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**The Resource Center for Raza Planning and
the Isleta Boulevard and Village Centers Sector Development Plan**



Margaret M. Adams

**Professional Project, Fall 2005
Community and Regional Planning Program
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Committee

Chair: Dr. Teresa Córdova, Associate Professor, School of Architecture and Planning, UNM
Member: Dr. Stephen Wheeler, Assistant Professor, School of Architecture and Planning, UNM
Member: Bernadette Miera

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It was presented and defended at the School of Architecture and Planning on November 7, 2005.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to acknowledge my committee for their kindness, their attention to detail, and their commitment to pushing me to challenge myself ever-harder. Each of them brought unique contributions to this reflection and to the sector plan itself, and they deserve many thanks for doing so.

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Stephen Wheeler deserves acknowledgment for all he brings to any planning effort he undertakes, in particular his kindness, humor, focus, and political perspective. Without Stephen's orientation into the world of physical planning, completing the sector plan would have been next to impossible, and he is directly responsible for helping me make the connections between the South Valley's unique cultural landscape and the physical planning measures that can help preserve it.

Bernadette Miera deserves recognition for being among the most thoughtful and conscientious planners and thinkers to graduate from the CRP program and, in effect, from RCRP. Working with her on the completion of this reflection was an absolute honor. Her words carry an earnestness and thoughtfulness that are truly inspiring.

I'd like to thank **Jacobo Martinez**, my co-Project Manager, for the hours upon hours we put into the sector plan and for our endless conversations about community and character. I can think of few others who I could have worked with so closely and so well for the last year, not to mention had as much fun with in the process.

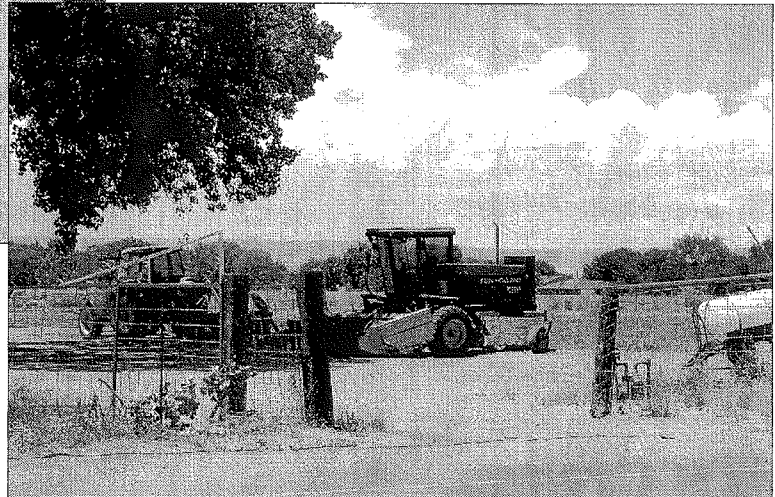
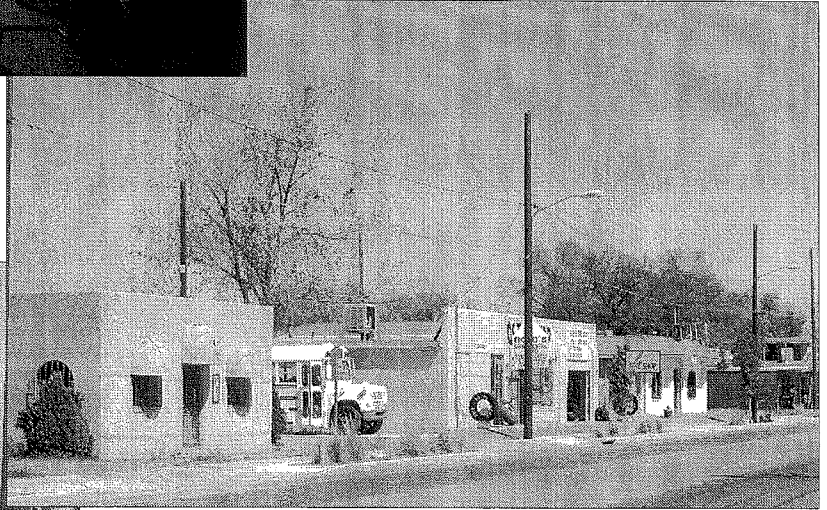
As I've transitioned from a newly arrived planning student finding her way in New Mexico to a fairly connected, politically active, entrenched young planner happy to be in Albuquerque, there are three people who must be singled out for the difference they've made in my life and in my ability to call Albuquerque home for the past three years.

First, **Marjorie Childress** and **Mikaela Renz** are more than just girlfriends; they're my inspiration and home base all at once. For our political activism, classwork, side projects, blogging, and endless girl talks at Winning's, Pearl's, and on Forrester, I salute the two women who make *me* a better woman. My work over the last year would have been incredibly harder had I not been able to bounce ideas off of Marjorie and Mikaela and get their input along the way.

I moved across the country with **Joe Lenti** three years ago to start an adventure that I hoped would match the kind of connected life I'd lived in Boston. New Mexico has more than surpassed my hopes, and much of that is because I've gotten to know and love this area with Joe beside me. Joe and I have always found a way to be excited about our surroundings no matter what, to see beauty in unexpected places, and to continually be surprised and delighted by the people and way of life around us. I cannot imagine being brave enough to start over in a new place with anyone else; nor would I want to. For keeping me grounded, I have Joe and everything he gives me to thank.

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- Maggie



I. Introduction

This paper is a reflection of my work as an employee of the Resource Center for Raza Planning and a Project Manager for the Isleta Boulevard and Village Centers Sector Development Plan, which began in the summer of 2004 and continues today. In combination with the sector plan draft that was submitted to Bernalillo County in July 2005, this paper also serves as my professional project for the partial fulfillment of a master's degree in Community and Regional Planning at the University of New Mexico.

In this reflection, I examine the role of the Resource Center for Raza Planning (RCRP) as a "reflective intermediary" between the community and the government throughout the planning process for the Isleta Boulevard and Village Centers Sector Development Plan. I consider the outcome of the County Planning Commission (CPC) hearing on September 7, 2005 through the lens of a reflective practitioner, community-based planner, and member of a community-focused organization. First, I begin by introducing RCRP and the planning process for the Isleta Boulevard and Village Centers Sector Development Plan. Then I examine RCRP's identity as a "reflective intermediary" and explore how the term describes RCRP, its staff, and its work. Next, I take a close look at the CPC hearing and consider the reasons for the one-year deferral of the sector plan. I review some happenings post-CPC hearing and what they can teach RCRP about its practice. Next, I look at ways to move beyond the CPC hearing and pass the sector plan. Finally, I consider RCRP as an organization and offer some thoughts about its direction and future as a successful organization hoping to continue positively impacting grassroots communities in New Mexico. I end with what I hope could be a new objective for RCRP that would reaffirm its organizational principles and allow RCRP to continue enacting true, long-lasting change in New Mexico's traditional communities.

In this time of transition for RCRP, when the organization is facing changing leadership and a staff that is constantly in flux, this analysis looks at how an organization like RCRP can stay true to its founding principles and staff of reflective practitioners while operating effectively in mainstream settings that require

technical expertise and instruction. The analytical framework for examining RCRP's reflective intermediary status comes from the experience of developing the Isleta Boulevard sector plan and understanding RCRP's role through the lens of Donald A. Schön's classic The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action. I hope the outcome of this analysis will offer insights for future planning processes that RCRP might undertake as it examines how to best manage a planning process when the typical constants like the myth of expertise are not espoused. For future RCRP projects, those answers lie not in changing its organizational structure or philosophy, but in better relating to and acting within the traditional structures that still govern politics and in changing the way outsiders view expertise, professionalism, and capacity.

II. Reflective Practice and Community Process

The community-based planning process for the Isleta Boulevard and Village Centers Sector Development Plan will stand on its own over time as a good model of outreach, inclusion, and ground-up planning. At the time of this writing, the planning process for the sector plan is in a limbo of sorts, recovering from the ruling of a one-year deferral by the County Planning Commission and preparing to begin a new series of public meetings. In addition to the already-stated goals of this reflection, writing this piece also serves to help this Project Manager overcome residual feelings toward the County Planning department and certain individuals who derailed the sector plan and move forward with an action plan for getting the sector plan passed and analyzing its symbolism in the beginning of this young planner's career.

In order to take a look at reflective practice and community process, I begin by examining the Resource Center for Raza Planning, the Isleta Boulevard and Village Centers Sector Development Plan, RCRP as a "Reflective Intermediary," and the community benefits that came out the planning process, including empowerment; relationships, time, and flexibility; and political advocacy.

Resource Center for Raza Planning

The Resource Center for Raza Planning (RCRP) was established in 1998 by Dr. Teresa Córdova to add to the planning efforts of traditional communities in New Mexico, defined by RCRP as longstanding Hispano and/or Native American communities. The founding philosophy of RCRP – housed in the Community and Regional Planning Program of the University of New Mexico – was that the organization could provide university resources in response to the needs of traditional communities, contributing to their sustainability and survivability.

The staff of RCRP has consisted primarily of students in the Community and Regional Planning program. For these students, RCRP offers an opportunity for them to practice their planning ideals and knowledge from the classroom in a real-world setting. By engaging in actual planning processes, RCRP students have also learned how to contend with bureaucracy, politics, wide-ranging community views, and government requirements for planning documents.

From the start, RCRP's projects often focused on the South Valley community of Bernalillo County and included a Community Impact Assessment, the Sanchez Farm site design, economic development language for the Bernalillo County Southwest Area Plan, a survey of businesses and residents along Isleta Boulevard, technical assistance for the development of the South Valley Economic Development Center, public participation for a South Valley water system, and public participation for the Isleta I and II Reconstruction Projects. With each of these projects, RCRP operated in the context of strategic engagement, deciding how RCRP could most influence the mainstream process through its presence in each project.

In all of RCRP's projects, the organization maintained a community-based planning philosophy that involved comprehensive public outreach, collaborative public processes, and seeking out, listening to, and learning from as many community voices as possible. Through its successful record with various community projects, RCRP began to develop a good reputation in the South Valley for doing community-

based work that partnered residents with university resources to respond to planning issues. In Dr. Córdova's roles as director of RCRP, a professor in the Community and Regional Planning program, and resident and activist in the South Valley, she in particular gave RCRP credibility in the eyes of the Bernalillo County government and local residents. In other words, by straddling the roles of university resource and grassroots organization over time, RCRP was able to obtain contracts for work from the County and secured a high amount of support from South Valley residents.

At the current time, RCRP is a state of transition. Primarily due to being elected to the County Commission, Dr. Córdova will be stepping down as the organization's director. Jacobo Martinez, my co-Project Manager on the sector plan project, will be stepping up as Associate Director in early 2006. A few months later, Assistant Professor of Architecture Tim Castillo will be taking on the directorship.

The Isleta Boulevard and Village Centers Sector Development Plan

In every RCRP project, the student staff learned how to engage in a real-world planning process with a community-based planning philosophy. The nuts-and-bolts mechanics of planning processes – engaging in bureaucracy, politics, wide-ranging community views, and government requirements for planning documents – have tended to serve as useful reminders to the staff that in many ways, planning is as much about small details as it is about overarching ideals. With the Isleta Boulevard and Village Centers Sector Development Plan, the RCRP staff had an additional task before them: to wade through all the small details of a planning process and emerge through them with a planning document that would be passed as ordinance at the County level.

Bernalillo County awarded the contract to develop the Isleta Boulevard and Village Centers Sector Development Plan to the Resource Center for Raza Planning in the summer of 2004. The need for a sector plan for the Isleta Boulevard area was established by community organizations like the Rio Grande Community Development Corporation (RGCDC) and the 2001 Southwest Area Plan (SWAP), where Policy

8.a called for the creation of an Isleta Boulevard sector plan that would “protect, rehabilitate, restore, and enhance the historic, cultural, and economic significance of the Isleta corridor.” According to the SWAP, a sector plan for the Isleta corridor was needed in order to:

- Protect the visual qualities that reflect the history and heritage of Isleta Boulevard
- Provide guidance to developers, design professionals, and property owners for new development, streetscape, and redevelopment projects
- Examine existing and future land uses in relation to economic development opportunities
- Examine existing and future land uses in relation to the revitalization of the adjacent properties and the efficient functioning of Isleta Boulevard
- Develop incentives to encourage commercial and mixed-use development for the area

As consultants for the County Planning Department, RCRP was charged with developing the sector plan for Isleta Boulevard, with the specific task of creating new zoning for the area. The Scope of Services mandated that RCRP study current zoning in order to propose new zoning, including but not limited to: “streetscape/landscape, building setbacks, pedestrian and bicycle trails, sidewalks, crossings and connections, parking areas, site design, walls and fences, street furniture, bus and transit stops, lighting, signage and mixed-use zoning.” In addition, “The plan should specifically consider those parcels that currently have both residential and commercial zoning in place and make recommendations for the most-appropriate approach to revising or better-utilizing this unique zoning condition.”

For the first time, RCRP was charged with developing policy that would be passed as ordinance at the County level, presenting the organization with new challenges and higher expectations. Importantly, these higher expectations also came at a time when the existing leadership roles were changing and new staff members were being hired, placing more responsibility and autonomy with the staffers managing the sector plan process, neither of whom had ever done planning work at that level before.

I was hired by RCRP when the County contract was awarded, in the summer of 2004. As a community outsider, my knowledge of the South Valley and Isleta Boulevard came only from my experience in the Fall 2003 Advanced Planning Studio taught by Dr. Córdova and Dr. Stephen Wheeler. In

that studio, we developed a "template" for a sector plan for northern Isleta Boulevard, where I specifically focused on economic development and also produced the final planning document for the class.

At the beginning of the process, my experience with facilitation and developing policy was very limited. My role in the beginning was also more limited. In the fall of 2004, Dr. Córdova was still leading the sector plan process, as she had not yet started her term as County Commissioner. Bernadette Miera, a longtime RCRP employee and veteran of several planning projects, was still working as a consultant for RCRP but planned to leave with Dr. Córdova after the holidays to work with her at the County. That fall, RCRP led the Visioning portion of the community process for the sector plan. In this portion of the process, the meetings were facilitated by Dr. Córdova. As a group, the residents and staff of RCRP started with the visioning from previous planning processes and then expanded it with the current visions of area residents. Starting after the holidays and her confirmation as a County Commissioner, Dr. Córdova stepped back in her role with the sector plan. Beginning in January 2005, Jacobo Martinez and I became the Project Managers for the sector plan, meaning that we were the point-people for the entire planning process, facilitated each meeting, developed the content for the meetings, and worked on the sector plan policy.

Throughout the winter and spring of 2005, the Project Managers led community meetings at Harrison Middle School every two weeks. The spring meetings were organized by issues, with typically two meetings per issue. In mid-June, a draft plan meeting was held where the initial policies were discussed. In late July, the Project Managers submitted a draft sector plan to the County and were scheduled to be heard by the County Planning Commission (CPC) in September, where the plan could be approved and sent to the Bernalillo County Commission to be approved as ordinance.

At the September CPC hearing, rather than approving the sector plan, the CPC gave it a one-year deferral. This did not mean that RCRP had to work for another year on the plan, but that the plan had a maximum window of one year before it could be brought back before the CPC. This decision was, in effect, a setback for RCRP, its year-long planning process, and the planning document that was created out of the

community meetings. For RCRP, this low moment in the process marked a period of self-examination and heavy reflection for the Project Managers, primarily because many of the problems that rose to the surface during the CPC hearing were unanticipated. As reflective practitioners, the sector plan Project Managers underwent a self-assessment as to how those problems could have been foreseen and prevented by them and by the County planners. In many ways, the Project Managers felt that while they'd waded through the minefield of their planning process relatively unscathed, having several big issues surface at the most critical moment in the process – the final approval stage – only highlighted some of the underlying problems in the process that had not been properly addressed over the past year. This reflection serves in part as a response to RCRP's current need to examine how in future projects it can be more effective in mainstream government settings and prevent breakdowns in the process from arising at the final hour.

RCRP as a “Reflective Intermediary”

An examination of how RCRP operates as a “reflective intermediary” in a community-based planning process is a useful way to examine the public process for the Isleta Boulevard and Village Centers Sector Development Plan. A commitment to community and to reflective practice has always informed RCRP's actions in its work. With the sector plan, the RCRP staff had to balance its ongoing role as a community-government intermediary and its commitment to the organizational principles, all while managing and responding to the increased expectations from the county and from the community in regard to developing ordinance policy.

Defining Terms

In the classic book The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action, author Donald A. Schön recognized that planners in particular often embody the role of intermediaries:

[Planners] may position themselves in the neutral space between regulators and regulated, functioning as mediators who convene interested parties, helping them to understand one another's position, to identify common interests, or to fashion an acceptable compromise. (Schön 209)

As an organization that facilitated public meetings held for the community of the South Valley by the County government, RCRP routinely acted in the role of community-government intermediary. The sector plan continued this role as intermediary for RCRP, one that both the South Valley community and the County were used to, albeit with higher expectations and responsibilities in this particular project. This intermediary role defined the entire planning process, and continues to do so.

As an intermediary between the government and the community, RCRP has served as almost a "translator" for the County and the community. When facilitating public processes that were very technical in nature (like the water, sewer, and drainage projects, for instance), RCRP's primary role was to get the public out to a meeting and to ensure that the engineering language of the County was being understood by the residents who participated. On the other hand, RCRP's translator role was also to give credence to the everyday concerns and collective values of residents that engineers often couldn't grasp or even hear. So in both of these roles, RCRP was respected for being able to straddle the worlds of government and community in an effective way, as seen by both parties.

With the sector plan, this role of community-government intermediary continued. Yet a sub-mediation also sometimes occurred "in-house" between the groups in support of and opposed to the plan. In both situations, RCRP embodied the notion of reflective practice, a concept aimed at empowering planning "clients" and downplaying the myth of expertise.

The mystique of technical expertise is seen as an instrument of social control of the have-nots – the poor, the dispossessed, ethnic and racial minorities, women – by a social elite. The mandate, autonomy, and license of the technical expert work toward a distribution of social benefits that is profoundly unjust, and they tend toward the creation of a technocratic society in which most human beings do not want to live. Professional expertise, when it is exposed to careful scrutiny, dissolves into empty claims. The professions are vehicles for

the preemption of socially legitimate knowledge in the interest of social control. (Schön 288)

For the sector plan, downplaying the myth of technical expertise and practicing reflectively meant actively contradicting traditional professional-client norms.

In the traditional professional-client contract, the professional acts as though he agreed to deliver his services to the client to the limits of his special competence, to respect the confidences granted him, and not to misuse for his own benefit the special powers given him within the boundaries of the relationship. The client acts as though he agreed, in turn, to accept the professional's authority in his special field, to submit to the professional's ministrations, and to pay for services rendered. In a familiar psychological extension of the informal contract, the client agrees to show deference to the professional. He agrees not to challenge the professional's judgment or to demand explanations beyond the professional's willingness to give them. In short, he agrees to behave as though he respected the professional's autonomy as an expert. (Schön 291)

Operating as a reflective intermediary was strategic. Particularly in a setting where residents brought with them their pre-existing views of the County – some of which were negative – the sector plan presented an opportunity to wipe the slate clean and forge new, more positive relationships. For residents who were pleased with previous County planning efforts, the sector plan presented an opportunity for them to take charge of this process using the know-how they'd developed from past projects. Obvious from the start, however, was that residents' views of their County government with respect to governmental regulation and private property rights would strongly impact how they participated in the sector planning process.

Designing a reflective practice is as much about small things as it is about large ones. Reflective planning practice is very much about personal interactions – how residents were greeted (warmly), how meetings were conducted (casually) and how information was exchanged (laterally, not top-to-bottom). Rather than “submitting to the professional's ministrations,” residents were encouraged to bring new information to the meetings, to challenge assumptions and ideas presented by RCRP, and to decide for themselves what would be right for their community. The relative youth of the Project Managers indirectly aided the ability to act in a truly reflective manner. The Managers' deference to the residents was on one part reflective and in another way, a deference to the seniority of the meeting attendees, who obviously

brought with them much more experience and know-how than the Managers had accumulated. The technical training the Managers did have was put to use in every meeting, but brought forth as shared knowledge rather than formal instruction.

Although the reflective practitioner should be credentialed and technically competent, his claim to authority is substantially based on his ability to manifest his special knowledge in his interactions with his clients. He does not ask the client to have blind faith in a “black box,” but to remain open to the evidence of the practitioner’s competence as it emerges. (Schön 296)

For some planners – particularly those firmly rooted in the traditional model of planner-client relationships, as are all of the planning firms in the Albuquerque area – acting as true reflective practitioners would be extremely difficult. Doing so would mean giving up the “heroic planner” image that so many planners desire. It would also mean working with a degree of humility not often found in the professions and legitimizing “community knowledge” that so many other planners tend to overlook. Yet as we’ll see, the rewards of reflective practice as concerned with community clients far outweigh any lost sense of heroism.

As the professional moves toward new competences, he gives up some familiar sources of satisfaction and opens himself to new ones. He gives up the rewards of unquestioned authority, the freedom to practice without challenge to his competence, the comfort of relative invulnerability, the gratifications of deference. The new satisfactions open to him are largely those of discovery – about the meanings of his advice to his clients, about his knowledge-in-practice, and about himself. When a practitioner becomes a researcher in his own practice, he engages in a continuing process of self-education. When practice is a repetitive administration of techniques to the same kinds of problems, the practitioner may look to leisure as a source of relief, or to early retirement; but when he functions as a researcher-in-practice, the practice itself is a source of renewal. (Schön 298)

As we will also see, however, reflective practice does bring up some difficulties, particularly in relations with a governmental entity perhaps used to a more traditional, top-down mode of action from their hired consultants, where community process is not as heavily emphasized. In addition, even reflective practitioners need to remember the other tasks and responsibilities necessary to be a good planner that are embedded in their role alongside community support, including organizing, communicating, and listening.

RCRP's Successes in the Reflective Intermediary Role

As a reflective intermediary, RCRP faced the same challenges any planner might face in his/her practice. Some of the lessons for future RCRP planning processes are directly tied to the role of the reflective intermediary. Yet before analyzing "what went wrong," or rather, "what could have gone better," taking a moment to celebrate what went *right* for RCRP as a reflective intermediary in the sector planning process is important, both for this reflection and as a chance to validate RCRP's founding principles and operating philosophy.

Without question, interaction with the community is by far the most positive aspect of RCRP's role as a reflective intermediary. In every way, the positive components of reflective community-planner interactions give more power to the community and better enable them to take true ownership of the planning process, directing it in the manner they see fit and supporting its implementation over time. In this way, RCRP successfully embodied its founding principle of "forming mutually beneficial relationships based on honor, respect, and trust so that work within our communities results in positive contributions" (RCRP). The specific success noted in this reflection include community empowerment; relationships, time, and flexibility; and political advocacy.

Community Empowerment

Schön states that reflective practice is as much about the planner letting go of his/her omniscient, omnipresent sense of self as it is about residents feeling empowered to take charge of plans for themselves. In the case of the sector plan, the Project Managers were young, relatively new to planning, and committed to a community-based planning philosophy that RCRP practiced. These factors made it easier for the Project Managers to consciously embody a reflective practice model than it might have been if they'd been steeped in the technical, top-down planning realm for some time. From the start of the

planning process, the Project Managers were humble and open to community-born knowledge. In some cases, the Project Managers admitted missteps and backtracked to make corrections, an action that while simple and almost obvious, can be incredibly hard for many technocratic professionals. These points of misstep were actually turning moments for the process, displaying the humanity of the Project Managers and the extent to which the sector planning process would remain open to new ideas at every step of the way. As Schön notes, “The recognition of error, with its resulting uncertainty, can become a source of discovery rather than an occasion for self-defense.”

The structure of meetings as “information exchange” rather than top-down lecturing showed how truly valued local knowledge was in this process. In the second half of the planning process, planning issues were typically given two meetings. In the first, the Project Managers and the community would discuss the issue and its impact in the area. Residents expressed their dissatisfaction or satisfaction of current planning/development trends within that topic and also stated things they’d like to see in the future with regard to infrastructure, economic development, agriculture, etc. In the second meeting two weeks later, the Project Managers would come back with a “Policy Option Handout” on the current topic that matched residents’ statements from the last meeting with policy solutions that could be included in the sector plan to respond to those statements. Options weren’t listed in any particular order and no preference was given to one over the other. Rather, the Project Managers and the community talked over the options as a group, crossing some out, noting that some needed more work, and expressing support for others. In this way, the sector plan policies were developed in a much more collaborative fashion than a typical planning process, where residents often don’t see policies until the final phase.

One note with respect to community empowerment in a reflective intermediary practice is *who* feels empowered versus who doesn’t. First, empowerment can be directly tied to participation. For residents who didn’t attend the public meetings, their opportunities for individual empowerment were obviously much smaller than residents who did participate in the RCRP planning process. Increasing community

participation is *always* a goal of reflective planners, and in this case, increased participation could have increased overall community empowerment as well as possibly changing the outcome of the CPC hearing in September, when RCRP first attempted to pass the plan as ordinance.

Empowerment is also about knowledge. One might speculate that in the case of the sector plan, the faction of the meeting attendees who knew quite a bit about planning and supported the plan from the beginning were better served by RCRP's planning process than were some of the opponents to the plan. Theoretically, a reflective practice that empowers residents to plan from their own knowledge inherently favors residents who not only know something about planning, but who understand the complexities of county government and how planning policy works on the ground. While it's undoubtedly true that RCRP's reflective planning practice empowered residents to take ownership of the sector plan, a possible criticism could arise that this model in some instances only serves to empower those *already* empowered with planning knowledge. These evaluations of empowerment are impossible to really undertake given that empowerment was never formally measured by RCRP, so we can only speculate.

This possible critique of community empowerment is not shared by all participants in this process, who point to several individuals who attended every meeting despite being very new to planning. Personally, I recognize that residual feelings from the CPC hearing in September may be influencing my hesitation to proclaim more community empowerment rather than less. Over time, I may be better suited to recognize small displays of community empowerment that RCRP's setback at the CPC hearing will not currently allow me to see clearly. Overall, this question of who is empowered versus who isn't is really about power, a thread that continued throughout the sector plan public meetings in a sometimes contentious way between the two groups at odds in the planning process, coming to a head at a critical moment in the planning process.

Relationships, Time, and Flexibility

Acting as an intermediary between community and government (rather than being strictly a community-led planning group or a government planning agency), also allows for more focus on the planning project and more attention to developing real relationships with the community. Municipal planning departments and large planning firms typically have several planning projects in play at once; RCRP, on the other hand, was solely focused on the Isleta Boulevard sector plan for an entire year. In addition, government agencies are typically bound by their sense of representation to *all* citizens in a given area and may proceed with a more obvious sense of neutrality than the Project Managers, who as intermediaries were able to develop relationships that went outside of the consultant role.

Schön focuses on the relationship perspective of experts versus reflective practitioners in the following contrasts (p304):

Expert	Reflective Practitioner
Keep my distance from the client and hold onto the expert's role. Give the client a sense of my expertise, but convey a feeling of warmth and sympathy as a "sweetener."	Seek out connections to the client's thoughts and feelings. Allow his/her respect for my knowledge to emerge from his discovery of it in the situation.
Look for deference and status in the client's response to my professional persona.	Look for the sense of freedom and of real connection to the client, as a consequence of no longer needing to maintain a professional façade.

This table rings true for the sector plan because of the strong sense of connection the Project Managers developed with many planning participants that might have been impossible under circumstances of strict "professional façades."

Given the single-focused nature of RCRP's time commitment with the sector plan in combination with the reflective practice of allowing the participants to directly influence the process, a high level of flexibility emerged. Despite the rough outline of meeting topics the Project Managers had established, in a

few cases the course of the process was re-directed by the needs of the community, including an unanticipated meeting on traffic concerns and an entire month on Village Centers.

The significance of many of the sector plan community meetings was that they really functioned as “Community Discussion” meetings that *would not* directly influence the land use and zoning policies included in the new sector plan. In these meetings, the Project Managers encouraged important community conversations to happen rather than “getting back to land-use” or “staying on track” with zoning and design discussions. These broader policy discussions (a month on agriculture, for example) went beyond the scope of a land use plan and toward important yet non-land use needs of the community; the discussions legitimized the concerns and views of community members despite the fact that the topic was not necessarily relevant to a sector plan.

The Project Managers felt that giving voice to these concerns, which truly were community values – regardless of their applicability in a land use document – was a crucial part of the planning process. Had RCRP been a government agency, it might have been very easy to limit the scope of these broad policy discussions by “getting back on track” and “sticking to land use.” Staying strictly within a timeframe and a concrete frame of discussion would have been a bad choice for RCRP and the sector plan, given the large amount of important community rhetoric and community value articulation that came out of these talks. Beyond just letting the community vent their frustration about things like the Greenbelt Tax and a community road’s designation as a “major road” in the MR-COG Long Range Transportation Plan, the Project Managers went a step farther and wrote up the community discussions and recommendations in the sector plan draft submitted in July 2005, making sure that these important community articulations were in print and recorded for the future. In this way, the Project Managers ensured that an articulation of community values informed the entire planning process and eventually the sector plan draft.

Would a non-reflective, non-intermediary planning process have been able to establish strong interpersonal connections, dedicate focused time to a single planning project, and had the flexibility to

capture the true feelings and intent of the residents without feeling the need to “stay on message?” Maybe. But without question, RCRP’s roles enhanced all of these positive aspects of the planning process in ways that are much more difficult in a top-down, ultra-professional, “expertise” realm.

Political Advocacy

As a follow-up to the notion of reflective practice increasing the flexibility of a planning process, acting as political advocates also becomes important. This implies looking beyond land-use planning when advocating for a community and taking on a broader approach that considers all of a community’s political needs. Several times throughout the planning process, the Project Managers encouraged conversations that while outside of the scope of the sector plan, reflected policy problems in the community that were indirectly affecting planning issues on the ground. In addition to including a write-up of these issues and conversations in the sector plan draft, the Project Managers were able to suggest some political solutions to political problems the community was facing. Although these “solutions” were not ones the Project Managers could enact on their own as they were clearly outside the scope of the sector plan, they made the connections for the community (down to who exactly could enact the change and the policy amendments that were needed) to better enable that political change to take place. In this way, the Project Managers became political advocates for the community with regard to the Greenbelt Tax, creating an agricultural land trust, using conservation easements, supporting agricultural production, encouraging acequia preservation, supporting local business and historic re-use of buildings, traffic congestion, trail networks, and access to amenities.

Connecting the political dots for a community – however far outside the scope of a sector plan – is a good model that RCRP should not only continue to embrace, but that other planning firms should follow as well. For traditional communities in the midst of a planning process, many residents view that process as their only chance to have someone listen to their problems. Rather than nitpicking which problems are

worth their time, reflective practitioners view themselves as completely open to hearing everything the community is undergoing and then trying to bring about improvements for the residents on all fronts. Inevitably, this will include politics. Planners who view themselves as facilitators of positive change for a community will see the need not just to write land use language in a plan, but to be lobbyists for that community on a political front as well. From the community's viewpoint, the opportunity to have someone working for them is all too short. Both parties should make the most of it. The challenge, of course, is how to do this and still meet the Scope of Services and provide the expected outcomes.

III. County Planning Commission Hearing

On September 7, 2005, the Project Managers presented the sector plan to the Bernalillo County Planning Commission for approval as ordinance. At that hearing, the Project Managers saw right away that they had problems – nearly twice as many people had signed up to speak *against* the sector plan as those signed up to support it. Even worse, most of the residents there against the plan were strangers to the Project Managers, so there was no way to guess *why* they were there. Once the hearing was underway, the South Valley planner for Bernalillo County gave a brief introduction to the plan and to the Project Managers. Next, the Project Managers gave a brief, 15-minute overview presentation of the plan and stood for questions from the Commissioners. When the public comment period began, the Commissioners advised the residents signed up to speak that they send representatives to make points for them with more allotted time rather than each go up individually. The group in favor of the sector plan chose to do this, sending up two individuals. But the folks against the plan did *not* choose to send representatives, instead going up individually, creating a fairly damning contrast between the smaller numbers of supporters and themselves. In addition, many of these opponents said they'd never been notified about the planning process, which is most likely impossible given that approximately 3,300 households within a quarter-mile of Isleta Boulevard were sent notices using a County-generated database of residents and property owners.

More likely, notices had been overlooked or disregarded as trash, yet the effect of saying they hadn't been notified was quite powerful.

In the end, the CPC issued a one-year deferral on the sector plan, meaning that the Project Managers and the County Planners have a one-year maximum window under which the plan can be brought back for a second attempt at approval. Proving the effectiveness of the statements made by the plan's opponents, the Commissioners commented that the community participation aspect of the planning process seemed troublesome, and told the Project Managers to go back to the drawing board and have more community meetings, even suggesting that the plan not be brought back before them until "consensus is reached with the business owners along Isleta."

In the final analysis, why was the sector plan deferred for a year? The primary aspects I'll consider here are the politics of timing, being out-organized, and the discourse of expertise.

Politics of Timing

Local politics mean everything in planning. Separating the two is impossible, particularly in a community setting like the South Valley, with a rich history and local character being threatened by growth and development pressures. Further complicating the standard politics of growth and development in the South Valley are the community politics taking place, wherein local residents are dividing themselves into pro-growth and smart-growth camps, half imagining a future of "modern" development and half wanting the area's historic character to remain and be enhanced. These immense and competing pressures of urbanization versus preservation are the setting for a short-term moratorium on new development along Isleta Boulevard that was initiated by newly elected County Commissioner Teresa Córdova as her first act in office. Initially, Commissioner Córdova's thinking was that the sector plan could be adopted as ordinance before the moratorium expired, effectively limiting the opportunity for bad development to happen on the ground while the sector plan that would permanently prevent it was still being crafted. The desire to pass

the plan before the moratorium expired at the end of September was a push that led the Project Managers to the CPC hearing on September 7, a push that came directly from the County planners.

In the County planners' opinions, the order to try and pass the sector plan before the moratorium expired came directly from Commissioner Córdova's office. This situation serves to showcase the lack of communication and lack of clarity about roles between the County planning and Commissioner's office. In the eyes of the County planners, they had no choice but to push for a speedier timeline. In the eyes of Commissioner Córdova, the County planners knew better than anyone when a plan was ready to go before the CPC, and never should have pushed for a September 7 hearing if they thought the plan wasn't ready.

In truth, the plan wasn't ready, and presenting on September 7 was a serious mistake that stands as the chief reason the plan was deferred. Although the aim in this case was to be politically strategic, the entire strategy backfired, when it was clear the planning process had simply run out of time and was perhaps not at the final stage needed for approval. In a broader political sense, the Project Managers in this case were sitting back and letting the County staff and Commissioner Córdova define the parameters they would operate in. They responded to the push for September 7 as hard as they could without asking questions or objecting. In this way, the Project Managers were not seasoned enough in political engagement to act on their own accord.

Interestingly, political engagement is one area that Commissioner Córdova might have been instrumental in enhancing had she still been in her leadership role at RCRP during the planning process. In previous projects, she often played the role of "political negotiator," someone who made connections with people in power positions and often laid the groundwork for RCRP's success at the political level. While it might seem that RCRP would avoid political problems with its former director taking on a major political leadership role at the County level, in reality, because Commissioner Córdova was limited in how much she could talk about the sector plan (due to potential conflict of interest concerns), the political negotiation element in RCRP's work was entirely missing for the sector plan.

The County planners are chiefly at fault for bringing the sector plan to the CPC when it was heard. In this case, everyone involved should have let the plan breathe and allowed the process dictate the timeline. The County planners (through miscommunication and incorrect assumptions with the County Commissioner's office) did a disservice to the community – and to the sector plan – by supporting a rushed process.

Out-Organizing the Organizers

For an organization whose roots are in organizing, a reminder to continue organizing seems almost silly. Yet for RCRP, it's a valuable one. Deeply enmeshed in a policy development project and the political approval process in the late summer of 2005, RCRP (to its discredit and immense regret) forgot its organizing roots. The Project Managers were overwhelmed much of the time at the end of the process, busy writing policy and formatting a large document on their own. Due to being so busy and in many ways understaffed, the Project Managers let others do what they should have been doing – making calls to remind residents of the CPC hearing, talking to residents about the draft, or holding more meetings to discuss the draft. In the midst of an intense period of working alone and not meeting with the community, the Project Managers left the organizing to some of the pro-planning residents. Inadvertently, they also created a major opportunity to be out-organized by opponents of the sector plan, who spent time doing what the Project Managers should not have forgotten at that late hour: walking door-to-door, mailing out information, making phone calls, talking through the plan with residents. These are tasks that might have been done very well by the RCRP staffers who were not finishing writing the sector plan, possibly in conjunction with community members of support of the plan.

One individual in particular jumped at the opportunity to organize opposition to the plan. As a economic elite of the community, this individual often portrayed himself as coming from a long-time South Valley family and speaking on behalf of his fellow Hispanic long-time residents. In reality, however, this

individual acts in his own interests, which are economic (as an apartment developer in the Valley) and political (as a future opponent in Commissioner Córdova's reelection campaign, according to rumors). The power of this individual cannot be overstated, for he has a magnetic personality, knows how to play to an audience, and is unnervingly strategic. He attended nearly every community meeting in the planning process and was often a handful to manage, for he tended to voice his opinions loudly and sometimes rudely, started arguments with other participants, and tended to get derailed on overarching, anti-government regulation sentiments. Despite all this, he was still overruled by most of the other meeting participants and his voice was a minority voice in the planning process. Throughout the summer of 2005, however, he went out into the community on his own to drum up opposition to the plan. In this effort, he was extremely dishonest to the South Valley citizens he so often proclaimed to represent.

Typical of the misinformation this individual was perpetuating involved the 100-foot setback for new development in the proposed Isleta Boulevard Agricultural Zone, which was written to help protect view corridors and a sense of openness along southern Isleta Boulevard. Knowing quite a bit about zoning from his occupation as a developer, this individual clearly knew he was lying when he pointed to the setback language in the plan and told residents what it meant: that anything in the first 100 feet of their property would have to be bulldozed if the plan passed, or that the County would be able to seize the first 100 feet of their property through eminent domain. Clear lies on both counts, this language is only worsened by the fact that this individual was also purportedly attempting to buy property from property owners who might wish to avoid the headache the sector plan would cause and cash out before it was too late.

To his credit as an organizer, this individual drummed up a huge amount of fear, anger, and concern among South Valley residents. Most of these residents believed this individual, and many of those concerned came to the CPC hearing to express their outrage at the sector plan. At this late point in the game, almost nothing could be done to appease these residents. Although the correct information about the setback and other sector plan policies were communicated at that time, the damage had already been

done and the Project Managers were perceived as outsiders trying to pass a development scheme that would destroy their community and take away their land. Especially heartbreaking to the Project Managers was the fact that the true intent of the plan is to help protect the community from those very things.

The fact that the Project Managers were out-organized and allowed the opposition to grasp the chance to do it themselves wasn't just a missed opportunity for RCRP, it was a primary contributor to the one-year deferral of the sector plan. With so many people having been roused (largely by misinformation) in opposition to the plan, it's no surprise that the CPC ruled the way it did. Numbers say a lot, and the opposition had more people there than RCRP had, had each of those people state their opposition to the plan rather than sending up representatives, and were more passionate *against* the plan than the supporters were passionate *for* the plan.

In future projects, RCRP cannot forget this valuable lesson. While RCRP was very successful at organizing in the beginning of the project, nearly all of that success was erased by the lack of organizing at the end. In the future, RCRP should designate someone to be in charge of end-game organizing and allow that person to talk to residents and get people out at hearings. Having staffers solely focused on organizing and not steeped in the policy development portion of the project would ensure that their full attention and energy will go toward community organizing when it most counts. It would better enable RCRP to respond quickly to misinformation campaigns like the one that was so successful here. Most importantly, it would also ensure that organizing received the full attention and time it deserves.

The Discourse of Expertise

As stated throughout this reflection, RCRP's embodiment of Schön's Reflective Practitioner ensured that the cult of expertise never overwhelmed the sector planning process. The benefits of developing the sector plan as reflective practitioners were clear, and include incubating substantially more community empowerment, encouraging the growth and value of community-born knowledge (which enabled RCRP to

truly “legitimize” community knowledge), and allowing the potential for more creative planning solutions. Yet some challenges with regard to expertise do arise from this reflective role, ones that present themselves as items for pro-active planning in future RCRP projects. The challenge of expressing competency without embodying expertise was seen in the CPC hearing and used against the Project Managers by the opposition organizer.

As young planners who were leading a process full of dialogue, horizontal information exchange, and even laughter, the Project Managers were not the ideal embodiments of respect for the residents who wanted to see “true experts” lead the planning process. The components of the planning process that the Project Managers were most proud of – explicit aims of community-mindedness that were the basis of each decision about how to develop the sector plan – were the exact same things that the pro-expertise residents disapproved of. This conflict will always persist, just as a conflict between technical, top-down planners and empowered, planning-literate residents will always persist, yet noting it is important for thinking ahead about how to better interact with residents who best respond to planners who seem to embody these residents’ notions of professionalism and technical ability.

The Project Managers learned the hard way that their hesitance to proclaim expertise could be used against them, as it was at the September CPC hearing. The CPC hearings embody professionalism and technical exaction, so it provided the perfect forum for the same individual who’d out-organized RCRP to paint a picture of the Project Managers as unprofessional and without the capacity, know-how, or technical expertise to be worthy of the CPC’s consideration. His doing so was not a function of the Project Managers’ true level of professionalism in any way. Rather, it was a strategic use of discourse by this individual to exert his own economic interests and political agenda in a public setting through whatever means possible, which in this case was disregarding the professionalism of the sector plan draft. Acknowledging this resident’s successful attempt at discrediting RCRP at the CPC hearing also means acknowledging an important distinction: this resident was not simply a pro-expertise participant, but actually

understood what the Project Managers valued yet saw an opening to discredit them and took it. In other words, the cult of expertise was used *against* RCRP at the CPC hearing, from calling the Project Managers “students” to saying that the plan was “laughable” and a “waste of the Commission’s valuable time” and “not nearly ready to be here today.” In a brilliant move on his part, this individual was able to undermine the Project Managers by undermining their biggest values: community participation and community knowledge.

The Project Managers and the County Planning staff should have been better prepared to respond to this individual's attacks on the plan. First, largely to the development moratorium along Isleta Boulevard and the relatively new makeup of the CPC, the Planning Commissioners were not familiar with the man proclaiming to represent average South Valley citizens. They had no idea that he was in fact a developer, and the process had no opportunity for them to learn this fact and view his comments through the lens of his own economic self-interest. The County Planners in particular could have laid the groundwork there, making sure at the in-house orientation to the sector plan a week before the official CPC hearing that the Commissioners were oriented to the community politics of the plan, which inevitably would have led to an introduction of this individual and his interests. In fact, orienting Planning Commissioners to community politics seems to be completely missing from the County planning process, and it is strongly recommended that they incorporate it into their CPC briefings. Allowing for that discussion before the CPC hearing also would have better informed the CPC about the community participation aspect of the sector plan, making it harder for them to believe the claims that large numbers of residents had never been notified.

Questions for RCRP

In a setting where the job of the Commission is to ensure that rigorous standards of professionalism are used when ruling on zoning and planning decisions, how could RCRP have better prevented strategic adversaries from publicly questioning their professionalism? Some solutions might include better explaining the values of RCRP, stating the qualifications of the Project Managers, clarifying

the “student” status of the Project Managers, and asking the County to vouch for their experience and ability as the recipients of the planning contract. Those are the small answers. The bigger one is to not get out-strategized by the cult of expertise again, which takes constant reflection and clarity on the role of expertise, dialogue about expertise with residents involved in the planning process, and established relationships with County officials like the CPC. Undoubtedly, some influence by the County planners as to the community politics of a plan would go a long way to orient Planning Commissioners to what they might see from the public at the hearing. But most importantly, RCRP’s work should speak for itself and maintain a standard of excellence that would automatically refute any attempts to discredit the organization’s professionalism.

IV. Lessons and Feelings Post-CPC

Recognizing and processing feelings after a setback like the sector plan deferral are crucially important to any community planning process. Without dispelling feelings and clarifying each player’s analysis, getting back on track to finish the plan could be impossible. In the case of the sector plan, the Project Managers are in the position of sorting through their feelings, reacting to the discourse of expertise used against them, considering how to increase community participation, and resolving tension with the County planners.

Sorting through Feelings

As “unprofessional” as it may seem, it’s important to recognize that the Project Managers felt personally hurt by the CPC hearing and the one-year deferral. They were extremely proud of the community participation in the planning process, proud of the sector plan, and proud of their work over the past year. Being attacked on all fronts is hard for anyone to handle. For the Project Managers, the ways in which they were attacked had the added insult of feeling personal.

Being young and experiencing a setting like the CPC for the first time undoubtedly played a part in the hurt feelings, but really do go beyond inexperience. In many ways, the Project Managers' hurt feelings stem from a feeling of abandonment by the County planners, who'd worked alongside them for a year. For a variety of reasons, the Project Managers had been losing confidence in the County planner who worked closest with them, and their suspicions about that planner's support of the plan were confirmed at the CPC hearing. After the public statement portion of the CPC hearing, the planner did briefly defend the community participation process of the sector plan, noting the efforts made to publicize the meetings and notify as many people as possible. Yet overall, his defense of RCRP and the planning process was quite weak and not at all impassioned. While he did briefly and rather timidly defend RCRP's community planning process, he did not defend the qualifications of the Project Managers and RCRP or the quality of the sector plan. In many ways, the Project Managers felt like they were being left out to dry at the CPC hearing, brought there so soon on someone else's demands and then left alone to experience the full assault of that mistake.

Recognizing these feelings and working through them is a necessary component of being able to move on and accomplish the task at hand – to finally pass the sector plan as ordinance at a future CPC hearing.

Reacting to Discourse, Coming to Terms with Expertise

An important need on the part of the Project Managers is to react to the discourse of expertise and the way it was used against them at the CPC hearing. Although theoretically the Project Managers know the importance of valuing community knowledge over a top-down, "heroic planner" approach, they must admit that the use of discourse around expertise at the CPC cut to the heart of a lot of their own insecurities about their qualifications and abilities.

In passionately legitimizing community knowledge and working alongside residents in laterally-constructed meetings rather than top-down lecturing, the Project Managers found a niche that made them very comfortable. In many ways, this method also served to mask the deep doubts the Managers had about their own knowledge, expertise, and ability to fulfill County expectations. Realizing that their technical training and experience *does* give them some expertise is an important lesson for the Project Managers, who all too easily discredit themselves and what they bring to the table. In the future, being comfortable with their own expertise *without embodying experts* is something they will need to do better. The key here is confidence, which at the moment (given the recent political setback) the Project Managers are sorely lacking.

In addition, the history of RCRP is one of jumping into new situations and being willing to learn. The Project Managers embodied this model as well, particularly in terms of ordinance language and physical planning, but the fact that much of their knowledge was so new perhaps contributed to their discomfort with proclaiming themselves experts.

Increasing Community Participation

Increasing community participation is always a major challenge in planning processes. For RCRP, whose community outreach record is arguably better than anyone else's in the area, a good community participation process is a point of organizational pride. Better than most, RCRP elicits good turnout at its meetings. First, RCRP uses a County-generated database to do large mailings to every household within a certain boundary outside of the planning area. RCRP also uses the media to publicize its meetings. After the first meeting, RCRP begins to develop a mailing and calling list using the sign-in sheets that meeting attendants use at each meeting. In that way, RCRP develops its own database of everyone who's ever attended a meeting, which is then used for the mailings before each subsequent meeting and as a list of residents to call before each meeting to remind them to attend.

Despite this extensive outreach, more can be done. As with any planning process, there is always room for improvement in community participation and there should always be a continual look at the community stakeholders taking part in the process compared with the stakeholders who are underrepresented or not represented at all. In the case of the sector plan, the Project Managers were so busy with the actual development of sector plan policy and running the twice-monthly meetings that they missed some opportunities to improve community participation overall. The other staff members of RCRP (there were three besides the Project Managers) could have played a valuable role in targeting new groups to come to the meetings and working on plans to increase overall participation, yet didn't seize the opportunity.

Increasing community participation can be seen as a major missed opportunity in the sector planning process. As good as the public outreach component of the plan was in terms of publicizing meetings, there was never a plan in place – initially or throughout the planning process – to reach out to underrepresented stakeholders at the community meetings. This is relevant for the sector plan because of the manner in which support for the plan by the time of the CPC hearing appeared to almost entirely consist of the newcomer/Anglo population. By outside appearances alone, it might have appeared to outsiders (and certainly did appear so to the County Planning Commissioners) that the longtime, Hispanic residents of the area were solidly opposed to the plan, which would raise legitimate questions for anyone about the merits of a plan seemingly supported only by newcomers.

The reality of the “race divide” in the case of the sector plan is not nearly so clear-cut. In no way was the CPC hearing an indication of Anglos versus Hispanics in the South Valley, with each taking their stand. The Anglo/newcomer group of residents were in a strong position to engage in a planning process for their community, given that they chose to move to the South Valley specifically because of its unique character and agricultural sense of place. In a strange way, the Anglos in this process were positioning themselves as the protectors of the area's Hispanic sense of place. Meanwhile, the planning process also

had some long-time Hispanic residents involved who were strong advocates for private property rights advocates. The main organizer against the sector plan was the “ringleader” of this group, and he maintained a strong anti-government perspective (advocating for no zoning at all, for example) that served to further his personal interests in the area, both in terms of economic and political gain. Although these two groups were the most vocal in the planning process, they were not the only types involved in the process. There were also long-time Anglo farmers and a few long-time Hispanic families who were involved in the planning process and supported the plan. Although Anglo residents outnumbered Hispanic residents at most community meetings, the divide of support v. opposition to the plan was not *in any way* as clear-cut as it appeared at the CPC hearing. Again, the *appearances* of this dichotomy at the CPC hearing spoke badly of RCRP’s planning process, but in actuality, participation was much more nuanced.

What was missing at the hearing and should have marked the work of the RCRP staff throughout the planning process was outreach to longtime Hispanic residents who would have appreciated the plan’s intent to maintain the area’s rural character, had they only been reached out to and invited into the process. Many of these same residents called the RCRP office to discuss the plan and liked what they heard, but they did not come out to the hearing to support the plan and therefore were not seen by the Planning Commissioners. Making sure these residents came out to the CPC hearing goes back to the missing organizing component already discussed in this reflection.

Acknowledging the structural factors that might be limiting participation by these longtime residents would be easy for the RCRP staff to do, many of whom decided to work in planning to begin with in order to tackle these same structural issues. Aiming for Hispanic participation rates that are on par with their demographic representation in the South Valley would be an important goal for RCRP to strive for. Rather than just lamenting the fact that the voices of the disempowered are not heard often or strongly enough, a staff commitment to true stakeholder representation would have been an opportunity for everyone to ensure that those voices are heard and to put planning student theory to practice. Another important

community participation element could have been reaching out to the South Valley's growing Mexican National community, none of whom participated in the process but who are undeniably legitimate stakeholders in the Valley.

For future RCRP projects, these important community participation goals should not be left to the Project Managers to meet alone. Better, more comprehensive, and place-specific community participation plans should be a staff effort for each future project that RCRP undertakes.

Resolving Tension with the County

Current tension between the Project Managers and the County Planning staff stems from the Project Managers feeling hurt after the CPC hearing when they were not adequately defended. Also, the damage inflicted by being out-organized at that meeting has been considerable, prompting extensive media- and political-repair work which further increases the embarrassment and guilt about being out-organized in the first place. But the real tensions between the Project Managers and the County planners come down to the actual sector plan draft. It seems that the CPC hearing opened the opportunity for the County planners to express their dissatisfaction with the sector plan text and layout in a way they did not express in the midst of the rush to pass the plan before the moratorium was lifted. This tension around the plan itself comes down to miscommunication and precedence of values.

After the CPC hearing, a number of points of dissatisfaction on the part of the County planners toward the plan were communicated. First, the County planners didn't understand why the plan looked the way it did, which was wordy, full of paragraphs, quotes and photographs, and written in a narrative style. RCRP wrote the sector plan to tell a story of community change and growth. For example, the introduction to the plan didn't simply serve as an introduction to the zoning proposals the plan contained; instead, it literally told the story of the South Valley's history, leading up to modern development pressures. It spelled out not just the need for a sector plan, but the spirit of the planning process.

In the County's view, however, there was far too much text and far too little technical language in the plan. The long introduction was a classic example of this, especially considering that it was followed up with an entire chapter on the community participation process, still absent any technical language. The County evaluated the plan as their Zoning Administrators might, technical professionals who would have to use the plan to base their decisions during planning disputes. RCRP, on the other hand, viewed the plan as a community member might, someone who took part in the planning process and would end up reading the plan as a citizen, not as a government insider.

RCRP realized the importance of passing the sector plan as ordinance, yet in all their meetings with the County planners never had a discussion on what the style and formatting of an ordinance-adopted plan might be, although in-house at RCRP many other sector plans were read and discussed. Without dismissing the need for an ordinance document, the Project Managers explicitly chose to make the plan readable, usable, and friendly to outsiders. But from the viewpoint of the county, the sector plan draft was a failure for those very same reasons – it was *too* narrative, *too* community-focused, and not nearly technical enough. In their view, the sector plan never should have been produced as anything but a technical, land-use manual for Zoning Administrators.

The lessons here are all about communication. Although the County planners had seen outlines of the plan, they never suggested that RCRP change course in style or content. In a late meeting with the County planners where the entire draft was reviewed, suggestions for change were minimal and certainly didn't include reworking the plan as a technical manual. Although one of the planners did suggest that the community process chapter be moved to the appendix, the other two planners did not express their desire to see the chapter moved. Furthermore, the Project Managers felt they were still working with a fair degree of autonomy and felt that the community participation chapter was important enough to stay where it was. At this point, a conversation about the plan as a whole and how it fit into County expectations would have been smart. The sector plan draft that was presented *did* fit into the official Scope of Services, yet seemed

to not fit into the personal expectations of the County planners. There seem to be two reasons that a conversation about these expectations didn't happen: first, the two parties had never established a pattern of good communication; and second, there was so little time left before the draft had to be submitted in the rushed timeline that it was almost too late.

Another major lesson – this one solely for RCRP – is to start writing much, much earlier in the process. An earlier writing process would allow for more communication about actual text (rather than discussing a theoretical as-yet-unwritten plan) with the County and be easier on all parties. In addition, remembering that Zoning Administrators *would* have to use the plan as their guide for settling planning disputes and directing developers is a valuable lesson for the Project Managers. Although the Project Managers maintained the importance of passing the document as ordinance, they never fully considered how that goal might impact their desire to have a narrative-style plan. Some early ideas about the formatting of an ordinance document were somehow lost during the planning process, either through simple forgetfulness or the busy nature of the community meetings.

Another important point of departure regarding the sector plan draft was ordinance versus non-ordinance language. In several instances (including agricultural policies and transportation designations), the Project Managers chose to devote language in the plan to capturing the community conversations about issues that could not be directly impacted by a land-use plan. Doing so was purposeful because it gave credence to the issues and captured residents' views about desired policy changes within an official document, meaning the conversations wouldn't just be lost and would actually be preserved in print as a record of community wishes. To the County planners, these non-ordinance issues were not only outside of the scope of a sector plan, but they took up valuable space and complicated the clear intent of a sector plan. In their view, the plan should be simple, technical, and straightforward. Capturing "community conversations," for whatever reason, clouded the clarity of the plan. In the end, the request was made to remove these broader policy issues and focus only on ordinance. It is possible that these sections may be

preserved in the appendix in the next version of the plan. The lessons for RCRP are again ones of communication, expectations, and keeping the outcome in mind at all times.

The path toward resolving RCRP/County tension is to first, *communicate*. While apologies are not necessary, good communication from here on out *is*. RCRP needs to remember that the sector plan is only as powerful as the ordinance language is, and passing the plan as ordinance is a requirement for that to happen.

V. Getting Back on Track

Getting back on track to pass the sector plan involves first, healing, which the writing of this reflection is a part of, and second, resolving the issues of the sector plan text.

Interestingly, a solution to the problems of ordinance versus non-ordinance text and layout may be one that RCRP had initially thought of, but that got lost in the planning process. The idea –one that the Project Managers will propose as an alternative to producing a technical manual type of plan – is to produce a narrative-style document with a pull-out section of ordinance language that Zoning Administrators could use. The pull-out section would serve as the technical guide that Zoning Administrators are looking for and may even be the only part of the plan passed as ordinance. This choice would allow the narrative portions of the plan to remain as they are, still maintaining the story of the South Valley and the need for the plan, still celebrating the community process behind the plan, and still capturing the community conversations that were part of that process.

In mid-September, the Project Managers will meet with the County planners to review this proposal for layout and to plan the next community meeting where this layout and some policy options can be discussed. It is hoped that the plan can be ready for CPC approval before the holidays.

VI. A Future for RCRP

The outcome of this analysis is to provide strategies about how RCRP can better operate as a reflective intermediary in mainstream, governmental settings for future planning projects. In the discussion thus far of the challenges in RCRP's reflective intermediary role, some lessons are woven throughout the examples. Nearly all of them center around communication. As RCRP continues in this time of transition – changing leadership (particularly Dr. Córdova stepping down as director) and the completion of the sector plan contract – future projects would be enhanced by a stronger commitment to critically examining RCRP's reflective intermediary role.

With new leadership and new projects, RCRP must strive to remain true to its founding principles of community-based action and reflective practice. This is particularly challenging for the organization given that the sector plan will likely be a harbinger of more policy development projects in the future and because the staff of RCRP is almost always in a state of change as students come and go. Since RCRP is an organization where community values take precedence over municipal values and there's a need to balance pride of skills with the espousment of expertise, continuing to work in mainstream settings like government will bring about the need for even greater communication in the future. Further work within mainstream governmental settings also calls for a more analytical approach to RCRP's work and relations with both the community and the government. Some specific recommendations beyond what has already been mentioned include reinstating an integrated flow of action, listening, and most importantly, embarking on a new grassroots planning education initiative.

Integrated Flow of Action

The fact that there were only two RCRP staffers working on the sector plan was surprising to many outsiders. In typical planning firms or agencies, a much larger number typically work on projects like a sector plan, with each person being responsible for pieces of the project. During the sector plan process,

RCRP was employing three other staff members besides the Project Managers, but these staffers worked on the sector plan in a very limited capacity, serving to help notify residents of the meetings via mailings and phone calls, to set up meetings, to record the meetings, and to help break down the meetings. Yet for the two weeks in between the meetings, with the exception of notifying residents in the sector plan database, the staff members did little to support the work of the Project Managers or even show much of an interest in the sector plan itself.

Dr. Córdova maintains a belief that an “integrated flow of action” should mark the work of RCRP and the process of its projects and anecdotally, this was the case in the beginning of the organization’s existence. Perhaps due to her absence in the organization and the lack of leadership during the sector plan, or perhaps due simply to the personality mix of the staff and Project Managers at the time, the sector plan process was markedly devoid of an *integrated flow of action*, where the staff would support each other’s work and rise to the occasion to help without being asked. During the sector plan, the Project Managers often had trouble getting help *even when* they asked the staff directly.

Reinstituting an integrated flow of action is an important strategy for RCRP to be a better, stronger organization in the future. Not having true staff support of the sector plan limited the scope of many things RCRP might have been able to do, certainly in terms of community participation and organizing. An office culture built around renewing this commitment to working as a team is a crucial need for future success. Besides the need for an organizational discussion of how RCRP could better reflect an *integrated flow of action* in its work, the organization should also determine what potential staffers should bring to the organization in terms of skills, interests, and beliefs.

Listening

Another important lesson for RCRP – particularly because of its role as a reflective intermediary – is to become better *listeners*. Although a lack of communication marked the entire working relationship

between the Project Managers and the County planners, there were moments in the process when the Project Managers should have had a self-evaluation of what they were hearing from the government versus what they were telling themselves, particularly with respect to the formatting and language of the sector plan. Such an analysis would have showed some important findings, particularly about document expectations and predictions for the final approval. As reflective practitioners, the Project Managers were good at listening to their inner conscience and to the community, but perhaps not as good at listening to the County planners. Hearing things you don't want to hear happens in every profession, and reflective planners need to do it, too. For RCRP, this lesson is a crucial one.

Toward a Grassroots Planning Education Initiative

The sector plan experience has been a valuable one for RCRP, primarily because it tested the limits of the organization and allowed staff members to push themselves as they conquered heavy challenges and responsibilities. In this time of change and transition at RCRP, it is an appropriate point to remember the mission of the organization. In my view, RCRP should take this transitional moment to regroup and to embark on a new objective: that of providing grassroots planning education to New Mexico's traditional communities. Redirecting the mission of RCRP in this manner would be timely due to the current transitions of leadership, staff, and major projects.

Community Education

A commitment to providing planning education at the *community* level – not just the university level – would be a crucially important step in communicating RCRP's community planning philosophy to the residents it hopes to draw into planning processes. More importantly, if RCRP committed to providing planning education to the very citizens it is fighting for, it can provide a true, lasting impact to the traditional communities most in need of planning help. In that way, RCRP could truly empower residents to take

charge in their own communities and fight for their rights. A grassroots planning initiative would be the most direct way that RCRP could truly build the capacity of the community to engage in planning at the municipal level. Without these more structural educational changes, RCRP may be effecting change with each project it undertakes, but is very limited in the long-lasting social change it can help enact.

The focus of this planning education would be the longtime residents of traditional communities who do not currently take part in RCRP planning processes, with the specific goal of increasing community planning participation over time and eventually increasing the capacity of local residents to plan for themselves. Instituting this new initiative would begin with community participation and an acknowledgment of the structural factors that limit participation. The fact that Chicanos – a very high percentage of the South Valley demographically – tend to have much lower participation rates in planning processes than the community's Anglo population is a good starting place for RCRP to examine where it could be most useful in the community. In the case of increasing Hispano/Chicano turnout to meetings, there is a clear need to communicate to residents that they have the right to participate, would be valuable participants, and belong in planning processes that can help determine the future of their community.

An RCRP grassroots planning education initiative would focus on increasing residents' familiarity with planning, communicating the notion that residents belong in planning processes and have the right to participate, valuing and legitimizing the knowledge that they individually have as local residents and as a part of the community's history, communicating the notion that the community is *theirs* to plan for, and trying to limit any institutional fear about participation. Educating and empowering local residents via grassroots planning education could be a major force of change for future South Valley planning efforts. An education initiative would also serve to correct some commonly held, incorrect assumptions about planning, such as the assumption that planning and zoning only benefit outsiders and encourage urbanization.

Although the primary goal of a grassroots planning education initiative would be to help incubate new citizen planners in the traditional communities that RCRP supports, providing planning education

would also help ease one of RCRP's biggest dilemmas that arose from the sector plan process. The fact that the majority of RCRP's outspoken citizen allies (based on attendance at the CPC hearing) were newcomers to the South Valley – and Anglos at that – meant that RCRP's explicit goal to help traditional communities was all too easily questioned, since the longtime residents of that traditional community comprised many of the vocal opponents of the sector plan. This dichotomy created dilemmas for the Project Managers, who were committed to RCRP's mission and unsure how to interpret the split in support. But the dichotomy also presented an obvious point of doubt about the RCRP-managed community participation process in the eyes of County Planning Commissioners unfamiliar with RCRP's record and process, making the sector plan all too easy to discredit at the CPC level. Increasing participation from local Chicanos via an RCRP grassroots planning education initiative would be crucially important for the future of local planning in the South Valley and for RCRP's success at the approval level in future projects.

In The Reflective Practitioner, Schön argues that citizen professionals are one alternative to technical-rational practitioners. In conjunction with reflective practitioners, he argues, active citizen planners in this case would do the work for the community they come from. Although Schön himself points out some shortcomings to this solution, the fact is that more citizen planners – residents who understand the connection between their community and the policies that guide its growth – working in their own communities would be a huge step forward in the struggle to save traditional communities from modern development pressures that so often destroy local, traditional character and ways of life.

RCRP Management of Grassroots Planning Education

Embarking on a new mission of grassroots planning education would fundamentally change the nature of RCRP and the scope of its work. It would amount to a restructuring of RCRP priorities and a rededication of its staff to the founding principles. To be successful at managing an ongoing grassroots planning education initiative, RCRP would be smart to try and limit its contract work while it regroups as an

education provider. Making the transition from a contract-based organization to a more constant, grassroots presence is timely given the current changes in leadership, staff, and project load.

Educating residents about planning would become a permanent, ongoing RCRP objective that should be funded separately from RCRP's contract-based work. Making this shift happen would involve enacting several institutional changes, including a new means of paying staff, new forms of fundraising, an increased importance of applying for grants, and a change in the way new staff is hired. In terms of financial health, RCRP would need to pursue ongoing operational grants rather than contracts that promise money for services provided to a municipality. This would mean that future staff and leadership should be proficient at grant applications and have an interest in helping to secure money for RCRP. That task should not be left to one individual, but be a shared responsibility among the entire staff. In terms of future staff members, there should be a shift from hiring students who can meet the needs of a particular project to identifying planning students who embody RCRP's organizational principles and would be valuable communicators of planning education in traditional communities over time.

If RCRP could make the shift from being solely a contractor to an organization that may still accept some contracts but primarily does grassroots education work, it would amount to a dramatic reaffirmation of organizational principles in everyday work. Too often in organizations, principles become obscure notions that current staff members aren't reflecting in their work. This reaffirmation of the founding principles would also be an important and timely opportunity for the staff to rededicate themselves to the principles and mission of RCRP and to examine how each staffer's unique skills and contributions connect with a grassroots planning education. As with any organization, times of change provide important opportunities for a reflection and examination of each staff member's role in the function of the group as a whole.

In terms of the actual management of the grassroots planning education, the format and process of providing this service should be managed and designed by the RCRP staff. The education initiative could look any number of ways, depending on what the staff wanted. An initial brainstorm about how RCRP could

set up this process includes first, having meetings in the communities and not in the university setting, and second, even hosting meetings and workshops in residents' homes, if participating residents would be willing to host a meeting for the night. Traditional meetings in school settings could also be valuable, but only when a larger group is convening. In the beginning of the process, homes would likely be a better setting for connecting and communicating.

VII. Personal Conclusions

The status of the Isleta Boulevard and Village Centers Sector Development Plan remains to be seen. While no one among the RCRP staff or the County government expects that the sector plan will never be passed as ordinance, the content and style of the final plan is less certain. Most interesting to discern will be the difference between the draft plan submitted in July and the final plan submitted in early 2006.

My experience as co-Project Manager for the sector plan project can be broken down into many, many valuable parts. In the scope of this reflection, however, I'd like to single out the opportunity I had through the sector plan to be a reflective practitioner. Via the sector plan and our work in the South Valley, I was able to practice the values I hold as a progressive person, a community and regional planning student, and a staff member of RCRP. Making the leap from theory to practice was something I tried to be extremely conscientious about, and the lessons I learned from the experience are ones I'll carry with me for the remainder of my career.

Personally, the sector plan experience has also acted as a real-world reminder of the limits that operating within a mainstream context can give you. For every time I've felt like the sector plan wasn't being explicit enough in its approach to local planning needs, I heard from County staff that they felt the plan was *radical*. For me, this was a valuable reminder of where my values stand in contrast to mainstream planners. That distinction will help guide me in the future as I determine what kind of work I want to do,

where I can be most valuable as a progressive planner, and how I can balance my values with the values of mainstream structures like government.

Out of this experience, I also have strong opinions about sector planning in general. I now fully understand how impossible it is – and should be – to separate planning from politics. I believe that progressive planners need to consider a multi-faceted approach when working with communities that looks at much more than land use and allows the planners to exercise their connections and knowledge in the political realm as well as the land use realm. I also have strong feelings about the look and feel of plans in general and still believe (however the plan turns out) that a document that celebrates the history, culture, change, and desires of a community is much more powerful than a simple technical manual, although the goal is to achieve both. I am proud that the version of the plan we submitted in June truly captured the spirit of the South Valley community and its struggles to hold onto its rich character, and I think planning would be a more powerful profession if all plans read that way, as true testaments to communities and the people who call them home.

In addition, while the politics of this planning process were not the focus of this reflection, they easily could have been the subject of an entire full-length analysis. In future efforts to analyze the Isleta Boulevard sector planning process, a study of the politics of Bernalillo County, RCRP, local planners, and the South Valley community itself would be a fascinating and very useful analysis for other planners negotiating their own reflective-intermediary roles.

The sector plan experience also served as a useful reminder for me that there's no education like jumping right into something. The best conduit of this lesson was Dr. Stephen Wheeler, who gave us a crash course in physical planning and without whom finishing the plan on time would have been absolutely impossible. Also, the lesson of acting as part of a team, and doing so gracefully, was more confirmed by my co-Project Manager Jacobo Martinez than anyone I've ever worked with. Jacobo and I were able to find a balance of skills, interests, and strengths that worked for us, for the community, and for the sector plan. For

the endless brainstorm and inspirations and just slugging away at it, I thank Jacobo and all his contributions.

In the final analysis, however different the sector plan might end up from what I envisioned, part of the lesson of this plan is the need for balance between a purely technical document and one that celebrates community. For every future planning process I undertake, I will forever cherish the time spent with the residents of the South Valley throughout the planning process for this sector plan. The relationships forged over the last year were important for me for a multitude of reasons, but primarily because they proved to me how much more I have to learn from communities than they could ever learn from me. The South Valley needs progressive, passionate, committed planners who will fight for their community. RCRP is very well equipped to continue fulfilling this role, but via planning education at the grassroots level, I hope that the next generation of planners fighting for the Valley will not just be *appreciators* of the Valley, but *of* the Valley itself. The difference would mean everything.

I'm not sure where I will end up as a planner, or how much *planning* I'll even end up doing. The future is absolutely open to me. Yet I hope the South Valley residents we worked with, the staff of RCRP (including Dr. Wheeler and Bernadette Miera), and especially Dr. Córdova know how deeply the experience of working on the sector plan will stay with me and help inform everything I choose to do for the rest of my career. The experience of working for something I believe in passionately is as much a requirement for me as anything else. Although my remaining time at RCRP is fairly limited, I hope I've contributed to the spirit of RCRP in a way that stays true to its organizational principles, makes the founders proud, and carries on the legacy of justice and commitment that Dr. Córdova set out to establish years ago.