The Politics of Planning Communities:

The Art of Collaborative Consensus Building

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There's a story about an Italian tenor who finishes a performance to find the audience

bringing him back for encore after encore. He does those, but the audience asks for even more,

and then he says, "Thank you very much, but I really must stop!" And then he hears a voice from

the back of the concert hall, "Not until you get it right!"

Now, like the tenor, I'm still trying to get it right, but in my case the "art" in question

involves addressing the politics of planning in our communities. I take politics not simply to be a

matter of "who gets what?" but to be an imaginative and creative "art of the possible," in which

we transform what we believe possible in the first place. Hannah Arendt thought that the essence

of politics involved not only plurality and difference, but our capacity for speech and action—

what she called "natality"—our ability to bring something wholly new into the world, for

example through promising and promise-keeping: here are actions between people in which we

change our worlds—interpersonally and politically. Think of official promises made in

communities and kept, or official promises made and broken—and the resulting public trust or distrust, public confidence or cynicism they've fostered.

I am not particularly an Arendtian, but I am fascinated by the micro-politics of planning processes, the day-to-day ways that planners in many fields (public health, social work, transport, education, and so on) shape what's possible in communities for better or worse: the day-to-day ways that planners raise or lower expectations, perhaps by saying, "Trust me," the day-to-day ways that planners might involve these "old boys," but perhaps not those people of color, the ways planners might frame problems this way, but perhaps never see—or yet come to see—other more collaborative ways of going on together. The most evocative definition of planning that I know simply puts it this way: "Planning is the organization of hope." Planning is the organization of hope—and so planning well done enhances our abilities to imagine our communities as we might yet really live in them, and planning poorly done diminishes our imaginations of what we can do, weakens our hope and discourages our action.

If we are interested in questions of public participation in planning, we need to worry, in part, about the challenges of planners who often have to work "in between" multiple stakeholders who all have different agendas—neighborhood residents and developers and agency staff and activists—each one convinced that the planners were "really on someone else's side." Asking planners, "How do you try to work with everyone, when everyone thinks you're partial to someone else?" can reveal practical strategies that planners use every day (shuttle diplomacy, for example), and this much you'll find in my earlier book, Planning in the Face of Power.

But planners face broader problems here, of course: the practical arts of consensus-building, mediated or facilitated negotiations, and community building—and because I take these to overlap substantially, I want this morning to address their deep and common problems, for these arts can involve amazing work—transforming real antagonisms into working relationships and practical agreements, not by magic but by hard and creative work—and just when so very few people really think that's possible to do at all.

2

I hope, this morning, address <u>both</u> the challenges that confront diverse community planners and practical techniques of consensus-building as well. Among these common challenges we find inequalities of power, income and information. We find multiple and diverse stakeholders who posture, hide information, stereotype one another, and presume zero-sum outcomes (just for starters). We find histories of distrust of public authorities and those working for public agencies. We find a penchant in public meetings for parties to "decide, announce, and defend" their positions, to shoot first and ask questions later, and to bring an almost visceral skepticism that anything collaborative or cooperative "with Them" (be they bureaucrats, blacks, whites, aboriginals, developers, or environmentalists) would be possible at all.

Now, I suggest that we've all been here—that we've all not only faced others in meetings who've acted in such ways, but more: it's very likely that we've all acted in just these ways ourselves: posturing, simplifying, hiding real interests, presuming zero-sum outcomes, being impatient with process, even being skeptical ourselves at times about cooperating "with Them." At the same time, I believe there's good news: skillful practitioners and carefully designed processes <u>can</u> respond to these real problems in surprisingly successful ways—ways that are inclusive, responsive, efficient, well-informed, perhaps, in a word, community-building too.

To see how this might be possible, I want to turn to examine practitioners' accounts of their consensus-building work—its challenges and their responses—and I will conclude by identifying more general themes or lessons that we can all take away for further reflection.

At the risk of making matters seem worse before better, listen first to an experienced Canadian mediator, Bill Diepeveen, who's been concerned with inter-municipal disputes such as those involving land annexations or road re-alignments.[i] He echoes several of these problems, but then suggests that collaborative processes might still offer promise.

I'd asked him what gives him a sense of possibility when he faced contentious public disputes, and he replied, in part, this way:

It never ceases to amaze me that people, when push comes to shove, haven't taken the time to really understand where the other is coming from and what's really driving them. It's still your grand-pappy did it to my grand-pappy. And they're so fixated [on that]. They identify themselves so much in the history and the bad situation, the bad relationships, that they can't see beyond it—and that's the challenge that I see that really gets me re-invigorated—that there is a way beyond it.

Here Bill raises the problems of who's "taken the time to really understand" and the difficulty of understanding "where the other is coming from," and he adds to those as he reminds us of the "blame-game" that parties can too easily play. Still, he says, his challenge is to show skeptical parties that mediated processes do offer promise. But why do experienced municipal politicians listen to him?

He continues,

[They listen] because they recognize that the traditional process has not been satisfactory. Administrative tribunals are costly, and they're antagonistic. They do absolutely nothing for inter-municipal relations. They basically create "win-lose" [outcomes]—it's a very, very distributive kind of process and it does nothing to address what, I think they realize at the end of the day, is their ultimate desire: which is to improve inter-municipal cooperation and to work better with their neighbors.

They're seeing that the traditional processes aren't working. But in some ways it's hard for them to give it up, because that's all they know.

So Bill reminds us that we're guilty of one hand clapping if we simply list off the many difficulties of "participation," without asking if politics as usual, or the courts, have done better. The practical evaluative question we must ask about consensus-building is surely, then, "Compared to what?" (Susskind, 1994) Our traditional administrative and legal processes, Bill

argues, can raise significant problems themselves: in his few words they are costly, adversarial, and may, as he says, "do absolutely nothing" for on-going relationships.

But sensing that there's a better way doesn't yet get us there. So let's examine now in some detail what a messy, difficult consensus-building case can involve. When the parties are distrusting, fighting each other in the political process, in the media, and in the courts too, what might a skillful consensus-builder really do? Let's look and see—and then draw more general lessons to take away.

Here's what an experienced mediator, Lisa Beutler, faced, working with a State Parks Deputy Director on conflicts among stakeholders interested in off-highway motor vehicle recreation, management and regulation in California. These conflicts involved both state and federal lands.[ii]

<u>In the Beginning</u>

Lisa begins this way,

> [The Deputy Director had a vision—that instead of <u>the ongoing contention—that had been classic and well known and well-described for years, and years and years</u>, perhaps they could all come to the table together and begin to think in a more collaborative way—and talk about the best way to manage this program—and that would be a much more preferable approach than having <u>the usual thing that happens, which is that the land managers [the planners in this case] go do something and get yelled at by everybody</u>."

Here we see again the sense, from inside of government as well as outside, that the existing regulatory processes are not doing so well. Lisa mentions "years and years" of "well-known and well-described" contention—that apparently State government had been able to do all too little to resolve. But the agency had not called her first.

She says,

What had happened was they had called a person who typically provides facilitations for the Department, and they had two meetings—at which point, according to the stakeholders, if you were to interview them, they would say that they nearly ran the [first facilitator] out of town on a rail. I took a look at what the first facilitator did—it was a disaster.

Now, we might think this experience surely to be a-typical, but history often provides us with less than a clean slate or a fresh beginning. Planners take new jobs and inherit the gifts and the mistakes of their predecessors, and they find as they try to build new relationships with community members that the shadows of those who have come before them can still linger. What community planner has not found his or her good intentions met with suspicion by community members who, as they quickly say, "have heard it all before"?

So just what did Lisa face? She explains:

What had happened in the first two meetings was that the previous facilitator – and this was part of my assessment of what was going on – had come into the process with a classic problem solving model . . . . a complete step-by-step process, and so he was just going to go through the seven steps of problem solving. . . .

Well, here, [though,] you had this really high level of contention in the room, and I had people who weren't even speaking to each other. So asking them to begin to define the problem just immediately put them into [saying,] "The problem is, the other guy is a jerk!"

That was going nowhere very fast. Plus, you've got 55 people. Plus, you've got a guy that was used to working with maybe six to twelve people. It was a complete mis-match."

So, enter Lisa. What I'd like to do now is give you a glimpse of what she accomplished and a sense of how she did that as well. From that story, from the drama of her own work to overcome

this history of anger and contentiousness, and the history of failed efforts that preceded her, we can learn through practice, not theory, a good deal about collaborative planning, about responding to community contentiousness, and about sensitive and skillful practices of community building too.

Interviewing Lisa with a colleague, I asked her early on what she'd been able to achieve in this case, if there were any practical agreements at all. She responded this way:

> Probably the most dramatic agreement was . . . to lower the "point-of-use" sound standard to 96 decibels from what was formerly 101 decibels.
>
> That was a huge agreement. It's the strictest standard except for one other state in the United States. We also had side agreements —associated with [sound] for continuing study, manufacturing standards, and that sort of thing. The "point of use" standard is so dramatic that the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management are both looking at adopting the standard, so it could end up having national implications.

Here already she tell us not just that they produced several agreements, one central and others more peripheral, but much more—that the central agreement was quite "dramatic," no routine compromise, and more too, that it was "huge," that two major Federal agencies were considering adopting the standard as well.

So we might well want to know, now, how she took 55 angry stakeholders from the disaster of their earlier experience with facilitation and "years and years" of difficulty to an agreement "so dramatic" that it could have national implications. Here's how she explained the heart of the central agreement:

> What was key about this particular agreement was [that it was a] "point of use" standard rather than a manufacturing standard. . . . Up until now, no other agreement had been able to achieve this, because the sound is emitted from a vehicle. Only the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency can set

manufacturing standards for <u>vehicles,</u> and that is a federal requirement, and

the state does not have the ability to preempt the federal law. However, the

state does have a right to determine how <u>land</u> is used—so, [this] is a "point

of use," [a land-use] standard, not a manufacturing standard. . . . and that

was the key to this negotiation.

And how, more than perhaps a dozen meetings into the process, did the group come to this

'point of use' breakthrough? Lisa recapped it this way:

[We realized that] the State has a right to say you cannot use alcohol on

State property. It's not <u>illegal</u> to have alcohol . . . if you're a certain age . . .

But the state has a right to impose that restriction. So somehow that came

into the mix, [and] so the next question was, "Could the State impose a

similar type of a standard for other uses?"

. . . . So, we investigated that question, [and] the answer came back,

"Yes, you can." Ok, if you can, you've got room to move forward—so then

what would have to be the piece of this that we can move forward on?

So, then we actually got to talking about numbers, . . .a strict, straight-

up negotiation about numbers. What could we physically do?

So the stakeholders re-framed their problem from one about which they could do nothing

(changing federal regulations, the vehicle-focused manufacturing standards) to one they could

influence (recommending changes in State land-use regulations about acceptable noise. This

crucial reframing grew, we shall see, not from parties arguing or bargaining with each other, but

from a process Lisa crafted so that the parties could together identify key issues, learn about

them, and only then negotiate real agreements.

But their beginning did not seem at all promising. Recalling this group's early

contentiousness, I asked Lisa if the parties had foreseen their ultimate, "huge" agreement about

the 'point of use' standard. I asked, "[Did they know [they might achieve] that at the beginning?]"

She replied quickly,

> Oh, no. They didn't know what the agreements would be. They had no idea. They didn't even have a single topic to discuss. One of the first things I had to do was assess what could even be negotiated. I mean, I didn't even know—no one even knew—what could potentially be <u>discussed</u>.

Here, Lisa teaches us a good deal. She has facilitated a State-level process that produced an agreement of national significance, and she had done that with a group of stakeholders who were so mutually suspicious and adversarial that they had no agreements even upon a basic agenda for discussion, a basic sense of the issues that they needed to discuss. Hardly mincing words, Lisa says of the stakeholders' group at the beginning: "They didn't know what the agreements would be. They had no idea."

<u>They</u> had no idea, but Lisa mentions her early work to move them in that direction (even if she had no idea of that agreement either!): "One of the first things I had to do," she says, "was assess what could even be negotiated." She's saying here not just that the stakeholders did not <u>by themselves</u> formulate an agenda for discussion and negotiation—that she needed to do that, to move beyond those "years and years" of contentiousness—but that the stakeholders began with little <u>hope</u> of such a dramatic outcome at all.

<u>The Initial View From the Outside</u>

She put the initial situation this way:

> This program had continuously, for every single administration, been a complete thorn in their side and a source of all sorts of chaos and problems, and typically it was a source of bad press—and litigation—and a million other things. The Program Director and the Governor both had said to the Deputy Director, "You get that friggin' thing under control: it's a nightmare for us."

And what about the Deputy Director who hired her? She said,

I think what [the Deputy Director who set this up] was really looking

for was some way to get people in the room and change the quality of the

[discussion] to go to a more civil <u>dialogue</u>.

Now, surely, what Lisa accomplished with these stakeholders reached far beyond creating

"a more civil dialogue," but that original expectation suggests just how poor were the working

relationships between the stakeholders, how much distrust they felt for one another.

So how in the world, we should ask, did a woman whom almost none of the stakeholders

even knew have the insight and skill, first, not to be discouraged or dissuaded by angry and

skeptical stakeholders with little idea of possible agreements, and (with the skill) second, to

actually find a way to innovative agreements having such significance? What kind of

understanding of consensus-building, what kind of abiding practical vision, did Lisa bring to

these warring stakeholders so that they could produce such dramatically unexpected results?

<u>Acknowledging Mutual Vulnerability</u>

So let's follow her work here. She continued this way:

What we had to do there was start [with] a classic reframing. We sat

down and we said, "We're not here [first] to do problem-solving work. We're

here [because] it's in everyone's interest for this program to operate at an

optimum level. Can we agree, in principle, [on that]?

So we spent the first two meetings in that conversation—to reach the

agreement that it was in everyone's interest to find an optimum approach to

physically managing this program.

[She gave an example to illustrate what she meant:
The environmental community. . .realizes that the potential for
environmental harm with an unregulated use is far greater, because you can
mitigate for a regulated use. So this was an important piece of the
conversation, to say, "Ok, we're going to stipulate that you don't like off-
highway vehicles—we'll stipulate to that. But that being the case, are you
willing to agree that an optimum management of tis program is in your
interests?]

Notice the reframing that Lisa takes up at the beginning: Let's back up from what you want; let's back up from solving the problem your way, and let's see if we can agree that it's in all of our stakeholder interests to have an optimally targeted and administered program, however differently we may now think about what "optimally" means. Lisa does not ask anyone to give up anything, but quite the contrary: she broadens stakeholders' attention from their particular views of the issues to a problem that they all share: they all share a vulnerability to a poorly designed and poorly administered program of state regulation. To paraphrase Bill, whom I quoted earlier, "the traditional processes weren't working;" their history of state regulation had produced, it seemed, a chaos of "bad press" and "litigation" hardly serving them well—so, was it in their interests, she asked, at least in principle, to have a better, an "optimal" program?

Mind-Mapping

But Lisa only began there:

> "So from there," she continued, "what we did was a 'mind-map' – to say, "If we were going to write a book about this program and what the elements of this program are, what would be the chapters of the book? What would have to be in the book—in a conversation about an optimal program?" And [so] we spent a meeting building this book: . . .like a sun-burst. . . in the middle. . ."optimum program" and shooting out. . .there would need to be a chapter on funding, . . . a chapter on mitigation for X, . . . a chapter on soil, . . . a chapter on sound . . . .

> So we drew the picture—and we took a whole wall, and we drew what would need to be in the book, and then I had the group prioritize what they had energy to work on in writing the chapters of the book — so they multi-voted and picked through these.

11

Now notice what Lisa's done here. She has <u>not</u> asked one party what his or her dispute is with another party. She has <u>not</u> asked what criticism of the existing State program the non-State stakeholders have. She has <u>not</u> asked these parties to make any compromises. She has instead asked the group as a whole a common question, "If we were going to write a book . . . , what would have to be in the book, in a conversation about an optimum program?"

She has put a common question to the group and asked them to do work together to respond. They were now facing the wall and trying to figure out the domain of relevant issues, and they were not, to begin with, talking about one another's failings. Lisa's 'reframing' shifted attention not only from personal antagonism to substantive issues, <u>but also</u> from past failures to future possibilities.

She summed a bit of this up as follows:

> What the mind-map does is help you describe the universe. What is the universe (of issues) I'm working with here? . . .And then from there, understanding this universe of issues, [we asked,] "Where is your energy? Where do you have an interest in paying attention and doing some work?"

<u>Multi-voting</u>

<u>In</u> the multi-voting system, she explained, each constituency had voted with a particular color of dot to select the topics they wished to work on. She went on,

> So I was looking for a space where there was energy to work collaboratively, where the colors were mixed and there were a lot of them, [which meant] that they would be willing to make a commitment to spend some time investigating that.

> Well, once we had some priorities set, then I could move into a lot more of the classic things, like doing "issue and interest statements. . . ."

She reminded us, though,

I was dealing with [an open] universe, you know—there was no topic even defined. We were just in the process of trying to begin a conversation with parties that wouldn't even speak to each other, hardly.

<u>Framing the Conversation Less Adversarially</u>

Here I wanted to press the point. How did the mind-map help with opponents hardly speaking to one another? She put it this way:

The mind-map did a couple of things that were helpful with the contentiousness of the process. The energy was directed to the wall, not at each other. So, by having people focus as if we were writing a book—what would the chapters be—it was content-based and all the attention was on the wall. . . When I'm writing a book on a program, [though,] one of the chapter headings is not "Joe is a jerk!"

But if I ask you what your issues are, one of your issues might be that "Joe is a jerk!" So it's a way of framing the conversation. . . . it's less adversarial.

Lisa tells us a great deal here, even if she makes it all sound deceptively simple and easy. She is acutely aware, of course, that Susan might very well say, "The problem in getting the State to act here is that Joe's a jerk," and what's more, Lisa knows that Joe won't waste much time in response, telling the group just what he thinks of Susan and her environmentalist groupies. . . and from there, Lisa knows that the conversation heads over the edge into antagonism, recrimination, escalation, and very little productive being accomplished.

Lisa knows that all this chaos can follow from a question to the group that seems as innocently simple and as apparently respectful as, "Well, what are your issues?" So she tells us essentially that before she can even begin to explore disputed issues, she must first "frame the conversation," as she put it—to make it possible for stakeholders to speak together without attacking each other, or, as she says, "less adversarially."

13

Lisa has told us about the "energy" in the room and the role of the mind-map to focus that energy "not at each other," but at the wall, on the substantive questions that the group together would need to address. So Lisa, remarkably enough, to some of us, does not find herself put off or threatened by the hostility in the room, for she seems confident that she can re-direct the attention of the stakeholders to substance and to exploring that "optimal program" in which they're all interested, that optimal program whose current absence makes them all vulnerable. If she can work with the group to define substantively those elements of an optimal program, if she can work with them to define their stakes in future regulations, she could then turn to a series of practical, future-oriented tasks. She put it this way, summing up the process so far:

> So, the first thing was, "Can we get an optimum program?" "Yes, we
> can." So, we came up with about five or six things that we thought might be
> useful to talk about, and once we had defined those things. . . then we
> moved into an "education phase," where we began, based on the topics that
> had been identified, to learn what was involved, to learn what the
> parameters were.

Education

She explained that education phase a bit this way:

> We did one meeting for each of the topics. We actually set up the
> meetings around them. In the beginning, we met monthly. It was pretty
> intense. . . So, for example, when we got to "sound," we'd called the US
> Environmental Protection Agency, and we had their "sound expert" come,
> and he spoke to the group and explained what the federal laws were."

So notice now the transitions, and the transformations, that Lisa has accomplished here. She has enacted a process—and seems not nearly to have talked about it so much as practically performing it: doing the mind-map, for example, and doing the multi-voting priority-ranking to focus the future efforts of the group. Lisa began with the 55 stakeholders in a stall or, worse,

14

mired in a history of recrimination and hostility and she moved them through issue identification
to assessing priorities for exploration (where stakeholders had the energy to work) and went
further, too, to a process of joint education so that the assembled stakeholders learned from
outside experts about questions posed by the group.

Now, as striking as this work was, it was nevertheless preparation for the mediated
negotiations to come: crafting practical agreements about actual regulations. So let's see how Lisa
turned that corner.

After 'education,' she tells us,

> To get the issues and interests statements, I gave them a set of
> questions to work on: "The areas where my constituency. . . has deep
> concerns are. . . ; if we were to think about how to make this [program]
> work correctly, the way we would describe that . . . would be such and
> such—and the reason that I think that this will really solve the problem is . .
> ."—and that, of course, [Lisa explains,] is a real interest, when they explain
> why it is that they think that this is the optimum solution (emphasis added;
> jf).

She goes on to stress this point:

> It's not what they actually present [as how to make the program work
> correctly]—it's their reasoning that provides what their interest is, but you
> can't get them there directly. So, you have to walk them through it.

> So once they had done that, we actually presented those to the others,
> so each of the caucuses shared with the others their perspective. So, I took
> away the solution and only talked about their reasoning. . .

So she helped "each of the caucuses" to learn about one another's underlying concerns. But
why, I wanted to understand, had she had to do this indirectly? Lisa explained it this way,

When you ask people, people typically think in terms of a proposed

solution, not the underlying assumptions or premises that led them to a

solution. I think . . . that in our society people are actually trained to be

solution-proposing. . . . "I know the solution to this problem; the solution is

X."

So Lisa knows to expect—and tells us to expect—"solution-proposing," and she knows,

crucially, that she must listen for far more than those proposed solutions. She has to listen

carefully to the reasons why those solutions seem desirable—for those "reasons why" disclose

underlying, driving interests. We might call this, "the classic mediator's response":

So, [she continues,] you . . . hit a "pause button," and you say, "OK,

you've proposed a solution, but you have reasoning behind that. What are

you thinking about when you propose [that] solution?"—because typically,

what people are reacting to is not one another's interest, it's their proposed

solution. That's what they're typically reacting to.

These comments too can teach us a good deal. When stakeholders can very quickly argue

against each other's favored solutions, Lisa tells us that we need to listen carefully not only to

what they're saying but to what they're not saying as well.

So here, she tells us, indirect strategies can help. When parties will otherwise waste no time

explaining the inadequacies of each other's proposed solutions, Lisa suggests that facilitators need

to slow the process down, to step back from parties' positions or temptations to focus upon this

solution or that one, to resist the urge to debate options, and instead work early-on to learn about

the underlying motivating concerns, the interests that they as interconnected, interdependent

stakeholders are really trying to satisfy.

So, she warns us, community planners seeking to plan collaboratively must be keenly aware

of their own temptation to moderate a debate between stakeholders instead of mediating their

differences. Moderating turns argument toward counter-argument and so surfaces debate;

mediating turns parties toward the diverse interests they can act to satisfy. <u>Moderating</u> helps parties to sharpen conflicting arguments; mediating helps parties to respond practically to one another's concerns.

Larry Susskind has put this very succinctly, this way:

> The essence of the process here is acknowledging the other's needs and your own, and making a proposal that tries to meet both. <u>Arguing</u> that you don't like what they want, and [that] you want something else instead, which is the old model of [public] hearings, doesn't get agreement. Remember, we're trying to get an agreement here—and we're not going until we get agreement. (Susskind, in Kolb 1994)

Like Lisa, and like Bill before her, Susskind too stresses the significance of creating a less adversarial mode of conversation ("acknowledging the other's needs and your own"), and he too contrasts "the old model of hearings," to consensus-building as a more constructive process, "making a proposal that tries to meet <u>both</u> (the other's needs and your own)." Like Lisa, he does more too: he stresses the difference between having an argument, <u>arguing</u> that you don't like what they want and that you want something else instead, and <u>mediating</u> a negotiation, crafting an agreement, a commitment to act together in way that addresses the real concerns of <u>both</u> (or all) parties.

Notice that this implies that <u>differing</u> interests provide huge opportunities for parties—who can collaborate, form practical coalitions, and help each other precisely because their priorities differ! So these consensus-builders suggest to us that in a safe and strong community, we will have not only "healthy debate," but a good deal more: a robust capacity to listen to one another, not just to hear bargaining positions but to probe for and to appreciate diverse underlying concerns, enabling, in turn, a capacity to craft options together for real mutual gain and mutual aid.

I have wanted to explore Lisa's story—her practical judgments—at such length with you not only because she helps us to understand the challenges of consensus-building, but because in her thinking about dealing practically with such acrimony and contentiousness, she teaches us about much broader community planning as well. How <u>was</u> it possible, after all, that Lisa saw real opportunities as she walked into a room of 55 stakeholders hardly speaking to each other—when so many planners in her same position might think that very little except even more heated argument might now result?

So I asked just that question. I said, "Some planners will feel that when there's so much bad feeling going around, they'd prefer to turn around and walk. But you came to that room, you saw all that, and you nevertheless thought, "Well, there's a set of things that might be possible here." So, the question for [community planning] students is, "What do we need to be thinking in the face of such contention?"

So I asked her, "When you're in that room and you feel that energy, and people might wish to be beating up on each other, how is it that you're still hopeful, thinking, 'Yeah, they're angry, but we can get something done?'"

She answered simply, and then explained in a quite instructive way. How can she still be hopeful as she walks into that room? She said,

> "Whenever there's conflict in the room, it means there's energy to work on something—conflict is always better than apathy: so that's where I start— . . . . [as a party,] if I'm angry, I'm angry about something, and I'm angry because I don't think something is working right—and I want things to work right.

I tried to press the point, to learn what else she might see here: "Maybe you're angry," I said, "that they're a jerk and they lied to you at the last meeting and their boss lied to your boss,"—to which she replied:

All that's true—that's the Hatfields and the McCoys. There was a piece of that here too, [but] you have to differentiate between the Hatfields and the McCoys, which is about "Your brother shot my brother," from "I have a fundamental public policy concern with the way business is being conducted."

But in the very next moment after Lisa makes that distinction, she immediately interweaves them. She says,

Often times, <u>both</u> things are true, because I [might have] started out with my fundamental disagreement—"I shot your brother" or "You shot mine,"—so then my job is to say, "We're going to stipulate to the fact that you shot at each other. Now, we can go on all night and day about that, but that doesn't fix the fact that you are very unhappy with the way that this is working.

[So] I'll say, 'I'm walking into the room today and there isn't a single thing **I** can do about the fact that people messed around and got shot. The <u>only thing I</u> can work with today is the reality of today, and the reality of today is that this situation isn't working for you, period, for all of you. If you're sitting in front of this room and thought that this situation was working for you, you wouldn't be in this room. So, your big question—that you have to pick up your mirror and ask yourself about—is: 'Am I willing to <u>not be</u> in this situation anymore? . . . Am I willing to take the risk to be in a conversation?"

Here again we hear an echo of an earlier theme: recognition of past grievances as a step <u>toward</u>, not as any substitute for, future action: "to not be in this situation anymore." But further, Lisa makes no claim to pre-empt the justice system—she wants instead to press a community

planning question to each party: are you willing to be in a conversation about rebuilding the community? As she put it,

> We can say it right now—we can put it up on the wall—we can do whatever you need to do to say, "In the past, I've been shot," or "In the past, you've been shot." That's not a secret!

> This is true, and [so I ask,] "Do you choose to continue suffering—do you choose to be shot at in the future, [and] choose to shoot at someone in the future? Is that your choice?"

She says deliberately,

> I will say that to them twenty times. You have to say it constantly—because that's really what it's about: is it worthy of your time to cease your suffering?

Here she gives us a central insight that illuminates the politics of community planning and consensus-building: what fuels consensus-building efforts is perhaps more the desire to diminish suffering than the desire to achieve lofty ideals. All the way through her story, Lisa has asked us not to consider collaboration and consensus-building as abstracted values in themselves, but as strategies of action that will serve all parties who wish to do much better than the status quo, who wish to improve vastly upon traditional community planning processes. She wants us too to be able to ask, "Is it worthy of your time to cease your suffering?" Are you willing to take the risk to be in a conversation [to that end]?

Conclusion:

Now, we've heard here no recipes with simple steps to collaboration and consensus-building, but we can take away several themes or, perhaps, lessons for any of us concerned with participatory community planning.

First, community planners should expect to inherit—and to recognize and work pro-actively to move beyond—community members' all too reasonable dissatisfactions with past government

efforts. History matters, and those histories can be quite painful, echoing for years and years—and those histories, which cannot just be checked at the door, may well involve displacement, power-politics, racism or cultural discrimination, neglect, and of course, (as in Lisa's case) botched earlier attempts at addressing community problems.

Second, when stakeholders are all too ready to highlight each other's faults, indirect strategies to explore issues and to build relationships can be essential. So Lisa's mind-mapping exercise shifted attention away from positions, away from debates over whose solution was better, or whose problem was bigger, and it shifted attention toward the joint problem of mapping elements of an optimal program. Face-to-face meetings do not have to be head-to-head arguments, head-to-head confrontations.

Third, consensus-building does not happen by itself: because parties often bring fear, suspicion, uncertainty, and vulnerability to community planning encounters, these processes require trained facilitators or mediators, skilled and not just well-intentioned planners—who will be keenly aware that the most productive way to learn about the parties' views of issues may well NOT be to ask each party, when everyone's together, "Well, what are your issues?" As a corollary here, then: because these processes are not self-organizing, because they require skillful design and guidance, our schools should of course address these competences in community planning-related curricula.

Fourth, consensus-building requires a deliberate attempt to recognize the past and to address real future possibilities: to acknowledge past suffering and to propose concrete future actions. Perhaps no one puts this better than Carl Moore who teaches us that facilitators who wish to help groups to act collaboratively must work with them "to enlarge the shadow of the future," to imagine ourselves acting to reshape that future, to build safer and stronger communities, to reduce—as Lisa suggested—today's real suffering.

Fifth, because consensus-building means building agreements to act, community planners need to distinguish carefully and practically between processes of: i) dialogue, ii) debate, and iii)

mediation. Fostering dialogues can promote understanding and mutual recognition between parties. Moderating debates can sharpen arguments and clarify differences between parties. Mediating negotiations can craft agreements to act to satisfy represented parties' interests. So community planners must be clear—with themselves and with community members alike—at any given meeting: are we here to foster a dialogue, to moderate a debate between perspectives, or are we here to agree together upon a plan of action?

Consensus-building provides no magic bullet, no panacea for substance abuse, domestic violence, racial intolerance, crime, multicultural conflicts, and other on-going problems of our communities. Consensus-building and collaborative planning require hard work from skillful and gifted and committed people in our neighborhoods, our schools, our church congregations, our community organizations.

This morning, I have tried to examine central challenges of consensus-building, challenges whose relevance I hope you find it difficult to question: How will you walk into rooms of stakeholders dissatisfied with existing programs and try to help them fashion innovative and powerful agreements? How will you deal with histories of suspicion and acrimony that threaten to cripple working groups? How will you try to identify issues and interests without making participants vulnerable and without opening the door not only to, "My issue? Joe's a jerk!" but to Joe's hot response as well? How will you work to acknowledge past pain but help diverse and distrusting stakeholders to learn about issues, to learn in part about their differing interests, and to propose mutually beneficial, mutually agreeable options not for compromise but for joint action?

Lisa's reflections and practical judgments can give us all, I submit, a running start at these questions. Now it's up to all of us to continue her good work.

Thank you very much for your attention.

[i] Bill is Coordinator of Mediation Services for Alberta Municipal Affairs where he designed and implemented the Municipal Dispute Resolution Initiative. The initiative provides municipalities, regional boards and regional service commissions with opportunities to use mediation to resolve intermunicipal disputes, training in interest based negotiation techniques and dispute resolution system design services. Further information on the Initiative is available at
http://www.municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca/ms/dispute/mediation/index.cfm
[ii] Lisa Beutler.....