999; Warwick-Booth, 2005; Phillips and Orsini, 2002).

Becoming a "Knowledge Broker"

Drawing on these similarities, the Centre for Urban Research and Education's role in the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative might best be described as a "knowledge broker". Our role has been to navigate between city protocols and community practices to generate new opportunities for dialogue, helping stakeholders to connect, reflect and correct their involvement. In this capacity, we have worn many hats: as an *evaluator* during important phases of the pilot; a *facilitator* of, and *participant* in, the engagement process; and as an *interlocutor* to share the study findings with other policymakers and practitioners (e.g. other levels of government, academics, other community groups).

In practice, CURE has attempted to gather local and planning knowledge on the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative at three interrelated levels (Bradford, 2005, p.5):

- *knowledge **about** communities to profile the Hintonburg neighbourhood*. CURE engaged graduate students to track current and historical trends in the community through literature and archival reviews. We participated in "walking tours" of the neighbourhood led by the Hintonburg Community Association. In May 2006, CURE facilitated a workshop to help identify 11 target stakeholder groups which might be affected by the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative. This information helped us to conduct two baseline surveys in the fall 2006 (over 350 responses). One survey was disseminated to city staff and the other targeted community stakeholders.
- *knowledge **of** communities to get "on the ground and in the street" feedback.* The CURE team has observed roughly 50 community meetings, open houses and other community events on topics ranging from transit routes and city lamps, to public art and community safety. In partnership with Imagine Ottawa, CURE held a workshop with panellists ranging from City planning departments, local businesses, community organizations and local residents. The workshop was part of the City Social Forum and involved 30 other Ottawa residents. To date, a dozen interviews with a wide variety of stakeholders have been conducted to gather more personal, in-depth feedback. The CURE team is also in the process of conducting city staff and community stakeholder monitoring surveys.
- *knowledge **for** changing communities to understand theoretical models and trends*. CURE has undertaken reviews of literature on issues related to community engagement theory, community council models, evaluation methods, as well as reviews on related initiatives such as Action for Neighbourhood Change and Vibrant Communities. CURE has also participated in and created opportunities for understanding the successes and challenges of community-engagement processes. These opportunities have included conferences, workshops and other forums involving government decision-makers, academics, students, foundations, community practitioners, the media and other citizens.

Research Dynamics: Tensions and Directions

The similarities between place-based planning and community-based research have made it both easier and sometimes more difficult to undertake this case study. In particular, CURE has encountered tensions and explored opportunities to find a niche for our involvement in the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative.

Tensions: Accessibility, Degree of Involvement, Time and Resources

- *accessibility.* CURE has been both an "insider" and "outsider" to the Neigbourhood Planning Initiative. On the one hand, we are privileged to be able to participate in the "nitty gritty" of neighbourhood development, from scribbling on maps to negotiating public spaces. On the other hand, our accessibility has been limited in some cases. In one instance we were officially "disinvited" to a city meeting and in another we were asked to only "observe" community meetings. This has been sometimes confusing, both for CURE and for other stakeholders.
- *degree of involvement.* Discussions about the level of our involvement in the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative get at the heart of the debate between conventional

and community-based research. For instance, should we be seen as an independent "consultant" to the City so that we may provide objective feedback on the NPI? Alternatively, should we be "initiators", taking on more of a process-facilitating role than a product-oriented role? Or should we be "collaborators" where stakeholders have an equal say in defining the research questions and research strategies? How will our decisions affect the credibility of the research (from both academic and community points of view)? (Stoecker, 1999, 7). CURE is still trying to address these difficult questions.

- *time and resources.* The City has taken the lead in organizing neighbourhood meetings which has provided us with many opportunities to interact with community stakeholders. Yet, this has also meant that CURE has needed to compete for time to get on the City's meeting agenda and/or to gather additional input from extremely busy community leaders outside of these meeting. Further, CURE's limited time and resources has also affected how much we can be involved in the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative.

Directions: Representation, Interpretation and Integration, Sustainability

- *representation.* The City of Ottawa has had limited success in obtaining feedback from "difficult to reach groups" (e.g. immigrants, youth, seniors, streetworkers, etc.) More effort is required to overcome real barriers (e.g. time, language) to participating in consultation processes. CURE's involvement could help to ensure that the Neighbourhood Planning Initiative is more inclusive to all community members. This may involve, for example, collecting feedback in non-traditional locations (e.g. soccer practices, senior centres) and using non-traditional methods (e.g. photo-based research) to engage such groups.
- *interpretation and integration.* CURE will explore ways to increase the involvement of community and city stakeholders as co-learners, co-producers and co-owners of the research. For instance, CURE may facilitate workshops for community and city stakeholders to play a role in interpreting the results of the monitoring surveys. We will also pursue opportunities to not only share the findings in a variety of formats accessible to the community (e.g. local newspapers, radio, blogs), but will also try to put the findings into the hands of Ottawa policy-makers, both municipal and federal.
- *sustainability.* Reciprocity and mutual benefit are critical to achieving effective partnerships. Campus-city-community relationships require a sustained commitment to listening, learning, and appreciating the evolution of goals and interests, and strengths and limitations. In the longer term, CURE may seek opportunities to engage faculty and mobilize students to develop new collaborative research and service learning projects to both broaden and deepen our role with the City and within the Hintonburg community.

Conclusion: Learning Forward

This paper has tried to argue that university researchers can play a valuable role in participatory, place-based planning and that one way is to function as a "knowledge broker". Informal feedback suggests that CURE's involvement has been helpful in collecting input from stakeholders during key phases of the pilot (e.g. baseline, monitoring); identifying lessons (e.g. reaching minority groups) and in sharing real-time observations with a wide-variety of stakeholders (local residents, policy-makers, academics, etc.).

In thinking about our role as partners and professionals, Carleton University's Centre for Urban Research and Education has extracted four key lessons (so far):

1) Navigating the complex nature of the urban planning frequently makes it difficult for scholars and students, regardless of their experience and expertise, to select the most appropriate research approach. Being flexible to "switch hats", moving from evaluator to facilitator, for example, is critical to remaining responsive and relevant to place-based planning initiatives.

2) While the principles of place-based planning and community-based research are well documented, there is still much to be learned in developing effective approaches for putting these principles into practice. Too often, partnerships are launched with a focus on implementation and too little attention is given to the goals, expectations, assets (and limitations) that participants bring to the table. More upfront conversations of these issues can build trust and can make partnerships easier to implement and sustain.

3) Willingness to commit time and energy are important, but so are developing and expanding knowledge (e.g. theory, research) and skills (e.g. communication, team building, problem solving). Each partner has knowledge and skills to learn from one another.

4) University researchers working in communities are often faced with multiple accountabilities. Are we primarily accountable to community organizations, the City, our funder, Infrastructure Canada? This is not always an easy question to answer and may vary depending on the issue and circumstance. At the very least, it is important to recognize and try to resolve these accountabilities.

The Neighbourhood Planning Initiative in Ottawa provides a rich case study and rationale for why collaboration is critical to dealing with complex, challenging and sometimes controversial issues. While there are many obstacles to overcome, place-based planning can benefit from three-way partnerships between communities, city planners and academic researchers. Moreover, intersecting local, technical and discipline-based knowledge can enable universities to play a more significant role in supporting cities and communities to build stronger, more sustainable neighbourhoods.

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