

Dealing with the New Activists—What Planners Should Know

The newly-energized and politically active citizens who have begun to dominate the American political landscape over the past several years will continue to be a force to be reckoned with for years to come. It is impossible—and would be unfair—to try to paint them with a single brush, but there are some things that the planning community should be cognizant of as we move forward in this changed political landscape. At the risk of oversimplification, here are some thoughts to consider.

Who are the new activists?

To a great extent the new activists truly are new to the process. They are not old political hands and to a remarkable—and laudatory—degree, they seem to be being relatively immune to being co-opted by existing parties or the political establishment. Indeed, “None of the Above” seems to be the favorite electoral choice of many of these new activists. This means that they are not familiar with the norms and vocabulary of the established political process and frankly find both to be problematic for what they believe are the requirements of American democracy. Thus, the folks who continue the same old vocabulary will be tarred as being of the same old politics marked by pluralism, compromise and delay in making critical decisions on issues and policy directions for which the new activists want to see a change from the status quo.

What are the issues?

Again, it would be unfair to settle on a single issue as the situation is far too complex. However, to the extent that there are three unifying issues they are the national debt, an overreaching federal government and fear of diminished property rights, each of which is viewed under the lens of the changing demographics of America. And, many are truly passionate about these things and see in them a threat to the freedom of choice and the American Dream as we have thought of it since WWII. Politics and politicians of all parties are viewed as a major part of the problem and by extension government at all levels is seen as the enemy. This has spurred a renewed interest in the concept of “states rights” and the 10th Amendment to the Constitution. Planning appears to be serving as a lightning rod for these core issues.

Where is the information coming from?

Many of the new activists get their information from what can only be thought of as a closed loop—bloggers and talking heads with whom they already agree. Unfortunately, this is little different from most Americans in the 21st Century and it may be that the slow death of daily newspapers and the resultant loss of in-depth news and political coverage is a contributing factor. Blogs and digital social media on the Internet form a very substantial source of information and as these sources are not subject to fact-checking, compelling, but incorrect, stories abound and are repeated over and over until they have a cachet of fact. It thus is very difficult to dissuade people of the essential “truths” that they believe. However, as previously noted, this is certainly not limited to the new activists.

How do planners respond?

For the most part, the planning community should remain committed to our profession and be fully guided by our ethical requirements. However, planners need to recognize that in many ways, we are our own worst enemy. It is hard to find a profession with more jargon and acronyms—plain English communicates far more and far better to non-planners. The planning community is often very trend driven, going for the purported brass ring of the latest planning fashion—TND, New Urbanism, Form-Based Codes—when what planners really do best is help citizens find, explore and document their shared values for the future through an open and collaborative process. Planners should NEVER pre-ordain outcomes; planners help develop processes to allow the citizens to get to the outcomes THEY want. Planning and planners must be seen as more than simply enforcers of codes. It is necessary to remind citizens and elected officials that good planning leads to a more efficient and effective use of scarce public resources. Moreover, planners can emphasize that a successful planning process finds common ground among citizens through choice, engagement and community involvement. Planning is an outcome-neutral tool for ensuring that all voices are heard in an open manner and does not advance particular agendas or ideologies. Indeed, planners themselves come from a variety of political ideologies, but are able to come together as a profession with the common goal of helping citizens help themselves in finding their shared values.

Planners should learn to frame the discussion in terms that citizens understand and avoid using various words and terms that are either code for things people think they don't want or are simply things that they do not care about today. For example, the new activists as well as most citizens do not care at all about the "transportation land-use connection", while they are passionately concerned about the cost of housing and the cost of transportation. Recent polling data (Ford Foundation, October-November 2010) suggest that most Americans support reducing commuting distances, times and costs and that they support having schools, shopping and recreation closer to where they live. Additionally, most Americans want clean air and water and they support sidewalks and bicycle trails. Finally, Americans overwhelmingly agree that as a nation we are far too dependent upon foreign oil. However, they do not favor "sustainability", "livability", "walkability", "smart growth" and similar terms. So, language is very important and planners need to clearly enunciate goals without reverting to planning jargon.

It does no good to argue with the new activists over what they believe—set facts straight, but do not argue over beliefs and absolutely avoid name-calling. By providing accurate, fact-based information, planners can begin to counter misinformation and the viral blogosphere and Internet discussion loops. At the end of the day, however, as planners we need to tell our story. We must sell the value we add to public processes to an increasingly skeptical public. It is absolutely true that planning can build great communities—we have done so in the past and we continue to do so; however, too often we do not shine a light brightly on our successes as a profession. By both nature and training, planners try to shun the spotlight, remaining both neutral and dispassionate. Perhaps some more passion about the good that planning does is appropriate—APA's Great Places in America and National Planning Month programs are good places to begin.

The changing demographics of our nation mean that there is now more than one “American Dream” and is driving the demand for more choices. So at the end of the day, it is the quintessential laws of supply and demand that is pushing for more diversity in housing and working choices, for more compact developments where residents can live, work, play and worship in close proximity, for more energy-efficiency to reduce the costs of housing and transportation, and for more options in lifestyle choices. And, truly, what can be more American than to let the free market decide?

The good news is that the national debt and the level of government spending that incites most of the passion and energizes the new activists is, ultimately, an issue for which planning is a key part of the solution. By ensuring that public investments of scarce resources are made effectively and efficiently, the planning profession contributes positively. Successful community and regional planning can lead to the job creation and economic development that our nation needs. We should focus our message on how effective planning is a part of fiscal discipline and responsibility at all levels of government and it is a lack of thorough and comprehensive planning that too often leads to poor performance and wasted resources.