

# COMMUNITY PLANNING – A SOUTHERN VIEW

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## The community planning workshop

The introduction of the Local Government Act 2002 and the requirement for local authorities to produce Long Term Council Community Plans has increased the pressure on and provided opportunities for planners to reassess and enhance their community participation processes.

Whilst planners have for some time now, seen community engagement as an essential component of the planning process there is a growing awareness of the need to develop better communication processes and of the widening remit of participative planning. There is a recognized need to engage in enhanced dialogues with and promote better understanding between planners and community.

The University of Otago Planning Programme, in conjunction with the Otago branch of the NZPI, held a community planning workshop attended

by 40 participants in late 2005. The workshop explored how we as a profession can work towards a better society. It brought together the resources, ideas and understandings offered by professionals from planning, community development, local government, with those from iwi and community groups.

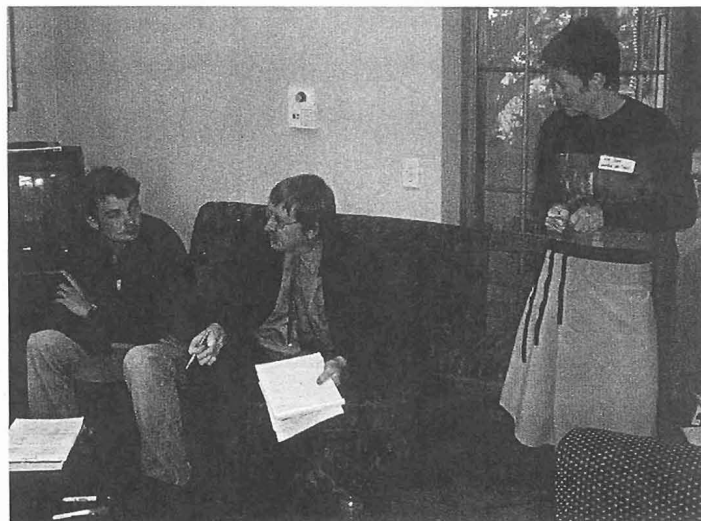
Some of the community groups were ones that planners would not normally work with but are groups that through their community work and networks have much to offer planners seeking to better understand the communities they 'plan' for and with.

These included groups such as Dunedin Council of Social Services, Methodist Connect and Communitree, as well as environmental focused groups such as the Taieri Trust, River-Estuary Care: Waikouaiti-Karitane and Waitaki First.

## The community debate

The workshop began by considering the whole field of community and issues around understandings of community and community participation. Speakers identified a number of issues to be addressed and questions that need to be asked. Some of the speakers and the ensuing discussions pointed to the fact that community is a term that is used loosely, as in "the rural community", "the Maori community", "the disabled community", "the South Dunedin community" and so on.

But, what does community mean? It is a term used to refer in its simplest sense to a group of individuals with a common interest or bond. However, rarely is community so simple, in reality it is a complex web of relationships, patterns of behaviour, traditions, shared spaces and shared histories. Other speakers noted the tendency,



especially in planning, to link community to place, but this isn't necessarily so. Communities as well as having complex geographies can be quite diverse in character; they differ in age, family status, history, economic well being, ethnicity and cultural attachments to name but a few.

Particular mention was made to the fact that community is usually used to indicate something that is good and identifiable and the need to challenge how the term is used. For example, it is used by developers as in the development "promotes community", by those applying for and those giving out grants as in requirement for applicants to demonstrate "community links and identify "community outcomes", and in briefs for regeneration projects which may state as a goal "building community capacity"!

All include community in their rhetoric, but community is not so easily created and influenced and neither is it all positive. Community also has a dark side. Finally, a matter of concern to

many participants was that communities can be excluding of those who don't "fit in", some voices, usually those most educated and wealthiest, speak loudest. Where are the voices of young people, the marginalised, the unemployed and others on the margins? We frequently hear phrases such as what does the community want? Has the community been consulted? But, these can be misleading as they imply a single voice speaking in unison. To ignore difference in community can lead to a perpetuation of inequities.

Di Buchan of Corydon Consultants and a specialist in community consultation spoke for many when she stated that these are important issues for any professional working with the community and are issues that are being wrestled with around the country. She identified a number of very practical reasons why we should all be concerned and why it is important to get community participation right:

- There is so much **legislation** now that requires

community consultation (RMA, LGA, LTMA, Gambling legislation as well as local authority's own policies and procedures)

Community consultation is an **expensive** process

Getting it **wrong** can prove very costly for councils and developers and sometimes the community itself.

During the day a number of cautions regarding community engagement were aired. These included the fact that communities are complex, communities themselves have different views, the question of who represents the community is crucial, and consultation has to move beyond mere recording or acknowledging of views to participative action. A view put forward by one community organisation was that:

"Communities define themselves. This definition often doesn't match municipal boundaries, elected representatives' wards,

geographical, or agency-identified "boundaries".

The workshop clearly showed that to use one speaker's words: "Communities don't come neatly packaged":

### Community engagement: the process

A prime concern of the day was to share ideas on how to develop better process and to address the "what approach, which mechanisms" questions that are focusing the minds of local government. It became clear that there was a significant gulf of understanding between the "community" and those who "plan" for them, on what the purpose of community participation is and what makes for an effective process.

The presence of speakers from local government, central government and community groups was instructive for all in highlighting the gaps, the linkages and the myriad of possible ways that participation could occur.

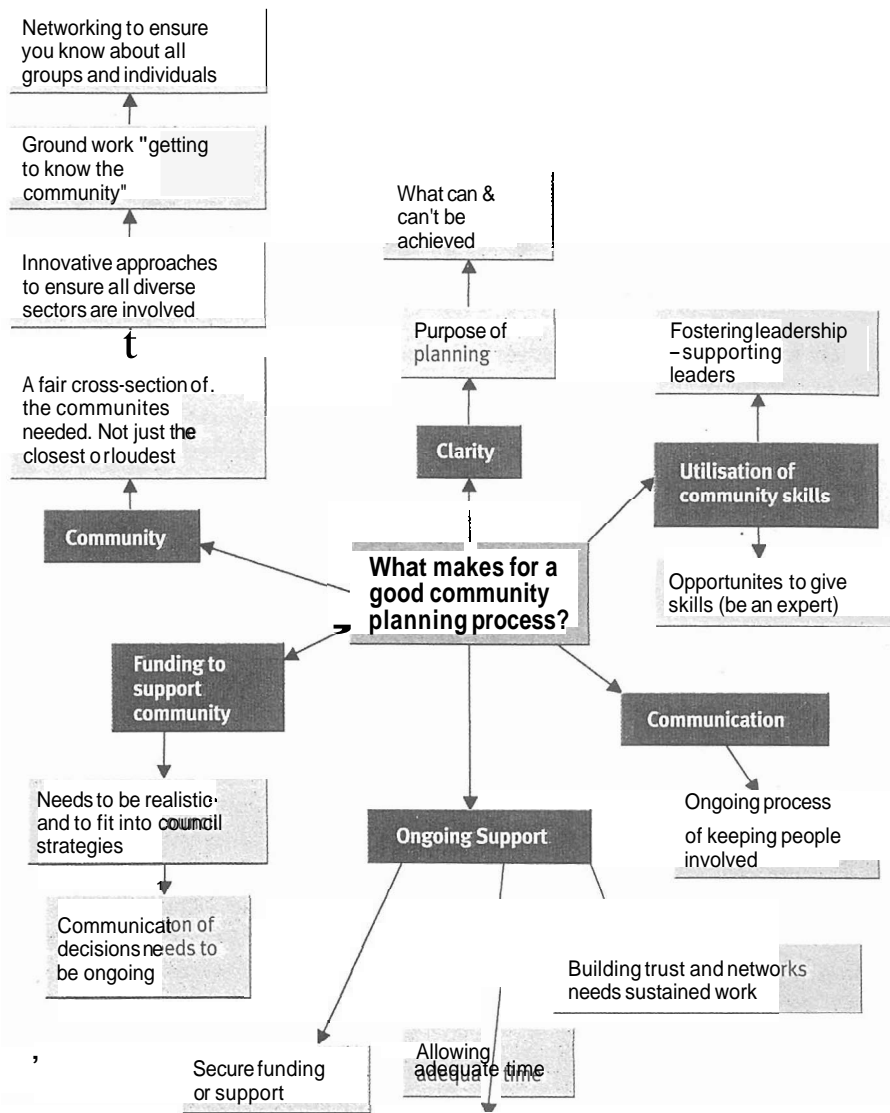
An important part of the day was the opportunity to work together in mixed small groups. In the group discussions, a number of characteristics essential to developing good process were identified. Key ones included:

- Commitment
- Honesty
- Trustworthiness
- Credibility
- Respect
- A shared purpose
- High quality facilitation and the right attitude
- Professionalism
- Transparency about what role community engagement will have
- Avoiding of consultation overload

A number of practical considerations were also identified, including:

- Adequate time
- Early engagement
- Relationship building (face to face)
- Defining roles and responsibilities
- Recognition of constraints - i.e. people's time, money
- Recognising and fostering skills within groups
- Recognising that people have varied perceptions of the value of process
- Sharing of information

The responses to the discussion question of "how can process be improved" were



ABOVE:: Figure 1: Group response to "What makes for a good planning process!"

particularly enlightening and one example of a group's working can be seen in Figure 1, above right. The group discussions show the depth of understanding available in the community and within local and central government and agencies and the benefits to be gained when planners, community, government and agency representatives work together even in the artificial and time challenged context of our workshop. A particular request was made for more workshops like this especially ones where the community can get together to share experiences and information helping them to overcome some of the isolation they often feel.

As always the day was too short, great discussions were curtailed in mid flow, and the demands of work intruded. However, valuable

connections were made, particularly connections between planners and community groups that would not normally be made. The complexity and the value of community planning were debated, new ideas generated and information shared. To end this piece I close with the words of one of our community speakers on why we need community participation in the planning process:

"Worth the time!

"Less likely to backfire!

"More likely to be successful/satisfying and robust!"

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the participants at the workshop for providing the inspiration and material used in this article.