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Coordinating Land Use Planning In the Context of Multiple Plans *Survey Comments Report*

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Summary

In early 2014 researchers conducted an online survey of planners and other municipal officials engaged in planning to collect information on how communities are managing the growing number of plans they have. On some questions, participants had the option to provide comments on topics covered. This report summarizes some of the initial findings on the comments given on the survey. The report complements the findings of Working Paper 2014-01, which documents the results of the survey.

Project Overview

This research explores how Canadian communities are dealing with planning and policy challenges that arise as the number of plans that must be managed increases. The research team includes Jill Grant (Principal Investigator), Ahsan Habib, Patricia Manuel, and Eric Rapaport of the Dalhousie University School of Planning, and Pierre Filion of the University of Waterloo School of Planning. Research is being conducted in partnership with the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP) and the Dalhousie Transportation Collaboratory (DalTRAC). Funding comes from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

The research purpose follows (Grant, et al., 2013):

“Integrating land use and transportation planning has become a high priority for local governments seeking to reduce land consumption, optimize infrastructure and municipal services, improve livability, and encourage residents to use transportation options other than private automobiles. Some jurisdictions have adopted regional planning or invested in computer models to facilitate planning and prediction. Municipal planners generally promote strategies such as mixed use, higher densities, and compact growth nodes and corridors. Cities can only achieve bold aims and regional visions if plans advocating the ambitions link effectively to implementation strategies which produce appropriate patterns of investment and growth. Planners constantly manage the tension between focusing on unified visions and accommodating diverse interests that affect urban conditions. With so many new kinds of plans and policies now appearing, the task of coordination has become extraordinarily complex. **How are Canadian communities coordinating their land use planning activities in the context of rapidly proliferating plans and policies?**

We hope to enhance current understandings of community planning by considering several related questions: How do Canadian cities develop, coordinate, and implement plans and policies that affect land use? To what extent do planners develop overarching principles, special processes, or institutional alliances or mechanisms to lend coherence to policies and practices affecting land use outcomes? How are municipalities encountering and addressing the challenges of coordinating land use and transportation effects from the disparate plans and policies various agents have produced? What strategies are proving effective for local governments in setting and coordinating land use planning policies?”

Survey 2014

In the early phase of the research researchers administered a web-based survey of Canadian planning practitioners. Two emailed newsletters distributed by the Canadian Institute of Planners to its members in February and March of 2014 included a link to the survey. The Interdepartmental Committee on Urban and Regional Research (ICURR) also included a link in its February newsletter to municipalities. We sent invitations to email addresses of planners located from a systematic search of municipal websites across Canada. Finally researchers distributed the survey to alumni of the Dalhousie University School of Planning. Respondents were asked to share the survey with others in their departments who might be involved with planning. Although the sampling strategy was not random it was designed to reach a significant number of planning practitioners in Canada.

The survey collected information concerning the extent of coordination as a problem, the prioritization of coordination in Canadian municipalities, identification of coordination challenges as well as their perceived factors, and effective strategies for improving coordination. We conducted the survey using *Opinio* survey software. We activated the survey on January 22, 2014 and left it open to responses until March 22, 2014.

Comment Results

This report presents preliminary results from analysis of the survey comments. Seven survey questions included a section for respondents to include comments (Questions 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, and 11). The questions directed respondents to a comment box in a category that stated '*Other (please specify in the space below)*'. See Appendix 1 for the list of questions that included a comment section. Of the 468 respondents who completed the survey, 306 respondents provided textual comments. Table 1 shows the number of comments generated by each question. The total number of comments analyzed was 1252.

Table 1: Number of comments per survey question

Question	Comments
4	111
5	75
6	53
8	30
9	398
10	315
11	270
Total	1252

The observations below provide a preliminary analysis of the overall findings. For this report our analysis focuses on the most prominent themes that emerged from the survey

responses. An in-depth analysis looking at specific research questions will provide helpful directions for identifying themes and planning priorities from the data. Recommendations for further research appear below.

What factors explain the growing number of plans?

Respondents suggest that more plans are being generated in Canadian communities due to two prominent factors: funding availability and legislative requirements. Many respondents stated that to receive funding, municipalities are required to produce plans. For example, to receive Gas Tax Funding, a municipality must produce an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan (ICSP). As a respondent from Newfoundland said, “ICSPs carry no legal weight and are seen by most municipalities as a 'tick box' en route to accessing gas tax funding” (ResID#2376332).

Many respondents stated that the reason for so many plans existing is that senior levels of government “download” planning requirements onto local governments. The rapid deployment of new policies, guidelines, and directives at senior levels of government is a common problem for coordination at the local level. Senior government agencies are promoting planning initiatives and require specific plans to be produced in local municipalities, especially when funding opportunities exist. Some respondents suggested data availability and issue identification (such as climate change and active transportation) led to an increase in plans.

The responses indicated that respondents see producing new plans as a better use of available resources than spending time revising or amending older plans and policies. This is especially true in the context of plans that are outdated and have not been reviewed in a comprehensive fashion for a long time. Because planning practice advances rapidly, plans tend to age quickly. As Provincial Acts and Municipal By-Laws are passed or amended, staff are requested to produce plans in a timely fashion. Policy drafting becomes a constant assignment with plans drafted on a regular basis. As one respondent stated, “They should stop overloading us with plan creation and first ensure proper monitoring of what has already been adopted” (ResID#2290917).

Many respondents indicated that the public and developers want as few plans and policies as possible, yet the number of plans and policies increases. One respondent noted, “I think to some extent planners become a little ‘plan happy’ – trying to produce something new or [better than] their neighbours” (ResID#2291717). An example of this may be producing a Waterfront Master Plan in community X because community Y has one. Another dilemma is that funding exists for producing certain plans; however, limited budgets prevent implementation. A lack of resources to support implementation surfaced in many comments.

The increasing number of plans produced in Canadian municipalities results in what some respondents referred to as plans being “shelved”. Several respondents said that good planning practice does not mean having more plans. Many respondents suggested consolidating multiple plans into one planning document to ease coordination.

Challenges to coordinating plans and policies

One of the most prominent challenges respondents indicated as to why municipalities experience barriers to coordinating plans and policies is resource constraints. We documented 86 direct references to resource constraints in the survey comments. We categorized resource constraints into six thematic codes: staff, time, financial, expertise, resources, and other (See Figure 1).

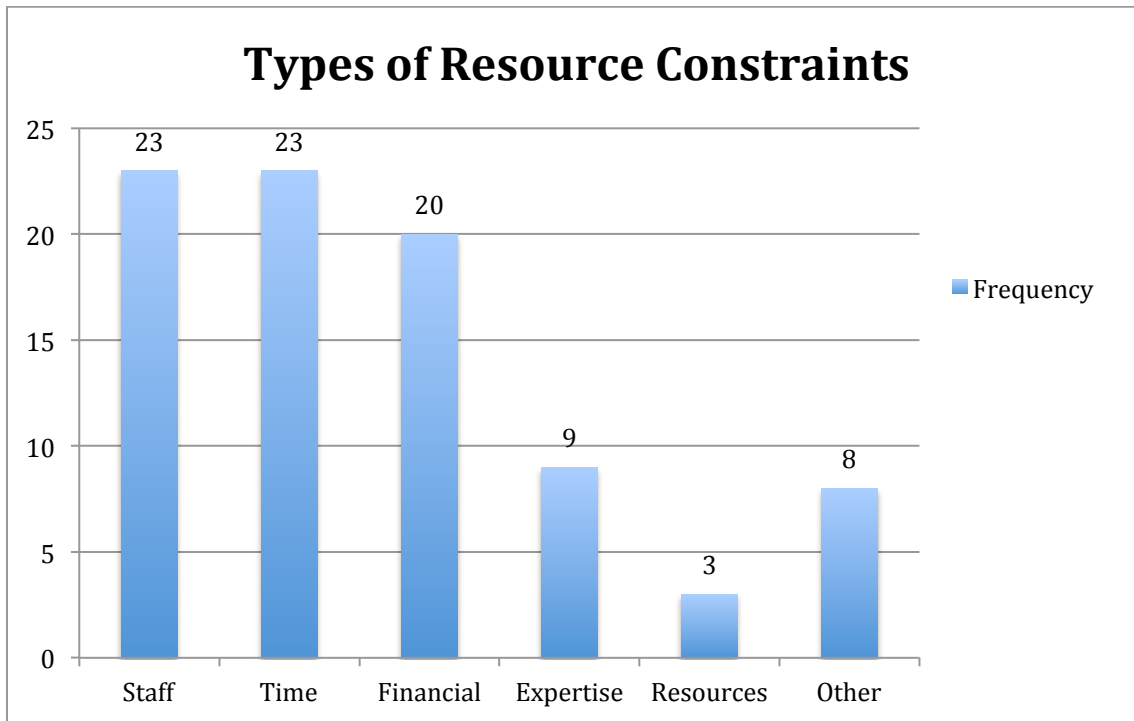


Figure 1: Resource constraints documented in survey comments

Not enough staff and limited time were the most frequently occurring types of resource constraints respondents said Canadian communities are experiencing. These factors are often documented together, as a lack of time is commonly a result of few staff. High rates of staff turnover were mentioned by many respondents as barriers to coordination efforts. Several respondents noted that because of time constraints, new policies and plans are not given a thorough review. One respondent suggested that before moving forward with additional layers, budgeting time for amending plans should take place. Overall respondents indicated that staff shortages combined with limited time results in coordination efforts becoming a lower priority than daily tasks.

Comments that referred to coordination barriers as a result of resource constraints were frequently linked to coordination challenges in smaller communities. This suggests a relationship may exist between the size of community and the number of resources available to manage planning and coordination activities. Some respondents indicated that due to their small community not having a planning department, staff resources are constantly an issue.

Insufficient funding to coordinate and implement plans appears to be a common issue across municipalities. One respondent noted that when money is tight, capital works projects automatically take priority over active transportation policies. Several

respondents said that older plans are rarely used or updated due to limited budgets: new plans are easier to implement. One respondent suggested that clear budget support for planning activities would help to achieve better coordination practices.

Strategies planners use to coordinate plans

It appears that respondents see having continued involvement and communication, especially with department leaders, as the most effective way to bring departments together. Sharing resources and data is another strategy many respondents use to communicate across departments. Information sharing provides a platform for identifying policy conflicts early by allowing professionals to learn about other departments' goals and objectives. Another notable example of coordination efforts is having a champion who brings staff together and facilitates workshops with staff across departments. Having an integrated planning framework was said to provide an effective strategy to coordinating plans in one municipality in the Greater Toronto Area. The framework takes the strategic plan and sets Council priorities. These priorities are implemented through coordinated program level plans on the same cycle and reported back to Council. The framework has been an effective strategy to bring together departments.

Groups and Meetings

Many respondents suggested that involving departments, elected officials, the public, and outside agencies was a successful strategy in breaching silos and enhancing coordination efforts. In this context, 'silo' refers to departments or individuals that operate in isolation from each other. Many respondents said that including elected officials in formal groups is key to ensuring policies and plans remain consistent. Respondents suggested that meetings should be held more frequently when new plans are released or during the plan review phase. While many respondents identified types of groups that work well, others suggested groups that may enhance coordination.

Types of groups identified by respondents:

- Working/Advisory Groups
- Committees
- Boards
- Teams

Plan Alignment

Many respondents favoured a guiding planning document (such as a strategic plan or official community plan) to align the goals and objectives of other plans. Some respondents indicated that including necessary past plan and policy decisions in staff and council reports reminds decision makers of the need to be consistent in both short and long term decisions. Several respondents noted the success of plans produced jointly for multiple jurisdictions.

Ontario's provincial plans are repeatedly noted for their effective coordination efforts. This reflected the large group of Ontario participants in the survey (making up more than 43% of respondents). The Greenbelt Plan, Niagara Escarpment Plan and Oak

Ridges Moraine Plan were described as good examples of plans that are well coordinated with regional and local official plans. The Ontario Greenbelt Act and the Places to Grow Act released a year apart was mentioned as an effective way of coordinating growth in Southern Ontario. Ontario's Provincial Policy Statement earned several mentions throughout the survey in relation to effective coordination practices.

New Approaches and Tools

Some municipalities are beginning to align their main planning documents to create a cohesive suite of plans. Several municipalities in Alberta used an online tool called *WebMap* to develop customized digital maps. *WebMap* helps with the centralization and sharing of information. Government staff can better plan, manage and develop their assets and resources with this tool. It is available for private users (Webmap, 2014).

Several respondents proposed ideas to enhance coordination efforts. One respondent suggested creation of a comprehensive software tool that combines multiple plan objectives and considers where they apply spatially to prevent policy overlap. Another respondent suggested a tool to identify needs, goals, and objectives of plans and policies to see everything collectively. Respondents' suggestions hint that an effective online tool may provide assistance in coordinating planning activities.

Recommended Further Research

Based on this preliminary analysis of survey comments, further research on emerging themes appears necessary. Examining the types of coordination barriers smaller communities face may provide insight into how to alleviate such issues. Analyzing how coordination plays out in different plans and examining what types of plans are coordinated effectively links to the research interests of the project. For example, taking a closer look at why coordination may be working in Ontario's suite of provincial plans may provide other provinces and municipalities with coordination guidelines. Conforming to high-level government plans and policies creates barriers to coordination efforts at the local level. More research could be conducted into where and why effective coordination strategies are working. An examination of online tools such as *WebMap* could be considered to assess the feasibility of applying these types of programs in other municipalities. Developing a better understanding as to why these challenges exist may provide insight towards improving coordination efforts in Canadian communities.

Final Notes

This preliminary analysis of respondents' comments highlights challenges and successes in trying to coordinate plans. Despite efforts to coordinate plans and policies, communities are experiencing increasing barriers to achieve desired outcomes. Resource constraints, including insufficient time and limited staff, are the most common barriers to coordinating plans and policies. A lack of communication and collaboration across departments further hinders desired planning outcomes. Many plans are being produced due to funding availability and legislative requirements. Amending existing plans and policies is often disregarded, while creating new plans is favoured: conflicting policies

commonly results. Efforts towards better coordination activities are being made; however, respondents indicated the critical need for better planning practices in Canadian communities.

Sources

Grant, J., P. Fillion, A. Habib, P. Manuel, E. Rapaport. (2013). Coordinating land use planning in the context of multiple plans. *Proposal*. Presented to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Available at <http://theoryandpractice.planning.dal.ca/multiple-plans/working-papers.html>

WebMap. (2014). Retrieved June 19th, 2014 from <http://www.yellowheadcounty.ab.ca/webmap/internal/WebHelp/WebMap.htm>

For updates on the research visit: <http://theoryandpractice.planning.dal.ca/multiple-plans/index.html>

Appendix 1: Survey Script Questions (that include comment section)

4. Based on your experience, do you agree or disagree with the following (respondents selected from “Strongly agree”, “Agree”, “Neutral”, “Disagree”, or “Strongly disagree” for each statement)?

Coordination is not a problem in our community: we have relatively few plans.
 Coordination is not a problem in our community: we can coordinate implementation across multiple plans effectively.

Coordinating conflicting policies and priorities has always been an issue in planning.

Communities have many more plans to coordinate than they had ten years ago.

Other (please specify in the space below)

5. What factors explain the growing number of plans that Canadian communities are producing (respondents selected from “Very important”, “Important”, “Neutral”, “Unimportant”, or “Very unimportant” for each item)?

Good planning practice

Political pressure

Community driven

Developer pressure

Strategic priorities of agencies or departments

Responding to current issues

Being innovative

Responding to local risks

Budget availability

Funding programs availability

Other (please specify in the space below)

6. What strategies or approaches are planners using to coordinate plans (respondents selected from “Strongly agree”, “Agree”, “Neutral”, “Disagree”, or “Strongly disagree” for each statement)?

Communities have a clear organizational hierarchy that facilitates choices.

Legal frameworks set out in planning acts guide decision making.

Policies are coordinated when the comprehensive plan is revised.

Collaborating, sharing data, and consulting with others facilitate consensus based decisions when policies may conflict.

Interdepartmental meetings provide opportunities to coordinate priorities.

Budgets provide mechanisms for communities to set policy priorities.

Communities allow plans to lapse because priorities and conditions change.

Processes or organizations are created to deal with particular coordination challenges.

Champions are appointed to facilitate coordination around critical issues.

Planning is inherently political, so plans have to be flexible.

Other (please specify in the space below)

8. What do you see as some of the challenges to coordinating plans and policies (respondents selected from “Strongly agree”, “Agree”, “Neutral”, “Disagree”, or “Strongly disagree” for each item)?

Too many plans.
Insufficient staff time.
Insufficient staff expertise.
Depends on political priorities.
Depends on market conditions.
Reflects changing needs in the community.
Insufficient data availability.
Depends on legislative requirements.
Competing interests among departments.
Professional rivalries affect outcomes.
Difficult to change past practices.
No established hierarchy of priorities.
Plans don't apply to outside agencies.
Other (please specify in the space below)

9. Can you provide an example of the challenges of coordinating plans and policies you have experienced in your work?
10. Can you suggest any notable examples of effective plan coordination or best practices in coordinating policies?
11. Is there anything about coordinating plans and policies that you would like to add?

Appendix 2: Method

The web-based survey involved two parts. Respondents first answered questions along a continuum such as “*Strongly agree*”, “*Agree*”, “*Neutral*”, “*Disagree*”, or “*Strongly disagree*”. The second part had respondents provide written responses based on the survey question (this part was optional). Analyzing respondents’ comments provides an in-depth look at the survey results. Having both a quantitative and qualitative assessment of survey results highlights the emerging themes of coordination activities in municipalities.

Approach

To identify emerging themes in the survey comments, we employed a coding framework to systematically categorize topics. We developed codes as themes emerged during the data analysis. We looked for patterns in respondents’ experiences of plan development, coordination, and implementation. We organized the comments within an Excel document. Each spreadsheet consists of one survey question with the respondent identification number, comment, and code category cells. The document consists of questions in the web-based survey that include a comment section. To develop a coding framework we read each comment, highlighted key words, and created codes in the cell beside the comment (See Table 2).

Table 2: Coded comment example

DEPARTMENTAL SILOS		
Respondent ID	Comment	Codes
2255634	I find the major challenge is the coordination of plans between departments . For example, the Transportation plan doesn't always support the land use plan , which in turn is impacted by the climate plan . In other places I see that planning plays more of a coordinating role between departments and plans. In smaller places you'd expect to find this, because there are less people to go through, but it is rarely the case.	types of plans (transportation, climate, land use) size (community; staff) role of planning

Data Analysis

To develop a coding framework, we employed several strategies to seek consistency. We began coding by reviewing a hard copy version of comments in the survey. We wrote notes in the margin beside each comment, to develop an understanding of the emerging themes. We developed main thematic codes and sub-codes for analysis. Main thematic codes are codes such as ‘Departmental Silos’ that refer to coordination barriers. Sub-codes were developed that relate to the main thematic code, but were more specific (e.g., ‘Types of Departments’ referring to a municipal department). The example in Table 2 shows a comment coded under ‘Departmental Silos’ with three sub-codes identified in the adjacent column. Table 3 shows the coding framework created to highlight emerging themes from the data. Bolded text indicates main thematic codes, while italicized text indicates sub-codes.

Table 3: Thematic Coding Framework

Coordination Barriers	Coordination Strategies	Other Factors Affecting Coordination
<p>Departmental Silos <i>Types of Departments</i> <i>Competing Objectives</i></p> <p>Resource Constraints <i>Staff</i> <i>Time</i> <i>Financial</i> <i>Expertise</i></p> <p>Planning Process <i>Resistance to Change</i> <i>Developer Pressure</i> <i>Decision Making</i> <i>Government Hierarchy</i></p> <p>Plans and Policies <i>Timing</i> <i>Amendments</i> <i>Conflicts</i> <i>Multiple</i> <i>Priorities</i></p>	<p>Communication <i>Groups</i> <i>Meetings</i></p> <p>Partnerships Plan Alignment Proposed Solutions</p>	<p>Community Size Political Climate Issues Types of Plans Role of Planner Role of Planning Implementation</p>

We developed a “code bank” to list all codes. As we read each comment we checked to see if we had a related code to the topic discussed; if not, we created a new code. While coding in the Excel spreadsheet, we kept a notebook to document emerging themes, comments of interest, and ideas for further research. We kept an 11 X 17 piece of paper with an ongoing mind map of the codes and how they related to each other. As analysis progressed, the connections between codes increased, as well as the types of codes created. We documented key words, reoccurring types of plans, and comments regarding issues about the survey. Documenting these items in the preliminary analysis may provide direction for further research.

To analyze emerging themes in the survey comments we created “evidence banks” in an Excel document. Each spreadsheet contained all comments related to a particular main code. Evidence banks are useful for providing one source with all relevant information regarding a particular theme. We also created evidence banks for the main questions asked in the survey. For example, questions six and ten ask about effective plan coordination strategies. This evidence bank included comments with codes under ‘Coordination Strategies’ applied. Having all comments related to a certain research question in one place provides an accessible reference source for relevant data.

Analysis Tools

We experimented with using NVIVO, a qualitative research data analysis software, after developing codes for the first survey question. Learning the basics of the

program was challenging and time-intensive. We worked for several days to code comments in *NVivo*, but generated so many codes that they proved difficult to organize. The number of codes generated may indicate that our codes reflected topics rather than themes. For the analysis tool to work effectively, codes need to be established prior to inputting data into the program. To conserve labour, we returned to coding in Excel instead. Excel offers a word search function, which proved helpful in the analysis. (The functions of *NVivo* will be useful in future analyses and will be considered for later stages of the research.)

Challenges

Developing codes in the first question was challenging because we were not yet familiar with the themes the comments would generate. As analysis progressed, we became more familiar with which code best applied to responses. When conducting a second review of the codes we noticed that some comments coded in earlier questions were missing codes created in later questions. To ensure consistency throughout the data, we applied additional codes to earlier comments in a second review and changed certain codes to align with categories that better represented themes.

We cannot discount the possibility of human error in researcher interpretation. The coding framework and codes applied to comments may be slightly different if created by another researcher.