

Citizen Participation and the Internet in Urban Planning

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INTRODUCTION

For the first time in human history, a majority of the world's population lives in urban areas. In the United States, not only do the majority live in urban areas, the overall population is projected to grow by 100 million by 2040. This urban growth will require unprecedented efforts by urban planners to engage communities and stakeholders in the planning of new buildings and infrastructure. Modern information and telecommunications technology, particularly the Internet, provides planners with new tools to facilitate citizen participation in planning. In order to propose a model for the use of Internet technology to support sound urban development efforts, this paper examines the e-government movement, American planning participation history, and planning participation theory. It concludes with a outline of a new model of Internet-centered citizen participation in urban planning.

This paper contains four parts. First, I describe public participation in urban planning in the context of e-government, or “the use of information technology to support government operations, engage citizens, and provide government services.”¹ The use of the Internet to engage citizens in urban planning has been constrained by the limited availability of suitable technical tools and concerns about digital inequality, as well as a lack of a clear understanding of how technology can meet the needs of citizens and professionals. I describe how new Internet technologies and expanding Internet access addresses these concerns, and why urban planning requires a distinct technological approach from other e-government initiatives.

Second, I review the history of participation in American urban planning in order to describe an early, expansive approach to public involvement useful today. Before winning

¹ Terry F. Buss and F. Stevens Redburn. “Information Technology and Governance,” in *Modernizing Democracy: Innovations in Citizen Participation*, eds. Terry F. Buss, F. Stevens Redburn, and Kristina Guo (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006).

government powers over private actions, early planners communicated directly with citizens in order to build the political support necessary to achieve their plans. Model enabling acts adopted widely by many states as the framework for planning and zoning defined the legal context for official participation practices. Contemporary outreach can build from these early models using Internet tools to achieve consensus about and coordination of new urban development.

Third, the paper describes the theoretical framework of professional planning for participation. Since the late 1960s the definition and rationale for public participation in planning has been intensely debated in professional literature. In recent years, new models of participation have been proposed and professional approaches solidified. The theoretical debates and professional practice of offline public participation can provide perspective and values for a new Internet-centered model.

The paper concludes with a description of a new model of the use of Internet technology for public participation. The Internet is a powerful tool for planners to expand the base of participants in planning processes and enhance traditional engagement approaches. Although Internet technologies are new, the practice of engaging citizens in urban development processes is not. This study contains a critical re-evaluation of planning participation history and theory in order to propose ways Internet tools can be used to realize more inclusive, democratic, and equitable planning processes.

PART 1: URBAN PLANNING AND E-GOVERNMENT

Since the advent of information technology, there has been intense interest in its potential use to enhance and improve government functions. Despite innovations in many areas of governance, the use of the information technology in general and the Internet specifically to facilitate citizen involvement in urban planning has been limited. Two fundamental reasons explain this: the unique character of public participation has made it difficult to replicate online, and professionals have hesitated to work on the Internet due to the unequal distribution of Internet access. These reasons also serve to describe the obstacles that must be overcome before effective online participation can be realized. New tools and expanding Internet access address these concerns.

The Center for Technology in Government defines e-government as “the use of information technology to support government operations, engage citizens, and provide government services.” The four broad government functions reflected in this definition are: the electronic delivery of services (e-services), use of information technology to improvement management (e-management), use of the Internet to facilitate citizen participation (e-democracy), and the exchange of money for goods and services over the Internet (e-commerce).² Although e-services and e-commerce have spread rapidly, the development of e-democracy tools has lagged behind. To the extent there has been innovation in the area of participation, it has been to facilitate individual communication (e.g. email) to government officials.

Although enhanced participation in government decision-making has long been a theoretical goal of e-government advocates, its actual implementation has been limited. By 2008, the vast majority of planning departments and commissions had at least posted plans and other

² Buss.

information online, many posted contact information to government officials, agendas and minutes from government meetings, and many have also begun to experiment with putting geographic databases online.³ Consultants have emerged specializing in workflow management, online document production, and even receipt of public comments for proposed plans in electronic formats.⁴ Despite broad adoption of some level of Internet use by public sector planners, few have elevated it to an important place in their work. A 2003 study of 60 urban planning processes in Florida and Washington states found just 5 percent used web sites as a “central role in providing information.”⁵

Government planners have not readily adopted Internet tools to engage the public in urban planning processes partly because of a lack of appropriate technologies. The work of creating plans is not limited to individual communications with the general public, but involves working with groups of people to identify problems and build consensus. In creating their plans planners must engage multiple distinct stakeholders, and often reach out to specific communities, organizations, and government agencies.⁶ Planners need easy-to-use tools that allow multiple constituencies to hold a mutual conversation. They need appropriate means to moderate the conversation as well as present a large amount of visual, cartographic, and textual data. Finally, despite advances in teleconferencing, the subtle aspects of face-to-face interaction cannot be easily reproduced virtually.

³ Charles H. Kaylor, "The State of Local E-Government and E-Democracy: Benchmarking the Progress of US Cities at Providing Online Opportunities for Citizen Engagement," *E-government: Key Citizen Participation Issues and Applications for Local Governments*, eds. Jennifer Cowley and Maria Manta Montoy, (Columbus, Ohio: The John Glenn Institute of Public Service and Public Policy, 2005).

⁴ The UK-based Limehouse Software (www.limehousesoftware.com) markets their product to government agencies as an integrated system to create documents, engage the public, and collaborate through a virtual environment. Urban Insight (www.urbaninsight.com), publisher of the popular planning portal Planetizen, offers clients web design and development, database development, and internet consulting services.

⁵ Samuel D. Brody, David R. Godschalk, and Raymond J. Burby, "Mandating citizen participation in plan making: Six strategic planning choices," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 69(3) (2003), 245-264.

⁶ See chapter 5 in Eric Damian Kelly and Barbara Becker, *Community Planning: An Introduction to the Comprehensive Plan* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000).

This style of communication contrasts sharply with the technology developed for e-services and e-commerce. These systems are oriented towards managing individual requests, or managing relationships between individuals and a central organization. Technologies emphasizing individual communication have limited utility to planners trying to build consensus between people and groups.

The creation of plans is fundamentally different than many other government actions because of its unique character. It often involves a large volume of information, takes place over relatively long periods of time, and entails abstract and value-laden policy choices like defining a future vision for a city. Planning processes involve public input and engagement with multiple constituencies. Unlike issuing permits or receiving service requests, it is difficult to imagine moving the process of creating long term plans entirely online.

Although access to the Internet has grown considerably, access remains unequally distributed. From a planning perspective, online initiatives may reach only a select group of residents or may be totally inaccessible to community members. Expending time and effort to development Internet systems seem less democratic than conventional means of engaging the public: meetings, notices, and receiving written comments. However, access to the Internet ranges widely, and participants of conventional participation practices can be more unrepresentative than online population.

The proportion of the U.S. population that reports using the Internet “at least occasionally” has grown rapidly in recent years, reaching 66% in 2005 and 73% in 2006.⁷ The share of Americans with broadband connections had reached 42% in 2006, up from just 5% in 2000. Internet varies by age, income, race, and education. 88% of 18-29 year-olds are online,

⁷ Mary Madden, “Data Memo: Internet Penetration and impact,” April 2006, Pew Internet & American Life Project, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/182/report_display.asp (accessed April 5, 2008).

84% of 30-49 year-olds, versus 32% of people age 65 and older. Low-income households are less likely to go online. 53% of households with annual incomes less than \$30,000 go online, versus 91% of adults in households earning more than \$75,000. Researchers have also found race to predict Internet use. 73% of whites go online compared to 61% of African Americans. Roughly 66% of English-speaking Latinos are online, compared to 33% of Spanish-dominant Latinos. Finally, education is a predictor of Internet use, ranging from 40% of those with less than a high school education to 91% of adults with at least a college degree.⁸

The data shows a gap in Internet use according to several important social and economic variables, a fact that has fueled concern with a “digital divide” and its effectiveness as a citizen participation tool. Although overall growth in the rate of Internet use has flattened in recent years, several historically underrepresented groups have seen rapid gains in Internet use, including African Americans, high school graduates, and older Americans.⁹ Furthermore, Internet access in public schools and libraries has become practically ubiquitous, reaching 99% of all public schools and 92% of all public school classrooms in 2002.¹⁰ The cost of computer hardware and Internet connections has declined sharply, with a fully-featured desktop computers available for less than \$500 (\$20 a month using credit programs), and dial-up Internet connections for less than \$10 a month. Increasingly the paradigm of a technologically-driven “divide” between groups is inappropriate. While disparities remain, the data shows significant variation in access to Internet connections, quality of the connection, and skills and motivation to use it. One scholarly examination of the “digital divide” urges us to “Declare the War Won,”

⁸ Susannah Fox, “Internet Usage Trends – Through the Demographic Lends,” Speech, 6 November 2006, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/74/presentation_display.asp (accessed April 5, 2008).

⁹ Susannah Fox, “Digital Divisions,” Pew Internet and American Life Project, 5 October 2005, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/165/report_display.asp (accessed April 5, 2008), 6.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, *Internet Access in U.S. Public Schools and Classrooms: 1994–2002*, NCES 2004-011, Anne Kleiner and Laurie Lewis. (Washington, D.C.: 2003)

citing rapidly expanding use, declining cost, and advancing technology, concludes the “digital divide is disappearing” and the role of public policy will be to help those left at the fringes.¹¹

A colloquium between activists in low-income communities and urban planning academics underscores the shifting understanding of the impact of the Internet. The activists were excited to learn about applications of information technology to enhance urban planning, empower communities, and compete for government resources and attention. “All these reasons contributed to the activists’ enthusiasm to learn about information technology (IT), even though the academics... argued that IT is unlikely to alter the conditions of the urban poor. ...”¹²

Despite excitement about the potential for e-democracy, technical barriers remain. Utilization of government websites depends on the website’s accessibility, usability, design, and functionality. Even citizens with computers may not be able to access websites that don’t function on their computers or that are difficult to use. These issues will be described in section four.

Since 2000, a host of highly interactive and popular websites has developed that allow Internet users to share information, form communities, and interact in new ways. Described by commentators as “Web 2.0” websites, they include social networking websites and specialized platforms allowing users to easily share photos and information.¹³ These websites share a common dedication to simplicity, usability, and interactivity. Collectively, they allow groups to communicate and collaborate online. Standards and technologies developed in this generation of websites are the source material for some services provided by planning technology consultants.

¹¹ Benjamin M. Compaine, “Declare the war Won,” in *The Digital Divide: Facing a Crisis or Creating a Myth?*, ed. Benjamin M. Compaine (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press Sourcebooks, 2001).

¹² Bish Sanyal and Donald A. Schon, “Information Technology and Urban Poverty: The Role of Public Policy,” in *High Technology and Low-Income Communities: Prospects for the Positive Use of Advanced Information Technology*, Donald A. Schon, et al. eds, (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1990).

¹³ These include websites to share links (del.icio.us), videos (youtube.com), photos (flickr.com). The term was popularized by technology writer Tim O’Reilly. For more information see Wikipedia contributors, “Web 2.0” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2 (Accessed April 14, 2008)

These technologies have several ramifications for the urban planning community. Because they have engaged huge numbers of citizens, they have created sources of information about very local issues. Neighborhood email lists, blogs, discussion boards, or other types of interactive websites are now commonly found in neighborhoods and towns across the country, containing a mix of information and opinion.¹⁴ The technology offers a menu of tools well suited for planners' long-standing goals of sharing information, interacting with the public, and fostering community.¹⁵

Governments have hesitated to implement e-democracy initiatives because of a lack of appropriately designed tools and concerns about the digital divide. Furthermore, public participation planning processes are not easily moved to online systems and may contain qualitative features that cannot be replicated through Internet technology. Expanding Internet access and the development of a new generation of Internet technology promises to ameliorate initial obstacles to realizing broader e-democracy initiatives.

Hardware and access are necessary but not sufficient to expand e-democracy in planning. Also needed is a conceptual model to understand how Internet technology can contribute to a larger planning process. To do that we turn to two areas: the history of participation in planning, and professional theoretical debates surrounding public involvement. In section 2, a study of history describes models of participation relevant to today, as well as helps to reframe participation in a larger political context. Despite ongoing, unresolved theoretical debates about the purpose and rationale of participation, contemporary professional practice reflects a

¹⁴ Email lists circulate email messages among all group members. They can be privately administered, or easily set up using free services like Yahoo Groups or Google Groups, and the members and messages may or may not be moderated by the list owner. Blogs, short for web log, is a frequently updated website written by an individual or a group, and generally allow visitors to leave feedback in the form of comments. Discussion boards allow individuals to post messages on a website. All three may or may not be accessible to nonmembers, but blogs are generally the most easily available to general Internet users.

¹⁵ Chris Steins and Josh Stephens, "Building Cities in the Virtual World: It's time for Web 2.0," *Planning*, April 2008.

surprising consensus. Section 3 evaluates professional literature and practice for lessons relevant to new online models of participation.

PART 2: A BRIEF HISTORY OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN URBAN PLANNING

In order to describe the potential uses of the Internet in public participation in planning, this section will begin with a short history of public participation in planning. The history seeks to challenge the profession's view of participation as simply the public processes designed and controlled by planners. Public participation includes not only the deliberate hearings, but also the role of politicians, civic activists, business leaders, the media, and others in engaging in or forcing public conversation about planning topics. Before the advent of modern urban planning regulation, American urban planners directly communicated with the public in order to implement their plans. The framers of early zoning laws sought to engage the public through an open and transparent process. Given the increasing power of citizen groups and growing complexity of urban development, contemporary planners crafting outreach strategies can learn from this history to achieve consensus about and the coordination of new urban development.

The *Plan of Chicago* of 1909 is an important document in the early history of American city planning. A group of Chicago business leaders commissioned architect and planner Daniel Burnham to create a plan for the city's development. The plan reacted to the congestion and pollution created by industrialization and rapid urban growth by calling for new infrastructure, parks, and establishing a framework for future development. Noted for its comprehensive approach, the plan was adopted by city government, who created one of the country's first city planning commissions to oversee its implementation. Although the plan's creation is widely

cited for helping to spark the planning movement in America, it is also associated with an important early example of public participation in urban planning.¹⁶

In 1909, city governments did not yet have the legal authority implement plans through zoning and an official planning commission. As a result, plan advocates turned to an unprecedented publicity campaign to win public support for the plan. Although the plan was commissioned by elites and presented to citizens through a propagandistic publicity campaign, plan advocates viewed public education as integral to the practice of planning itself. Voting citizens held direct power over the plan, since plan implementation depended on the approval of public bonds at the ballot box for road expansions, parks, and other initiatives. Therefore, before planners obtained the legal authority and institutionalized power to implement plans, the success of the nascent field depended on voluntary public and private coordination, created through broad public communication.¹⁷

After the completion of the 1909 *Plan of Chicago*, the business leaders who had commissioned and funded the plan formed the Chicago Plan Commission. The commission's first chair, Charles H. Wacker, retained a former salesman and self-made marketing expert Walter Dwight Moody to craft an ambitious promotion effort to build broad public knowledge and support of the plan. Moody's first publication for the commission was a ninety-page, hard bounded reference work titled *Chicago's Greatest Issue: An Official Plan*, that was sent to over 165,000 Chicago residents, property owners and tenants who paid \$25.00 or more in rent. The booklet rebutted critics of the plan and is credited for contributing to support for the first plan bond. Moody also wrote a 137-page textbook, titled *Wacker's Manual of the Plan of Chicago*:

¹⁶ Carl Smith, "The Plan of Chicago," *The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago*, (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 2005), <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/10537.html> (accessed 15 April 2008).

¹⁷ Thomas J. Schlerent, "Burnham's Plan and Moody's Manual: City Planning as Progressive Reform," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 47, 1 (1983), 70-82.

Municipal Economy, which he convinced city officials to include into the city's civics curriculum for all 8th grade students. Planning historian Thomas Schlerentz described the text as the first textbook in American city planning.¹⁸

Moody thought that planning was divided into two parts: first, a technical branch in architecture and engineering that creates plans, and a second “which is promotive, is likewise scientifically professional and could be truthfully termed the dynamic power behind the throne of accomplishment.”¹⁹ Like other progressive urban reformers, Schlerentz argues Moody saw his task as to link planning reform with extensive public information for both adults and children. Moody supplemented the manual with thousands of pamphlets, hundreds of slide presentations to some 175,000 citizens, a documentary movie about the plan, and even talking points distributed to clergymen encouraging them to preach on the virtues of city planning on a designated “*Plan of Chicago Sunday*.”

The unprecedented publicity was one cause for the implementation of large parts of the plan, and the creation of a city planning legacy relevant even today. Although citizens were not directly involved in the creation of the plan, their votes influenced which recommendations were implemented. The publicity campaign enabled plan advocates to coordinate private decisions and build political support for government actions. The history of the *Plan of Chicago* demonstrates the “dynamic power” of a good plan well promoted.

Although citizens and civic leaders in dozens of American communities created city plans in the early 20th Century, government's power to enforce them was limited. Governments had the ability to build public facilities and exercise eminent domain for public uses like roads and government buildings, but they did not possess the legal authority to regulate the

¹⁸ Ibid., 72.

¹⁹ Ibid., 70-82.

development and use of privately owned land through zoning. The landmark 1926 Supreme Court Case Village of Euclid, Ohio v. Ambler Realty Co., 272 U.S. 365, settled the matter, upholding the Village of Euclid's zoning ordinance as a reasonable extension of the town's police power. The Court also rejected the Ambler Realty Company's claim that the zoning violated their right to due process.

In the wake of the case the U.S. Department of Commerce circulated two highly influential model acts for states interested in allowing cities to adopt zoning ordinances, the Standard State Zoning Enabling Act (1926), and the Standard City Planning Enabling Act (1928).²⁰ Conceived by lawyers, these two model laws were deliberately written in response to the Euclid v. Ambler case. Although the legal language is oriented towards guaranteeing property owners the legal minimum required to satisfy the due process requirements of notice and hearing, the footnotes reveal an earlier, progressive-era belief in the intrinsic need for extensive public involvement.²¹

The Standard Zoning Enabling Act (1926) published by the U.S. Department of Commerce contained language requiring public notice and access to hearings, and encouraged public involvement in a footnote. Before enacting or amending a zoning code in a given community, the model law stipulated "no such regulation, restriction, or boundary shall become effective until after a public hearing in relation thereto, at which parties in interest and citizens shall have an opportunity to be heard." The law continued to require "At least 15 days' notice of the time and place of such hearing shall be published in an official paper, or a paper of general circulation, in such municipality." A footnote explains "it was thought wise to require by statute

²⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce Standard Enabling Acts available <http://www.planning.org/growingsmart/enablingacts.htm> (accessed 9 January 2008).

²¹ Bradford J. White and Paul W. Edmondson, *Procedural Due Process in Plain English: A Guide for Preservation Commissions* (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2001).

that there be a public hearing ... There should be, as a matter of policy, many such hearings.” It also notes specifically that any citizen should be permitted to be heard, not merely property owners.²² Although mentioning the importance of “many” hearings, the law is designed specifically to meet the legal standard of due process through at least one public hearings and notices. Once the legal authority to plan through zoning was secured through law, public participation shifted from something absolutely required for planning to something to allow and encourage through meetings. The attitude towards public involvement in the zoning enabling act is similar to the position taken by the model act specifically for planning published two years later.

The Comprehensive Planning Enabling Act (1928) provided for the creation of comprehensive planning commissions by state jurisdictions. Before enacting a comprehensive plan, the act requires “the commission shall hold at least one public hearing thereon, notice of the time and place of which shall be given by one publication in a newspaper of general circulation in the municipality and in the official gazette, if any, of the municipality.”²³ A footnote describes a rationale for the public hearing that extends beyond the satisfaction of a legal due process requirement, and is worth quoting at length:

The public hearing previous to the adoption of the plan or substantial part thereof has at least two values of importance. One of these is that those who are or may be dissatisfied with the plan, for economic, sentimental, or other reasons, will have the opportunity to present their objections and thus get the satisfaction of having their objections produce amendments which they desire, or at least the feeling that their objections have been given courteous and thorough consideration. The other great value of the public hearing is as an educating force; that is, it draws the public’s attention to the plan, cause some members of the public to examine it, to discuss it, to hear about it, and gets publicity upon the plan

²² U.S. Department of Commerce, 6-7

²³ Comprehensive Plan Enabling Act 1928, 12.

and planning. Thus the plan begins its life with some public interest in it and recognition of its importance.

The quote hints at the awareness by planners that participation can have the functional use of not only building consensus (and here, diffusing the most dissatisfied) but also encouraging broad based knowledge necessary for implementation. Like the zoning act, it also requires notice and hearing for subdivision controls also.

Between the 1920s and the 1950s, the approach contained in the laws became widely adopted in the country. Citizen planning and zoning commissions, public newspaper notices, and public meetings became the common tools for allowing involvement in planning processes. After World War II, a newly dynamic economy and new federal funds for urban renewal would highlight the limitations of this restrained approach to planning.

The Housing Act of 1949 made significant funds available to cities to engage in slum clearance programs, and very soon after the passage of the law a host of cities launched significant clearance programs, often in low-income African American neighborhoods. The National Defense and Interstate Highways Act of 1956 provided funds for road construction providing funds to realize highway plans for urban areas, often being planned since the 1920s. In cities throughout the country, civic elites used the machinery of zoning and planning – combined with federal dollars – to forcibly remove low-income and African American communities for urban renewal projects. Despite public hearing requirements, low income communities had little meaningful input in the creation and execution of renewal plans.²⁴ By the early 1960s, scholarly critics concluded what many had discovered through personal experience: the urban renewal program did not protect the interests of those displaced, and was undemocratic. In his 1964 classic *The Federal Bulldozer*, Marin Anderson suggested each renewal project should be

²⁴ For a description of the experience of urban renewal in Detroit, see Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).

approved through popular referendum, ironically the very means used to implement parts of the 1909 Chicago Plan.²⁵ Another critique of urban renewal sarcastically argues that urban renewal must be “shielded from the voters,” observing “the more directly democratic a local urban renewal program is, the more likely is to live from hand-to-mouth,” and that the “City Planning Commission is consulted when appropriate (that is, after the basic decisions have been made)”²⁶

In large part in response to the history of urban renewal, President Johnson’s War on Poverty invented an important new terminology and approach to participation in urban planning. The 1964 Economic Opportunity Act committed significant federal funds to a variety of efforts to combat poverty in America. It created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and over 1,000 Community Action Agencies (CAA) who were eligible to receive funds for a variety of social programs. The Community Action Agencies ranged from community groups, nonprofits, and city agencies, but the law required all be “developed and conducted with the maximum feasible participation of the residents of the area.”

Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s account of the legislation focused on the origins and repercussions of the phrase.²⁷ Moynihan noted that Robert F. Kennedy was the only administration witness to touch on the subject during legislative hearings, describing the clause as providing the poor with a “real voice in their institutions.”²⁸ His book includes a description of the voluntary guide created by federal administrators describing how community action programs could satisfy the maximum feasible participation requirement.

²⁵ Martin Anderson, *The Federal Bulldozer*, (Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1964, McGraw-Hill Paperback edition, 1967), 225.

²⁶ Scott Greer, *Urban Renewal and American Cities: The Dilemma of Democratic Intervention*, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), 89-91.

²⁷ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: community action in the war on poverty*, (New York: Free Press, 1969), 87. It should be noted the book did not receive positive reception, the New York Times described it as a “desultory after-dinner conversation, in which all sharpness and bite of analysis have dissolved in self-contradiction, [and] vague ellipses ...” from Adam Walinsky, “Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding,” *New York Times*, 2 February 1969.

²⁸ Moynihan, 91.

“The requirement of resident participation,” the Guide continues, “applies to all stages of a community action program, from its inception on.” Participation must be “meaningful” and “effective.” It should be brought about by “traditional democratic approaches and techniques such as group forums and discussions, nominations, and balloting.” It should be stimulated by “grass-roots involvement” committees; by “block elections, petitions and referendums”; by “newsletters to neighborhood leaders and potential leaders”; by “promotional techniques, including use of films, literature, and mobile units operating from information centers.” Further, residents should be given “meaningful opportunities . . . either as individuals or in groups, to protest or to propose additions to or changes in the ways in which a community action program is being planned or undertaken.”²⁹

However, for the first two years of the program the precise meaning of “maximum feasible participation” was left undefined, with OEO offering little specific guidance other than that the CAA board should contain some representatives of the poor. Privately, federal administrators arbitrarily suggested one-third of the governing body an appropriate number. The issue of how the poor would be represented was intensely debated in dozens of cities, often distracting from the mission to tackle poverty. In 1966, the U.S. Congress stipulated democratically selected representatives of the poor comprise one-third of the boards, and in 1967 the Green Amendment allowed local elected officials to designate the official CAA for their area.³⁰

The Great Society experience with maximum feasible participation had several important lasting effects. First, it established the principle that government planners should proactively ensure the involvement of citizens of low-income communities. Second, despite the professional consensus that involving low-income communities improved planning, it highlighted the lack of methods and techniques to translate the abstract goal of “participation” into reality. The inability of the OEO to translate the legislative requirement into meaningful techniques forced the CAA

²⁹ Moynihan, 97-98.

³⁰ Lillian B. Rubin, “Maximum Feasible Participation: The Origins, Implications, and Present Status,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 385, Evaluating the War on Poverty. (Sep., 1969), 24.

boards to debate the issue themselves. Beginning in the 1960s, the planning profession increasingly turned to the problem of defining participation and describing what it would mean in practical terms, described in the following section. Lastly, while having a profound intellectual impact in the profession, the legal requirement only ever applied to a shrinking slice of funds for social programs. Other planning processes – such as city plan commissions and zoning – were unaffected by the War on Poverty’s participation requirements.

PART 3: PARTICIPATION THEORY

Since the 1960s, the urban planning profession has developed increasingly sophisticated techniques and theories regarding how and why to involve citizens in planning processes. Critics pilloried the effectiveness of citizen participation during the War on Poverty, suggesting a new theoretical approach to participation itself was needed. Despite theoretical disagreement about the proper definition of and practice of participation, professional literature reflects a consensus a variety of additional techniques can enhance the process and result in more effective and democratic plans. These debates suggest ways planners can craft strategies that take into account social divisions and inequality, and effectively incorporate Internet technology into existing processes.

The experience of limited participation during urban renewal and the debate surrounding “maximum feasible participation” in the 1950s and 1960s sparked an intense professional interest in the topic of public participation in planning. The political and social turmoil in American cities and the contested nature of urban politics raised serious questions about how participation should be structured, and how power should be distributed more broadly in the city.

In this climate, Sherry R. Arnstein, a former U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) official, published one of the most influential articles on the topic of public participation. Titled “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” her article described an eight-rung metaphorical ladder of participation.³¹ The rungs are organized into three levels: nonparticipation (manipulation and therapy), tokenism (informing, consultation, placation), and citizen power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control). Interlaced with her description are anecdotal

³¹ Sherry R. Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, July 1969.

stories describing both flawed participation and successful examples where power was delegated to community representatives.

Arnstein described the lack of meaningful participation in policymaking in poor urban communities, and identified “citizen control” as the proper definition of citizen participation in planning. This approach discarded any effort where “citizens” were not given full authority. Arnstein observed “no Model City can meet the criteria of citizen control since final approval power and account-ability rest with the city council.” This “ladder” of participation was a powerful critique of duplicitous participation processes that do not provide citizens with real power. Two characteristics of the critique influenced subsequent debates and the usefulness of the ladder today.

First, the ladder provides few specific strategies. If we are sympathetic to her findings, it offers little guidance for planners seeking to design processes that conform to the standards proposed. The citizen control section describes one approach as giving grants to grassroots organizations, but Arnstein concedes full neighborhood self-government seems unlikely in the future. Aside from criticizing the usual methods used by formal planning to incorporate citizen input – public meetings, special committees, etc – she has little to say about how these processes can be improved.

Second, the article provides little to those who might disagree that citizen control should be the proper goal of citizen participation. Her model radically eliminates any role for the rational or technical expertise of planners, and assumes citizen power will result in good planning decisions. Transportation, environmental, and many other types of planners may bristle at any strategy that completely removes them or elected officials from the decision-making

process. Indeed, the tension between planning's technical expertise and democratic aspiration has fueled ongoing debate.

Arnstein was not the only scholar paying attention to the subject of participation. Just eight years after her article was published, the Council of Planning Librarians published a "comprehensive" bibliography of "Citizen Participation in Urban and Regional Planning." The chronological index bears witness to a flowering professional interest in the profession: while the years of the 1950s each have just a small number of citations, the late 60s and early 1970s contain dozens of books and article each year. The compiler, John David Hulchanski, concedes in the introduction that the literature after the early 1970s has become too extensive to include in any one general bibliography.³²

By the late 1980s, the lessons of the experimental and uneven forays into participation of planners of the 1960s and 1970s had become synthesized with pre-existing processes and requirements, particularly for local neighborhood planning. The American Planning Association's 1990 *Neighborhood Planning: A Guide for Citizens and Planners*, presents a wide variety of outreach methods, data-gathering methods, and participation methods. The book is sanguine on the effect of public participation on planning, arguing it is needed not just for ethical reasons but to create better plans that are more likely to be implemented: "Doing things democratically takes more effort and more time, but it is worth it for the quality of product that emerges and the sense of commitment that people will have toward it."³³ The author describes four principles to "democratic neighborhood planning": deprofessionalization, decentralization, demystification, and democratization.

³² John David Hulchanski, *Citizen Participation in Urban and Regional Planning: A Comprehensive Bibliography*, Council of Planning Libraries, Exchange Bibliography #1297, June 1977, 2, 55-61.

³³ Bernie Jones, *Neighborhood Planning: A Guide for Citizens and Planners*, (Chicago: American Planning Association Planner's Press, 1990), 12.

Consultant James L. Creighton's Public Participation handbook defines participation as informing the public, listening to the public, engaging in problem solving, and developing agreements, within a framework where the government officials retain decision-making authority.³⁴ He argues participation can have a number of benefits: improved quality of decisions, minimizing cost and delay, consensus building, increased ease of implementation, avoiding worst-case confrontations, maintaining credibility and legitimacy, anticipating public concerns and attitudes, and developing civil society.³⁵ He proposes a process of decision analysis, process planning, and implementation planning, and provides a range of possible "tools" to reach and engage citizens. The manual has only a short section on Internet tools. Pointing out more than one-third of U.S. residents get their news online, Creighton notes the following: "This is a new enough area that I have little to offer in the way of advice on how to use these forms of communication more effectively. But it is worth your time to tune in to bulletin boards or listservs that focus on topics related to your public participation program and then consider how to use these media to reach audiences you cannot reach through conventional media."³⁶

These and other professional models are summarized in Table 1. Despite the diversity in their approaches, many common themes exist between them. A 2003 article proposing clearer regulation of participation organizes these themes into five areas. This framework provides a contemporary summary of what form participation should take according to stated professional theories.

1. Objectives: provide information to as well as listen to citizens; empower citizens by providing opportunities to influence planning decisions.

³⁴ James L. Creighton, *The Public Participation Handbook: Making Better Decisions Through Citizen Involvement*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

2. Timing: involve the public early and continuously.
3. Targets: seek participation from a broad range of stakeholders.
4. Techniques: use a number of techniques to give and receive information from citizens and, in particular, provide opportunities for dialogue.
5. Information: provide more information in a clearly understood form, free of distortion and technical jargon.

Despite the professional consensus about “good” public participation, its practice ranges according to local preference, availability of funds, and the values of government officials. In order to propose how the Internet could be used as a participation tool, we need to understand both professional models of good participation and critics of participation as it is practiced today. Despite the proliferation of theory, techniques, and evaluations, the legal requirements of participation remain the same in many communities. A survey of legally mandated citizen involvement techniques in ten states found the requirements closely followed the requirements of the 1928 Planning Enabling Act: a public hearing and newspaper announcement after the planning had been completed.³⁷ A researcher proposing a model ordinance to require citizen participation at the municipal level found just seven such ordinances nationally, in cities in California, Arizona, Wisconsin, and Florida.³⁸

Judith E. Innes and David E. Booher urge us to abandon the existing model of participation for a collaborative approach that “should be understood as a multi-way set of interactions among citizens and other players who together produce outcomes.” They argue the legally required methods of public participation, in particular public hearings and review and comment procedures “do not work,” and antagonize the public, pit citizens against each other,

³⁷ Samuel D. Brody, David R. Godschalk, Raymond J. Burby, “Mandating Citizen Participation in Plan Making: Six Strategic Planning Choices,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 69 (2003), 248.

³⁸ Kathy Kem, BRR Architecture, “Citizen Participation Model Ordinances,” 2005 American Planning Association National Conference Poster.

polarize issues, and discourage participation.³⁹ Recognizing that “governance is no longer only about government but now involves action and power distributed widely in society,” they advocate a set of approaches that are “inclusive of stakeholders and that put dialogue at their core.” The authors describe the differences between currently legally required participation methods and their proposed collaborative approaches as “one-way talk vs. dialogue; elite or self-selecting vs. diverse participants; reactive vs. involved at the outset; top-down education vs. mutually shared knowledge; one-shot activities vs. continuous engagement; and the use for routine activities vs. for controversial choices.” While the authors acknowledge the two approaches can coexist, the practical obstacles for replacing the existing techniques with collaborative ones are significant, and their list include everything from open meetings laws, costs of collaborative efforts, and the “hubris of elected officials.” The article suggests the next steps for advocates include “developing an alternative practice framework,” a daunting task that may not be possible given the significant expense and lack of specificity in their proposal.⁴⁰

A study of environmental justice and industrial zoning in New York City found the public participation process unsatisfactory as well. Describing it as “complicated, convoluted, time-consuming, and intimidating,” the author concludes these characteristics have “helped to maintain the hegemony of the affluent and the non-minority population.” The study concludes people living near industrial zones were more likely to be minorities and poorer than the average New Yorker, and poor communities were more likely to see expanded industrial zones in their neighborhood. She concludes that these changes have happened despite modern participation, which in New York City includes enhanced neighborhood activism, community boards, community plans, environmental review processes, and an official “fair share” city policy. She

³⁹ Judith E. Innes and David E. Booher, “Reframing Public Participation: Strategies for the 21st Century,” *Planning Theory and Practice*, Vol. 5, No. 4, (December 2004) 419.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 429-430.

identifies three major limitations of the participation process: the technical nature of policymaking dominated by a rational-technical approach, unreasonable time constraints for public responses, and a process that does not provide participants with actual authority.

Finally, a 1997 article argued citizen participation was an “essentially contested” concept that was not clearly defined in the profession. Indeed, if we mean “citizen power” as Arnstein defined it there is very little actually practiced, as the final authority in most planning processes is reserved for elected political officials. The author argues this lack of agreement on a definition is caused by the unresolved varied philosophies in the field, relating to the role of the planner, the functioning of a bureaucracy, and concepts of justice.⁴¹

My approach is to understand both the normative systems developed and actual history of participation in planning, not resolve long-running philosophical differences. The history of American participation in planning can be organized into two general categories: sources of participation from within the profession, and sources of participation from outside the field. Participation from within the field can be the result of legal or procedural requirements. In this tradition is the due process requirements of model acts, the federal maximum feasible participation requirement, and a small number of more complex modern statutes proposed by some scholars.⁴² Also within the profession there is a history of voluntary, values or outcome-inspired participation. In this category we find professional manuals who urge participation because it makes for better plans and minimizes conflicts, and advocates like Arnstein who argue planners have a moral imperative to involve the public in a meaningful way.

The other large category of participation comes from outside the bounds of the profession. Individuals, community and special interest groups can insert themselves into

⁴¹ Diane Day, “Citizen Participation in the Planning Process: An Essentially Contested Concept?,” *Journal of Planning Literature*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (February 1997), 421-434.

⁴² Brody, et al.

planning processes through a variety of techniques, from lawsuits to protests. Planner's frustrations with this type of involvement are responsible for the negative description of Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) activists.⁴³ The media can play an unexpected role, reporting accurately or inaccurately on a planning process. Finally, politicians can play a role, inserting themselves into processes, driving the agenda, or holding hearings. Often these forces will interact in complex ways.

There is a complex relationship between the two sources of participation described above. To a certain extent, many of the external sources of participation require at least some amount of voluntary disclosure and creation of forums through formal participation processes. (If there are no meetings and no public information, will the NIMBY ever be upset?) The first chapter of Peggy Robin's pre-Internet 1990 NIMBY manual, *Saving the Neighborhood: You Can Fight Developers and Win!*, is titled "Finding Out What's Coming," describing the paucity of due process announcements and the variety of techniques citizens will need to use to find out information about proposed buildings ranging from public signs, personal contacts, government planners, and elected officials.⁴⁴ Our democratic culture and legally mandated minimums mean the raw material is almost always available, and the planner's instinct to be as controlling of the process as possible – or interpret public noninvolvement as agreement – can sometimes backfire.

These critics aside, professional guides consistently urge participation in planning and its practice ranges widely. The American Planning Association's statement of Ethical Principles of Planning requires planners "recognize the rights of citizens to participate in planning decisions,"

⁴³ Perhaps indicative of the professional opinion is the title of Herbert Inhaber's 1998 book *Slaying the NIMBY Dragon* (New Brunswick, N.J. : Transaction Publishers, 1998).

⁴⁴ Peggy Robin, *Saving the Neighborhood: You Can Fight Developers and Win!* (Rockville, Md.: Woodbine House, copyright Adler and Robin Books, Inc., 1990).

“strive to give citizens ... a meaningful role in the development of plans,” and “ensure that ... information is made available to the public in a convenient format and sufficiently in advance of any decision. Given this professional culture and ethical requirements, a clear model to use the Internet to facilitate participation will be professionally useful. It may also be possible the technology addresses concerns raised by critics about conventional practices.

PART 4: THE INTERNET AS A PARTICIPATION TOOL

While the Internet makes possible new types of interactions between citizens and government, the purpose and structure of these interactions are not new. The section creates a roadmap for the use of the Internet as a civic participation tool by describing the technical implications of participation history and theory.

Despite scholarly interest of the web's potential to improve e-democracy, most have viewed it as simply digitizing existing processes. Instead of corresponding with government officials through mail, citizens can use email. Instead of requesting pamphlets or reports they can download digital copies online. A 2004 study of the websites of 582 U.S. cities with a population of 50,000 or more in the 2000 Census found 35% provided an email address for citizens to contact the office, 74% offered the zoning ordinance and 55% had plans, and 37% had minutes of planning meetings.⁴⁵

Most planning agencies have placed large amounts of information online, viewing it as something analogous to newspaper notices or the creation of an official record for public review in person. This means planning board agendas, meeting minutes, and a wide range of planning documents are posted online, often in PDF format. Furthermore, many have adopted web GIS systems allowing visitors to view GIS data and create their own maps.

The discussion above demonstrates a gap between the current theory regarding public participation and the state of government planning websites. While we have a historical basis for widespread outreach and education about planning processes, information is scarce and often missing. This section seeks to apply the historical and theoretical lessons to suggest a path for

⁴⁵ Maria Manta Conroy and Jennifer Evans-Cowley, "Informing and Interacting: The Use of E-Government for Citizen Participation in Planning," *Journal of E-Government*, Vol. 1(3) (2004).

use of the Internet for participation. As a framework, it adopts the five choice areas advocated by Brody, Godschalk, and Burby for participation in general.

1. Objectives: provide information to as well as listen to citizens; empower citizens by providing opportunities to influence planning decisions.

This objective argues the Internet should be approached as a tool for communication among government and citizens. In addition to accepting inquiries by phone or in person, planning websites should support email correspondence. Furthermore, allowing the receipt of comments in a public forum can allow a collective process of clarification. The PlanNYC website allows visitors to post comments, and private vendor products like LimeHouse software allows commenting on plan elements.⁴⁶ Some communities have launched blogs that accept public comments on a variety of public topics. Montgomery County, Maryland has started a blog dedicated to housing policy. The organization E-Democracy.org has created a forum that exists through email and a website, allowing high quality interaction between citizens and government officials.⁴⁷ In addition to making information available governments can create RSS feeds, email lists, and other approaches that “push” information to citizens who have subscribed. These efforts can cultivate both bi-directional communication between citizens and many-to-many communication among a broader community. Better information delivered promptly can also improve citizen’s ability to influence decisions by helping them contribute comments and attend events at appropriate times.

2. Timing: involve the public early and continuously.

Offline planning models are nearly unanimous in their belief that high quality participation takes place both at the beginning and ending of a planning process. The iterative,

⁴⁶ For example see New York City PlaNYC Initiative, www.nyc.gov/planyc.

⁴⁷ See www.e-democracy.org.

ongoing nature of many processes is well suited to the architecture of the Internet. Blogs are easily updated, and organized in chronological order. Once published, online information is instantaneously distributed or available. Finally, online systems make archives easily accessible. The City of Alexandria, Virginia collects all information presented on a given topic on one page in “Plans, Projects, and Initiatives” section of their Department of Planning and Zoning website.⁴⁸

The right to know about the proper venue to have their views heard is an important prerequisite to allow public involvement at the appropriate project stage. Allowing citizens to impact decisions requires not only providing the details, but also regular communication over the long term and projects evolve. Websites can accomplish this by allowing citizens to register for newsletters, or even to be notified regarding local issues (development within a certain radius of their home or office, for example). Furthermore, online information often lags far behind the offline program. Timely information empowers citizens to know how and decide whether they would like to get more involved.

3. Target: seek participation from a broad range of stakeholders.

There are several implications for Internet participation if planners commit to engaging a broad range of stakeholders. First, the digital inequality described previously may be shrinking but is very real. Like any technology, it is likely a small group of citizens will never possess the access and skills to utilize a planning website. One scholar points out “participation requires not only physical access to computers and connectivity, but also access to the requisite skills and knowledge, content and language, and community and social support to be able to use ICT for

⁴⁸ City of Alexandria, Virginia, Planning & Zoning Website, <http://alexandriava.gov/planning/default.aspx?id=65> (accessed 5 April 2008).

meaningful ends.”⁴⁹ Planners can bridge these gaps by explaining the use of technical tools through other mediums, or collaborating with educational institutions to connect citizens with information online.

The Internet is best used in conjunction with other outreach strategies to engage different types of individuals. Citizens have unequal levels of interest and understanding in public issues to motivate them to attend meetings, unequal access to meeting facilities, and unequal time to attend meetings. A study of participants in a planning process in Austin, Texas found them better educated, whiter, and wealthier than the public at large.⁵⁰ Although these inequalities are known, they are not reasons to abstain from online outreach any more than they are reasons to abolish public meetings. Instead of choosing *whether* to go online, officials should craft their strategies online and off to reach diverse populations. On the web, multiple languages, background material explaining the planning process, animations and videos, and other content may be needed.

Lastly, the best research available shows Internet technologies exist in a hierarchy of use. Of the 75% of American adults who use the web, 92% have sent an email, 91% use a search engine, 66% purchased a product, 48% watched a video, 39% sent an instant messages, 22% post comments to a website, and 12% write their own blog.⁵¹ These discrepancies are due to varying levels of motivation, skills, and technology by Internet users. It suggests the simplest information – such as email newsletters and simple websites found easily by search engine searches – will reach the widest audience, with more sophisticated tools and information reaching fewer users.

⁴⁹ Mark Warschauer, *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003), 216.

⁵⁰ Timothy Beatley, David J. Brower, William H. Lucy, “Representation in Comprehensive Planning: An Analysis of the Austinplan Process,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 60, (1994).

⁵¹ Pew Internet & American Life Project, Total Online Activities Report, 15 February 2008, <http://www.pewinternet.org/trends.asp> (accessed 5 April 2008).

Simple factors such as font size and website design, described in the last section, can increase the number of website visitors, commenter's, and time spent reading.

4. Techniques: use a number of techniques to give and receive information from citizens and, in particular, provide opportunities for dialogue.

The unique characteristics of face-to-face communications in building consensus, communicating complex information, or creating new ideas means it cannot be totally replaced by online communications. However, the Internet is the idea “home base” for any multidimensional strategy for several reasons. It is increasingly the repository for disclosing government information. For this reason government officials often post meeting minutes, reports, and other documents of presumptive public interest. Second, its persistent character means it is ideal to store reference or archival information for review at any time and place with a connection. While participants in conventional processes can see diminishing participation as citizens drop out along the way, online event calendars and notices can allow citizens to participate in the meetings and events of interest to them without risking losing touch with the process. The Internet can supplement offline work by making additional information available, and archiving information presented at public meetings for future reference, as well as serving as a venue for ongoing conversation.

5. Information: provide more information in a clearly understood form, free of distortion and technical jargon.

This principle has a number of specific implications: content presentation, web design for ease of use, using web standards to maximize access, and providing data in open formats.

Planning websites too often are organized according to organizational structures, instead of according to the type of information sought by visitors. In order to reverse the structure of the website, planners can construct a taxonomy organized by issues and themes of interest to citizens. Visitor tracking services can allow planners to see which articles are most important, and expand and improve the sections receiving the most visitors, or evaluate what barriers exist for infrequently used resources. Planning websites should be organized with the public in mind, organizing data according to intuitive categories and explaining the process. The American Planning Association's neighborhood planning guide urges planners to de-mystify planning jargon in order to encourage local participation. Critics of participation argue the existing system of public hearings assume more technical expertise than most people possess. Others argue the hearings are dominated by technocratic discourse. Planning websites should contain not just digital copies of zoning codes or lengthy technical reports, but should seek to explain the meaning of policies and data, and seek to respond to public interest in topics from hit data and visitor surveys. Such efforts won't benefit simply the visitors to the site, but also community leaders, nonprofit organizations, advocates, and even members of the media, who have come to increasingly rely on the Internet for background information. This approach requires additional skills, as some of these functions fall in the area of knowledge management or journalism

From a technical point of view, presenting clear information online involves web design, web standards, and open data formats. A standard text on web standards describes how web standards make it possible to have "forward compatibility": "designed and built the right way, any page published on the web can work across multiple browsers, platforms-and will continue to work as new browsers and devices are invented."⁵² The author of a standard text on the topic argues websites developed not conforming to web standards have real costs in terms of

⁵² Jeffrey Zeldman, *Designing with Web Standards, second edition*, (Berkeley, California: New Riders, 2007), 15.

bandwidth and server expenses.⁵³ Standardized formats exist for website's structure (HTML, XHTML, XML) presentation (CSS), and behavior (DOM, ECMA Script). Open standards, formats owned by no company, have formed the basis of blogging and a variety of applications. Websites developed under web standards have valid markup, meaning the pages are coded according to industry standards and can be viewed on a wide range of browsers. The federal government also requires its websites meet the Section 508 requirements. Intended to make the Internet easy to use for people with disabilities, it includes standard approaches to handle graphics and text for those using special software. One advocate argues "compliance with accessibility guidelines and web standards not only makes your site more available to millions who are living with disabilities, but also helps you reach millions more ... and attract still more via search engines."⁵⁴

Government websites that provide data according to open formats like XML empower citizens to monitor, download, and analyze the data themselves. In Washington, D.C., a neighborhood activist has utilized the District of Columbia's data feeds to provide automatically updating lists of crimes, complaints, and permits in the neighborhood.⁵⁵ Indeed, one study of the use of technology in low-income communities suggested that "public policies must ensure that the computer functions as a repository of information for interactive use by grass-roots planners," pointing out that "even if universal coverage is achieved, the programs and computers used by upper-and ower-income residents may differ ... governments must be willing to support the minimum threshold data needs of low-income communities ..."⁵⁶

⁵³ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 340.

⁵⁵ Jacqueline Dupree, JDland: Near Southeast Development, www.jdland.com, (accessed 5 April 2008).

⁵⁶ Bish Sanyal and Donald A. Schon, "Information Technology and Urban Poverty: The Role of Public Policy," in *High Technology and Low-Income Communities: Prospects for the Positive Use of Advanced Information Technology*, Donald A. Schon, et al. eds, (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1990).

Conclusion

Millions of Americans use the Internet to shop, work, follow current events, and communicate with friends and family. Increasingly, they also use it to interact with government, including to participate in urban planning decisions. Although the Internet is a revolutionary technology, it does not require revolutionary approaches to participation. This paper argues the history and theory of citizen participation form the guide for few models to use the Internet to engage the public.

Urban planning takes place in a political context, often directly shaped by planner's approaches to public participation. The success of planning initiatives depends on engaging the proper stakeholders, and one study found planning processes with more stakeholders resulted in both more policy recommendations and more implementation.⁵⁷ Scholars have observed the critical effect of information in influencing planning processes, arguing “consensus building ... requires broad access to information.”⁵⁸ Some think the field has taken a "communicative" turn, and argue planner's effectiveness is linked to their ability to craft public discussion.⁵⁹

Through a history of public participation, I show the critical role of engagement and public information in urban planning is not new. Indeed, early participation efforts were explicitly crafted to reach broad groups of citizens. Although subject to intense professional debate, by the close of the twentieth century a professional consensus emerged. Citizens have a right to information about planning processes, and to contribute their views through writing and

⁵⁷ Raymond J. Burby, “Making Plans that Matter: Citizen Involvement and Government Action,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 69:1 (Winter 2003), 33-49.

⁵⁸ Kevin S. Hanna, “The Paradox of Participation and the Hidden Role of Information: A Case Study,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 66:4 (Autumn 2000), 398-410.

⁵⁹ P. Healey, "The Communicative Turn in Planning Theory and its Implications for Spatial Strategy Formations," *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 23(2), 217-234.

public meetings. While our laws reserve final decision-making authority for elected officials, the profession seeks to give citizens influence on the process.

The Internet has tremendous potential to allow planners to enhance and improve existing participation techniques. It can connect citizens to huge amounts of information in engaging, interactive ways. It can serve as a new venue for public conversation, potentially more accessible and flexible than any previous approach. It can keep them updated over time. Thus, this paper is both a roadmap to guide the development of Internet participation methods, and an argument for use of the Internet by the planning profession. The Internet is a powerful tool, but *how* it is used depends on our choices. It is our responsibility to harness its potential to create democratic, inclusive, and creative methods to allow communities to tackle problems and plan for the future together.

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