

Planners As Leaders

Mary Joan Manley Pugh

Planners often fail to fulfill their leadership qualities or realize their leadership potential. But the reasons planners give for not owning up to their leadership potential are often the same reasons why planners should lead. This article explores the reasons most often given for the lack of leadership among planners, a simple methodology which can put these qualities into action, and finally, a case study in which this methodology was used to provide leadership in an issue at the state level.

Why Planners Are Not Leaders

Many planners see themselves as nothing more than advisors to appointed or elected officials--the leaders. The planner provides the technical expertise and leaves the decision making to others. Planners forget that the way in which they provide technical information can greatly influence the decision. Seldom is technical information straightforward and purely objective; otherwise, there would be no need for a code of ethics or guidelines for professional responsibility. The staff recommendation and decision making process, the format for public participation, and the relationships among the participants are all areas which present leadership opportunities to planners.

Planners tend to avoid anything that smacks of politics. Many planners fear that their involvement in an issue beyond their role as a technical advisor could jeopardize their jobs. Politics--even nonpartisan politics--are seen as dirty business conducted in back rooms by unsavory characters. But anyone involved in an issue, even as a technical advisor, is involved in the political process.

Leadership Qualities

Ironically, the two reasons why planners do not lead are the same reasons why planners should lead. First, planners have technical expertise which gives them the necessary leadership skills. Leaders need to be good problem-solvers, and planners are trained problem-solvers. Planners know how to size up a situation, formulate options, evaluate those options, and choose the best solution. A leader must have problem-solving skills to successfully resolve today's complex issues.

Leaders also need to have vision and the ability to plan for the future. Planners are trained to look into the future,

anticipate needs, and plan for them. Since most of the current issues facing today's leaders are complex, require long-term solutions, and involve a variety of interested parties, leaders need to be able to chart a course which will lead to a workable solution. Thus, the technical expertise of planners is an asset to leadership. This holds true whether a planner endeavors to lead a planning staff, an elected or appointed board, or an entire community.

Second, planners typically avoid leadership roles in order to stay clear of "politics." But any planner who has implemented a plan successfully has been involved in politics. Nothing in an office, an organization or a community is accomplished without being involved in the political process at some level. Planners, like it or not, are involved in politics. Indeed, the code of professional responsibility demands that planners look after the public interest. How can a planner possibly advocate for the public interest from the sidelines without getting involved in the political process? Politics are a healthy part of the planning process and an essential one in a democracy.

Methodology

Given that planners have leadership potential and, to some degree, the responsibility to lead, how can they best develop their potential and use their technical expertise

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and political experience? I have formulated a simple methodology that I find useful in working through an issue or developing a policy:

1. *Know the Political Landscape.* Before beginning any process, one must know the actors, their interest in the issue or policy, their values, and finally their objectives.
2. *Know the Carry-On Baggage.* The next step is to know the history behind the issue or policy, the positions taken by each actor, and the reason action needs to be taken.
3. *Determine the Public Good.* Given the political landscape and the history of the subject issue, one must assess the situation and decide the public's best interest. The desired end result--be it a policy objective or a regulation--should be considered.
4. *Determine the Best Strategy.* Next is to determine the strategy and process necessary to achieve the desired objective. Possible strategies include a series of discussion sessions, informal deliberations with the involved parties, and a task force to develop a recommended policy or set of guidelines.
5. *Implement the Strategy.* Probably the most critical step in this whole process is the implementation of the chosen strategy. In most cases this entails close monitoring of the situation and the capability to make adjustments or even to abandon a flawed strategy. For these reasons, a monitoring system needs to be devised.

Case Study

Outstanding resource water (ORW) is a water quality classification of the North Carolina Environmental Management Commission (EMC) that is used to provide extra protection to water bodies which have both excellent water quality and an outstanding resource. Excellent water quality is based on physical, chemical, and biological parameters. The outstanding resource must be one of five types: fisheries or wildlife resource, designated national or state refuge or natural area, research or educational resource, recreational area, and ecological resource. The extra protection is provided in the form of a tailor-made protection package with restrictions on development of the adjoining land. At issue in this case was what constituted an ORW, how many ORWs would be designated, what development restrictions would be included in the protection package, and the length of the nomination, study, and designation periods.

Political Landscape

The interested parties fell into six basic groups. The first group consisted of environmental or conservation organizations of which the major parties were the North Carolina Coastal Federation and the North Carolina Wildlife Fed-

eration. Their principal interest focused on the coast, the scene of the most recent environmental battle for coastal stormwater runoff controls. The conservationists' objective was to restrict development on the coast to minimize the pollution of fragile coastal waters from stormwater runoff. But the developers thought that they were against all coastal development.

Some of the most prominent and influential coastal developers, represented for the most part by the Alliance for Balanced Coastal Development, constituted the second group. Their major objective was to minimize development restrictions. They believed that the existing restrictions were unclear, leaving them vulnerable to attacks from conservationists. The Alliance was formed to counteract the Coastal Federation, which earned its reputation assisting individuals and local groups in fighting specific development proposals. The conservation group thought that the developers were against all regulations.

The Environmental Management Commission (EMC), the third group, is responsible for the management and hence the regulation of water quality. The eighteen-member EMC is composed of twelve gubernatorial appointees who hold seats according to specific statutory designations including development, conservation, and expertise in water quality; two at-large appointees; and two at-large appointees each made by the Lieutenant Governor and the Speaker of the House. The purpose of the designated seats on the EMC is to create a balanced commission; however, the conservationists argued that the EMC was more development oriented after the 1987 appointments to the at-large seats. They successfully convinced the N.C. General Assembly to change two of the at-large seats to designated seats in the 1989 Session. But the Administration argued that the EMC was too environmentally oriented and that only after the 1987 appointments did it become balanced. This is supported by the fact that the 1987 appointments were made according to the statutory requirements. In any case, the conservationists were unhappy with the composition of the EMC while the developers were satisfied.

The Coastal Resources Commission (CRC), the fourth group, is responsible for managing coastal resources through land use regulation. The CRC is composed of gubernatorial appointees in statutorily designated as well as at-large seats. Like the EMC, the complexion of the CRC was changed with new appointments in 1987; the conservationists thought the CRC was too development-oriented, and the developers were satisfied. The General Assembly resisted making sweeping changes in the CRC composition as proposed by the conservationists and instead limited the number of appointees with business interests.

The fifth group was the EMC staff, who are responsible in part for recommending actions to protect and manage water quality. Not unlike the typical planning staff, they did not relish the politics of the situation; they were pressured from all sides, and only wanted to provide objective techni-

cal expertise.

The sixth group was the staff of the Secretary of Natural Resources and Community Development (NRCD), the so-called Department. This group made the major political decisions in this issue. Their role was to take information from the other five groups, analyze it, and influence decisions in the interests of the public. The conservationists felt that the Department, particularly the Secretary, leaned toward business interests. Conversely, the developers felt that the Department was taking a balanced approach for the first time. The EMC staff did not always feel that they had the support of the Department.



Polluted shellfish waters

Carry-On Baggage

The baggage from the past centered on the coastal stormwater runoff regulations promulgated by the EMC in 1985 and subsequently revised in 1987. The regulations were supposed to protect fragile coastal waters and resources such as fish nurseries and shellfish areas from the pollutants in stormwater runoff. Since North Carolina was one of the first states to address this situation, the technical data were largely unavailable.

This lack of technical data led to a large divergence in opinion as to the level of restriction needed to protect coastal water quality. Also, a dispute arose regarding which commission should take the lead in promulgating the regulations. The CRC was the first to investigate the link between stormwater runoff and the quality of coastal waters and resources in connection with its land use management responsibilities. Although the EMC is responsible for the state's water quality, they did not want to take on a controversial issue with statewide implications. In the end, water quality was the deciding factor, and the EMC assumed the task of developing stormwater regulations.

At first the EMC adopted strict interim regulations which only applied to the area adjoining the most environmentally sensitive waters, those with shellfish resources. After an in-depth study, the EMC staff recommended less stringent runoff controls applicable to the entire twenty-county coastal area instead of the area adjoining shellfish waters. In addition, the EMC staff recommended that a stricter regulation called outstanding resource waters be adopted within the area adjoining waters nominated by the EMC. The EMC adopted these regulations and began the process of identifying potential ORW nominees.

Conservationists

The conservationists felt they had lost the compromise reached by the EMC regarding the size of the area adjoining shellfish waters in the interim regulations. Although the area was increased to encompass the twenty-county coastal area, the conservationists thought the battle was lost because the actual runoff controls were relaxed. Thus, their objective in the ORW battle was to convince the EMC to nominate and designate as many coastal waters as ORWs as possible so that the most restrictive regulation on land use and development would apply. In addition, since the ORW designation included an untested anti-degradation concept, the conservation

group could contest development proposals which even met the protection package regulations that accompanied the actual designation. In this way they could achieve their ultimate objective to control development.

Developers

Meanwhile, the developers were pleased that the developable distance to shellfish waters in the interim regulations was shortened, and that the runoff restrictions were reduced in the final version of the runoff regulations. But they were unhappy with the introduction of yet another regulation--that of ORW. Not only was the anti-degradation concept unknown, but so was the profile of an ORW. How this translated as far as development restrictions was at best unclear and at worst a major threat to coastal development. Thus, the objective of the developers was to have the ORW classification left dormant. In this way they could achieve their objective of eliminating unclear regulations that left development proposals open to attack from conservationists.

Environmental Management Commission

The EMC was glad to resolve the controversial coastal stormwater runoff regulations. But they were now confronted with the more formidable issue of ORWs. The criteria for ORWs was broadly written to protect unique water resources. Many EMC members, particularly those with business backgrounds, were uncomfortable with the subjective ORW criteria and wanted the criteria defined in quantitative terms. They were also reluctant to impose the more restrictive measures that accompanied ORW designation.

Coastal Resources Commission

Some members of the CRC saw an important role for the CRC in shaping the land-based part of the protection package for ORWs. In its statutory authority the CRC had the power to designate special environmental areas called *areas of environmental concern* (AECs). Within these AECs, the CRC could specify the land use management regulations needed to protect that particular ORW. By combining the two concepts of AEC and ORW, a more comprehensive protection package could be developed for each ORW. But most of the CRC members avoided the issue. They preferred to sit back and watch the EMC grapple with this issue--after all, the EMC handled the coastal stormwater runoff issue on its own.

Environmental Management Commission Staff

After completing the in-depth study of the interim stormwater runoff regulations, the EMC staff concluded that the applicable area was too limited and the regulations were too stringent. Hence recommendations were made for the twenty-county area and the regulations were relaxed. But certain waters needed more protection and required stricter controls. For this reason, the EMC staff recommended more stringent controls for development adjoining waters nominated as ORWs until they were designated with an accompanying protection package. The EMC staff was comfortable with the subjective criteria for ORW nomination and designation. Moreover, they were competent to begin the process with a few selected waters.

Department

The Department (composed of the staff of the Secretary of Natural Resources and Community Development) played a major role in reaching compromise on the distance from shellfish waters on the interim stormwater runoff regulations. They supported the EMC staff recommendations to protect special coastal waters using the ORW concept. The Department also understood EMC's trepidation in using subjective criteria and the CRC's reluctance to get involved in a controversial issue after having been left out of the coastal runoff controls issue. The Department was in a quandary as to how to resolve these issues in the state's best interest.

Public Interest

In this case, the public's interest was fairly easy to determine. The public would best be served by providing addi-

tional protection to special environmentally sensitive coastal areas. To achieve this objective the EMC and the CRC used the appropriate tools available. The EMC could use the ORW classification to nominate, study, and eventually designate special coastal waters for added protection. And the CRC could use the AEC classification to nominate, study, and eventually designate areas adjacent to special coastal waters for added protection. In addition, a mechanism was needed so that the two commissions could work in tandem.

To accomplish the overall objective, the EMC needed to feel comfortable with providing added protection to special coastal waters. The CRC would have to adapt the AEC classification to include the land adjacent to the various types of coastal waters. Coordination between the ORW and AEC processes was needed so that the development limitations of land nominated by each process would not be unknown for an unreasonably long amount of time.

Strategy

Environmental Management Commission

First, making the members of the EMC comfortable with the ORW criteria protection would be a formidable task. Several key members were adamantly opposed to any subjectivity in the criteria. Since each of the coastal waters has

unique qualities, it was impossible to design totally objective criteria. Therefore, the focus of the strategy

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was to make the EMC comfortable with the subjective criteria.

Since the EMC was the battleground for the conservationists and developers, a process needed to be designed which would involve both groups. An ad hoc committee was created to design guidelines, a protection package, and a schedule for nomination, study, and designation of ORWs. The guidelines would supplement the existing ORW rules and spell out in more detail the on-the-ground impact of each phase of the ORW process and the schedule to be followed so that limitations on development of affected land would be known within a definite time period. The group included one member from the EMC water quality committee, two chosen from the conservationists, two chosen from the developers, and a chair or referee who was chosen for his neutrality, balanced approach, and conflict resolution skills. The EMC staff provided technical assistance, and the CRC staff was present to hear the proceedings.

The ad hoc group would make its recommendations to the EMC water quality committee, which would pass them on to the EMC after careful consideration. The strategy

was to involve the key groups in the ad hoc committee so that the resulting guidelines and schedule would be acceptable to the EMC.

Coastal Resources Commission

Developing the strategy to convince the CRC to use the AEC classification to provide added protection to lands adjacent to special coastal waters was a more complex matter. First, the CRC was purposely excluded from the coastal stormwater runoff issue out of which emerged the ORW and added protection. Consequently, the CRC was not convinced it should participate at all. Thus, the strategy needed to focus on convincing the CRC to become involved and use the AEC classification as the mechanism to add more protection to coastal waters.

Second, the need for coordination between the ORW and AEC classification processes had to be factored into the strategy development. If at all possible the two processes needed to be running parallel to each other, perhaps even having joint public hearings. Because of the "wait and see what the EMC does" attitude of the CRC, this would be a difficult task.

Nonetheless, the determining factor in selecting a strategy for the CRC portion was probably the group dynamics. The conservationists, the developers, and the CRC were strong willed and at times combative.

Given these factors, an ad hoc committee process similar to that chosen for the EMC was ruled out. Instead the strategy was to work informally with the CRC members who were aligned with the conservationists and developers. The objective was to convince them to use the AEC classification to determine the land use controls for land adjoining nominated ORWs and to run the AEC process parallel to that of the ORW process.

Implementation

The most crucial factor for the Department in implementing the strategies was to recognize that the EMC and the CRC required different monitoring and involvement.

Environmental Management Commission

It was fairly easy to convince the members of the EMC to let the Department set up the ad hoc committee. It was probably a relief for the EMC to hand it to a group for further resolution. In contrast, the actual deliberations were a difficult process. The committee took more time than anticipated and the recommendations were just short of consensus. But that aspect was more attributable to a glitch in the monitoring system than to the skill of the chair

or referee who masterfully pushed the committee to the limits of agreement. The monitoring problem was a function of the key Department contact going into labor two weeks early on the day of the ad hoc committee's first meeting and leaving on a ten-week maternity leave after giving the charge to the committee.

The strategy worked. The guidelines of the ad hoc committee were adopted by the EMC. Just before the next EMC meeting, Governor James G. Martin endorsed the nomination of ten coastal waters recommended for ORW status. The EMC voted to nominate the ten, and the interim restrictions went into effect for the six months allocated for the in-depth study.



Outstanding Resource Waters

It was popularly perceived that the ORW nominations were made because it was an election year and the governor needed environmental green stamps. This was a problem. No matter what the Department said or did, the groups could not be convinced otherwise. The conservationists thought they were set up for another major defeat, and the developers hoped that the nominations were a hoax but continued to fight the final designation. Most of the CRC and the EMC also thought that the ORW nominations were a political promise that would soon disappear. The EMC staff braced itself for a round of pressure and interference from all groups, particularly from the Department.

The Department had to constantly monitor the groups to ensure the study's integrity. Much time and effort was spent in meeting with the groups to reassure them that if they followed the process, the coastal waters which were outstanding and needed extra protection would be designated ORW; and the protection packages would allow reasonable development of the coast.

After the election the ORW nominations did not prove to be an empty, election year promise. According to schedule, the studies were completed, the protection packages

were prepared, and the public hearings were held on all ten nominations. Only minor changes, mostly additions, were made in the boundaries in contrast to the conservationists' prediction that the areas would be greatly reduced. After the public hearings, all but one of the nominated areas were designated ORW with individually tailored protection packages. The remaining nominee was given a special designation by the governor so that controls designed to upgrade the water quality could be put in place.

It was a victory for all groups involved. But most of all the ORW designations showed that the political process can work in the public interest given the proper attention to strategy and implementation.

Coastal Resources Commission

Implementing the strategy selected for the CRC portion was an almost insurmountable task requiring constant attention and close monitoring.

Opportunities to reach agreement on small parts of the whole concept were seized.

The major turning point came when the governor endorsed the ten coastal waters proposed to the EMC for nomination. At that point, the developers knew that the CRC would have to participate in the coastal waters protection process by using the AEC classification. The issue then became the timing of the AEC portion. As stated above, the developers wanted to wait until the EMC acted on the ten nominated ORWs.

The next step was to convince the CRC that it would be better for them to establish the land use controls for the land adjoining ORWs than to entrust that responsibility to the EMC, which only had expertise in water quality. The deliberation took many hours of discussion, and centered around the specific controls that would be applied to land designated AEC and the size of the AEC. The CRC voiced many of the same concerns about on-the-ground impacts, and the potential for litigation and for appeal of issued permits, that were raised during the deliberations of the ORWs ad hoc committee.

A turning point occurred when the General Assembly convened and considered a bill that designated land adjacent to designated ORWs as AECs, that the AEC would be a certain size and that specified land use controls would be applied to the AEC. The bill provided a real incentive for the CRC to design its own AEC category for land adjacent to ORWs. The CRC hastily adopted a proposed rule for public hearing. This action provided the Department with

enough evidence to convince the bill's sponsor to transform the bill into enabling legislation that not only conformed with the CRC proposal, but also clarified the CRC's authority to use the AEC classification for ORWs.

At the next CRC meeting, deliberations were again made over the final form for the AEC category for ORWs. At last an agreement was struck and the CRC adopted the new AEC for ORWs. This action led the way for the CRC staff to work more closely with the EMC staff. Unfortunately, it came too late for the two processes to run simultaneously. The AECs for the corresponding nine coastal ORWs are now in place.

Throughout the CRC deliberative process, the Department had to be constantly involved and prepared to facilitate, cajole, and intervene if necessary. This was the case especially with the CRC. The Department also had to be on constant watch to guard against disruptive tactics used by the

conservationists and developers. For example, the conservationists used the tactic of convincing a legislator to introduce a bill in the General Assembly to establish an AEC category fashioned to their likes. Likewise, the developers sought to stall the process by requesting a ruling from the state attorney general and EPA on the impact of the antidegradation clause of ORW classification on permit appeals.

Successfully establishing an AEC strategy for ORWs was the result of careful planning and follow through to direct the political process to resolve an issue in the public's best interest.

Conclusion

Planners do possess the qualities to be leaders. They have the technical skills in solving problems, anticipating future needs, and identifying the public good. The most formidable obstacle planners face in becoming leaders is their reluctance to admit they are involved in politics. Until planners realize that they are involved in the political process, they will be unable to structure their involvement to best serve the public interest. As a result they will not reach their potential as leaders or planners.

This methodology is an attempt to provide a simple, straightforward approach for using planning skills to assess the political landscape and develop a strategy to achieve the public good. The case study demonstrates that by using this methodology, planners can lead the process in resolving an issue such that the public good is served. As a result, they become leaders as well as better planners. ■



Coastal development