

Considering the Regional Implications of Your Actions

by C. Gregory Dale, FAICP

We're all familiar with concerns about conflicts of interest and ex-parte contacts in local planning decision-making.

But do ethical considerations also come into play in other aspects of decision-making? Some years ago, I discussed whether planners and planning commissioners have an ethical obligation to consider the impacts their actions may have on the provision of affordable housing within their community. *Choice & Opportunity*. In this column, I want to discuss a related question: whether there's an ethical obligation to take into account the regional impacts of local actions.

Suppose your community is updating its comprehensive plan. Your planning commission is being diligent in considering a wide range of issues and elements, including land use, housing, natural resources, transportation, and others.

As part of the planning process, you expected to hear from a diverse group of local citizens, but you are surprised to hear from individuals and organizations from *outside* your community. These include environmental groups urging you to consider certain water management policies, transportation groups urging you to plan for regional transit, and regional housing advocates urging more affordable housing.

How do you weigh these demands relative to local planning issues? More to the point, what are the ethical considerations, if any, of whether your plans are consistent with regional goals?¹

Planners have long recognized that communities should be planned within the context of the regions in which they are located, not as isolated islands. This is an easy concept in theory, but what does it mean for planning commissions? This column explores the ethical dimensions involved in considering the impacts of your decisions as planning

commissioners on adjacent communities or the larger region. For guidance, we'll be turning to the American Planning Association's "Ethical Principles in Planning." It is intended to provide guidelines for ethical conduct by both professional and citizen planners.

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When you were appointed to your planning commission, you were charged with a leadership role for your community and given certain decision-making responsibilities related to planning and (often) the review of development proposals. Most of these responsibilities relate to what happens within the boundaries of your community. Yet, your community exists within a larger regional context, usually with other communities either adjacent or nearby. Clearly, many decisions that you make have implications for that larger region and nearby communities.

There are several dimensions of this regional context consideration.

First, your community is part of numerous *systems* that extend well beyond its boundaries:

- Perhaps the most obvious of these are the *natural environmental systems*. Natural resources know no jurisdictional boundaries. Water networks and

systems, wildlife corridors, biological networks, and air transcend all manmade boundaries or jurisdictions. Your decisions about stormwater runoff and encroachment of development into sensitive stream corridors, among other issues, have an impact on those systems that extend far outside of your borders.

- *Transportation* is another classic example of a system that transcends local boundaries. Your decisions about individual developments or transportation improvements may have a significant effect outside your community.

- Similarly, many planners argue that *affordable housing* is a regional issue, and that individual communities should consider their housing markets and policies within the context of the regional housing market.

Second, your community makes decisions about individual developments that may have a direct and tangible *land use impact* on adjacent or nearby communities. This is particularly true for those that are either of such a size and magnitude that they impact areas outside the community, or that are proposed to be located at or near your border. For example, a large retail facility is likely to generate traffic and other impacts on adjacent communities, particularly if it is located near your jurisdiction's borders.

What then are the ethical considerations, if any, associated with these types of issues?

For better or worse, there is little in the APA's "Ethical Principles in Planning" that *directly* addresses regional or extra-territorial impact considerations. So, are you out of the woods? Not so fast. The guidelines do provide some *indirect*

¹ For purposes of this article I'm focusing only on ethical considerations, not on whether state law may require a community to take into account regional impacts or impacts on neighboring localities.

guidance, and like many ethical considerations, a good bit of balancing and common sense comes into play. So, let us drill down deeper.

First, the guidelines provide that the planning process must “serve the public interest” – admittedly, a very broad and vague guideline. The obvious question then is how does one define the public interest? Is it the interest of *just your community*, or does it also include the interest of the *broader region*?

The APA’s guidelines go on to set out some more specific considerations involved in serving the public interest. Two of these are of particular interest. One provides for the need to protect the “integrity of the natural environment.” No one can reasonably argue that the environment can be adequately protected without consideration of systems that go beyond jurisdictional boundaries.

Another guideline encourages special attention to the “inter-relatedness of decisions and the long-range consequences of present actions.”

These statements imply the need to think about broader systems and the way in which your decisions are related to other communities and the region.

The APA ethical guidelines also note that its principles derive in part from “the general values of society.” Being a good neighbor is certainly a general value of society and could easily be applied to the community and regional planning context. The guidelines further note that these ethical judgments require a “conscientious balancing, based on the facts and context of a particular situation and on the entire set of ethical principles.”

Virtually all professional planners would agree that communities should consider both regional impacts and the impacts decisions may have on adjacent communities. We understand that it is hard enough to worry about keeping our own house in order, let alone think about the wider impacts of our decisions. However, planning commissions are uniquely positioned to provide leadership and advice to elected officials that goes beyond the parochial interest of a particular community and consider the impacts of our decisions outside our communities.

It is your job as a planning commissioner to balance your local concerns with regional concerns in a conscientious manner.

Not only will you be more closely adhering to ethical principles, but you’ll be engaging in good planning practice. ♦

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Choice & Opportunity

Suppose you are on a planning commission that is considering a draft revision to your zoning code. During the course of public hearings on the proposed code, representatives of a low income housing advocacy group appear and argue that the proposed zoning does not allow for the development of affordable housing, and is therefore preventing low income residents who may want to live in your community from being able to do so. On the other hand, you know there is a great deal of sentiment within your community opposed to the development of low income housing.

How do you balance these interests? Are there any ethical considerations involved?

The APA’s “Statement of Ethical Principles for Planning” addresses this issue directly: “Planning officials ought to

strive to expand choice and opportunity for all persons.”

As a planning commissioner, you have an ethical responsibility to consider the impact of your community’s regulations and planning practices on housing opportunities for all persons. Even the most well-intentioned regulations designed to protect the environment and character of your community can result in added costs that create barriers to affordable housing.

Providing for affordable housing is generally not a popular position. Keep in mind, however, that you were not appointed simply to carry out popular sentiment. Taking steps to ensure an adequate supply of affordable housing is one of those difficult ethical obligations that each planning commissioner ought to shoulder.

Excerpted from Greg Dale’s “Choice & Opportunity,” in PCJ #3 (1992).