

**SSHRC Insight Grant 2013 to 2016**

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*Coordinating land use planning in the context of multiple plans*

Community planning has been adopted as a function of local government in Canada because of its essential role in helping to focus priorities and coordinate decisions about the use of land in the context of competing interests, objectives, and strategies. In recent years, strained fiscal conditions for governments and the rise of professional discourses promoting sustainability and smart growth helped shaped a consensus that integrated land use and transportation planning could be a useful tool to improve urban efficiencies. Consequently, most municipal governments adopted various plans and regulations to deal with the critical issues they face in managing community assets, improving urban livability, and facilitating growth with limited resources. They made coordinated land use planning a stated priority in their efforts to contain sprawl, optimize infrastructure investments, and enhance urban amenities.

At the same time that visions of sustainability reached the forefront of the urban agenda, other factors led to the proliferation of local policies, plans, and regulations—some with the potential to conflict with higher order land use planning objectives. In 2012 it is not uncommon to find individual municipalities trying to coordinate many topic- or area-specific plans, which may influence land development and use (see Table 1). Some of these plans respond to key issues on the contemporary political agenda (e.g., immigration); others reflect the way governments distribute responsibilities among staff (e.g., transportation) which affect land use coordination. Outside government, private agents (e.g. developers) increasingly apply private mechanisms for controlling development form and land use (Filion & Alexander 1995; Grant 2005a, 2005b; McKenzie 1994). Coordinating plan development and implementation to achieve over-arching ambitions for land use efficiencies and urban sustainability proves increasingly challenging in the context of a plethora of policies, plans, and regulations. Canadian planners today are dealing with levels of complexity in plan development, coordination, and implementation that warrant detailed investigation through the research program we propose.

*Table 1. Diverse plans, policies, and regulations that may be in place*

<p><b>Some types of local plans and policies governments have in place:</b> regional plans, municipal plans, official plans, community plans, integrated community sustainability plans, infrastructure plans, transportation plans, transit plans, heritage plans, cultural plans, immigration plans, open space plans, environmentally sensitive area plans, climate change adaptation plans, energy plans, waste management plans, watershed plans, urban design strategies, economic development strategies, downtown revitalization plans, housing plans, structure plans, functional plans, secondary / district plans, emergency management plans, vision plans, waterfront development plans, active transportation plans, regulating plans, plot plans, physical activity plans, transit node plans</p>
<p><b>Some types of guidelines, regulations, practices, and contracts in place:</b> land use bylaws, zoning bylaws, subdivision regulations, heritage guidelines, urban design guidelines, form-based codes, overlay zones, comprehensive development districts, planned unit developments, development agreements, design briefs, business improvement districts, special assessment areas</p>
<p><b>Some private regulations in place:</b> deed restrictions, covenants, condominium or strata corporation bylaws, homeowner association bylaws, community association bylaws</p>

Policies and regulations affect the shape and functioning of urban environments. Harris (2004) argued that government regulations about housing and land development, along with lending policies

that promoted particular kinds of planning and building practices, generated “creeping conformity” in suburban patterns in Canada in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Blais (2010) noted that “wonky policy” involving fiscal incentives and pricing mechanisms had perverse effects on urban development patterns. Local policy-making and planning occur as governments identify needs, particular issues and champions arise, and appropriate resources become available to produce policies, impose regulations, or affect outcomes. The diverse plans, visions, and policies created do not always prove consistent with each other, may demand resources that are not available, or may not be easily implemented given local conditions and conflicting priorities. Relatively little is known about how Canadian municipalities develop, coordinate, and implement contemporary planning policies, standards, and regulations. Aims such as sustainability and smart growth have been integrated into many plans, but prove elusive (Filion 2009, 2010b, 2010c; Filion & McSpurren 2007; Grant 2009; Jackson et al 2012). Practice shows that many kinds of policies affect municipalities’ abilities to achieve particular land use objectives. We need to learn more about the specific contexts in which governments develop policy, adopt particular strategies, and encounter challenges that affect the ability to coordinate planning objectives amidst diverse plans prepared by various actors and agencies.

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 focussing 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?

**OBJECTIVES:** The study has four related research objectives.

1. To understand the context and practices within which planners develop, coordinate, and implement the diverse policies, plans, and regulations that affect land use;
2. To assess the ways in which factors such as community size, institutional arrangements, growth rates, and professional discourses may affect the development, coordination, and implementation of land use planning policies and regulations;
3. To evaluate current trends and best practices in plan coordination and implementation;
4. To identify opportunities to enhance the potential for effective plan development, coordination, and implementation in Canadian community planning.

**CONTEXT:** Created by the provinces, but functioning as the level of government providing services that affect the everyday living and working spaces of Canadians, local governments by their nature must respond to changing fiscal conditions as well as to immediate concerns raised by constituents

and interest groups. Community planning to regulate land use became an important function of local government in the post-war period as Keynesian policies provided justification for increasing land use regulations (Grant 2008): most cities and towns adopted comprehensive master plans and zoning bylaws (Cullingworth 1987; Hodge & Gordon 2008). Recession in the 1980s and early 1990s led to a brief retrenchment when provinces and cities reduced the size of planning departments, but by the turn of the millennium cities were hiring again and adding functions such as transportation, urban design, cultural, heritage, and sustainability planning. Ironically, the ascendance of the neoliberal city—created in a milieu wherein government became increasingly responsive to market demands (Hackworth 2007; Smith 1996)—contributed to the renewed importance of the planning function to promote urban revitalization, growth, and redevelopment. In recent decades, urban development has become a vital component of economic growth in major Canadian cities (Boudreau et al. 2009). Consequently, local governments focus increasing attention on how to ensure that they benefit from potential opportunities, avoid looming crises, and achieve a good “share of the pie”: creating appropriate plans, policies, and regulations to coordinate land use arrangements and transportation efficiencies is part of that effort.

Several factors—including professional discourses (e.g., theories which dominate a discipline), environmental and health concerns, politics, and economic conditions—contribute to producing a plethora of plans and policies which affect land use decisions and which require coordination. For instance, we have shown that in recent decades the professional discourse within planning has promoted ideas known under the rubrics of smart growth and sustainability (Filion 2003, 2009; Filion & McSpurren 2007; Grant 2002, 2006, 2009). These ideas, which gained political traction and now influence policies in most provinces, promote greater urban densities, mixed uses, mixed housing types, downtown development, and urban design qualities to facilitate walking and transportation options (Condon 2010; Duany et al. 2010; Ewing 1996). Planners actively encourage infill development and have adjusted policies to enable smaller lot sizes and a greater proportion of multi-family housing (Filion et al. 2010; Grant & Perrott 2009). Policies promoting urban nodes, transit and road improvements, livability, heritage, and quality urban design often reflect the influence of this professional discourse. Integrative paradigms like sustainability offer rhetorical coherence but embrace competing aims and strategies: for instance, most planners advocate intensification and compact urban form while others may promote naturalization or protection of food-lands around urban areas (Waldheim 2006). Within local government, other professions (e.g., engineers, recreation staff, and health officers) similarly develop policies that reflect their professional discourses while influencing land use and transportation outcomes. For instance, planners may advocate narrow streets for walkability while more powerful fire, police, and engineering departments produce standards requiring wide lanes for traffic safety. Such competing priorities and power differentials create implementation challenges for planners.

Federal and provincial programs often facilitate policy and regulatory development. Local governments in Canada have few sources of revenues and hence face significant economic pressures to deliver required services effectively and efficiently. They see economic and population growth as vital to survival. This can render them vulnerable to opportunistic policy-making: that is, they respond to incentives to develop plans and regulations where government or private sources provide funds. For instance, communities recently adopted integrated community sustainability plans (ICSPs) in order to gain access to federal gas-tax revenues. Federal funding encouraged local governments to prepare climate change adaptation plans. Environmental and health concerns and pressures may stimulate policy, planning, and regulatory action: e.g., efforts to manage wastes, upgrade infrastructure, control emissions, reduce energy consumption, deal with hazards and risks, and improve health outcomes. Media attention to health concerns pressures local governments to develop policies on issues related to physical activity. Some such policies developed by specialized staff to

meet unique agendas have the potential to conflict with plans adopted to promote regional or municipal land use objectives.

The private sector can also force policy action: e.g., if insurers require particular types of policies to limit liability or manage risk related to community infrastructure, municipalities may feel obliged to respond. Business groups and chambers of commerce play a role in stimulating economic development policies and practices within communities. In recent years, as manufacturing activities declined in Canada and birth rates plummeted, development interests encouraged municipalities to adopt policies and plans that facilitate immigration, attract talented young people, and produce competitive and creative cities (Florida 2002; Good 2009; Kipfer & Keil 2002; Landry 2000). Towns and cities now hope to compete within a cultural-cognitive economy where knowledge and innovation promise success (Scott 2000, 2007). Not surprisingly, then, in addition to official plans and economic development strategies, many local governments recently prepared cultural plans and immigration strategies, and created business improvement districts or other mechanisms to stimulate growth and competitiveness. Such ancillary plans may contain policies that conflict with land use and transportation aims articulated in other policies. The challenges for planners coordinating land use planning multiply as communities add new layers of plans and policies to their agendas.

With limited staff resources and power how do municipal planners produce, coordinate, and implement the policies and plans that affect land use and transportation outcomes and seek to embed them effectively in development processes and practices? Concerns about plan making (Hopkins 2001; Leung 2003; Punter 2003) and implementation (Alexander & Faludi 1989; Dalton 1990; Talen 1996) are not new. Seasons and colleagues (Gordon & Seasons 2009; Hoernig & Seasons 2004; Seasons 2003a, 2003b) discussed issues around plan implementation in Canadian communities. The work we propose builds on such analyses as well as on our own research experience and expertise in examining Canadian planning practice. Our team members have documented significant challenges that planners and municipal governments face in trying to implement a smart growth and sustainability agenda (Filion 2003, 2010a; Filion & McSpurren 2007; Grant 1994b, 2009; Grant & Filion 2010; Grant & Perrott 2009, 2011). We have examined the trend towards downloading services to developers and residents (Grant 2005b, 2007; Grant & Carson 2008; Grant & Curran 2007). We recently explored issues related to implementing creative cities agendas (Grant & Kronstal 2010; Grant, Holme, Pettman 2008), healthy environments policy (Grant & Manuel 2011; Grant, MacKay et al. 2010), and wind energy policy (Watson, Betts & Rapaport 2012). Team members have experience in examining land use and transportation interactions (Filion & McSpurren 2007; Habib & Miller 2008; Habib et al. 2011; Rapaport 2002a, 2002b). We recently worked with communities on climate change adaptation planning (e.g., Manuel et al 2012; Rapaport et al. 2012). Together the research team hopes to shed new light on plan-making, coordination, and implementation challenges planners face in the context of multiple plans and policies but limited resources.

**THEORETICAL APPROACH:** The planning literature concentrates on two factors that affect land use planning outcomes: processes and institutions. The research community has frequently examined planning processes. In succession, researchers explored biases in planning decisions originating from overreliance on experts and scientific models (Altshuler 1965), insufficient public participation (Baum 1983), and communication distortions (Forester 1989). These factors help explain social inequity in planning interventions. Realizing that organizations shape the processes taking place, other researchers examined the role of institutional factors (the organizational structure of the agencies responsible for planning) on decisions. Such studies highlight the policy effects of fiscal dependency, the distribution of organizational responsibilities, and the boundaries of agencies (Alexander 2005; Bolan 1991; Healey 2007). The “silo-ed” or distributed nature of duties in local government can impede communication and cooperation in pursuing objectives (Mills et al. 2007), including land use planning.

Our approach is influenced by two ways of interrogating planning practice and outcomes: one seeks to understand actors’ perceptions and motivations; the other examines the processes and institutional context within which planners act. We expect to find significant interactions between actors’ interpretations, processes for coordinating activities, and institutional characteristics shaping perspectives and interactions. Bringing findings generated through these approaches together will inform rich interpretations of the challenges and opportunities planners in municipalities may have to achieve their ambitions.

We will investigate the way professional discourses and interactions may shape the objectives local actors pursue and the strategies they select to achieve their ambitions. For this we employ a *social constructionist* perspective that views planning and coordination as cultural and political activities within which participants negotiate and mutually construct meanings as they shape policy, work collaboratively, and build landscapes (Grant 1994b, 1994c; Jacobs et al. 2004). Our approach draws on sociologists and anthropologists—including Blumer (1969), Geertz (1983), and Gottdiener (1994)—and planning scholars interested in practice—including Flyvbjerg (1991), Forester (1989), Friedmann (1987), and our earlier work (Grant 1994a, 2005c, 2006). We are interested, for instance, in understanding values, processes, and institutions that produce a level of homogeneity in planning policies and implementation practices across jurisdictions even in a context where diversity, adaptability, and sustainability are articulated as professional and community goals. We want to learn more about professional discourses and practices within local governments which may affect land use planning outcomes.

We will be influenced by the literature on *planning processes* and *institutional behaviour* in our attempt to contextualize the difficulties local governments face in achieving policy consistency and desired planning outcomes. Institutions vary in their structures, processes, and operations. One question behind our proposal asks whether institutional features of organizations formulating and implementing policies may create particular problems coordinating land use, transportation, and infrastructure investments. Lack of policy consistency may reflect institutional sensitivity to pressures from financially or electorally influential interests, along with tensions in public sector organizations among the need to raise revenues, maintain acceptable taxation levels, and respond to demands for services (Buchanan 1977; Peterson 1981; Sites 1997; Ross & Yinger 1999). A further factor interfering with policy coordination is the “silo effect” as departments pursue their own policies oblivious to the consequences on other departments, the organization, or the community at large (Foy & Giguère 2010). Power structures within government affect the influence planners can exert. We are interested in understanding how institutional arrangements and decision processes shape plan development and implementation, and in turn how they influence planners’ expectations and actions.

**METHOD:** The research will involve a *mixed-methods approach* by a well-qualified team experienced in each of the methods proposed. The PI, Jill Grant, will lead the team.

In **YEAR ONE**, we will complete two related study components.

1. We will conduct a **comprehensive analysis of planning and related policy documents** in municipalities which enjoy a reputation for innovative or exemplary planning practices to assess land use objectives, to determine the extent of internal conformity or discrepancy across policies within a single jurisdiction, and to identify implementation strategies on paper. We will select 4 or 5 cases based on discussions with staff of professional organizations, review of professional awards and stories in professional journals, and on expert knowledge. We expect this could include cities such as Vancouver, Toronto, Calgary, and Ottawa, and some smaller communities known to be developing integrative strategies to unify plan implementation (e.g., Airdrie AB, Corner Brook NL). This preliminary study will help us develop and test a framework for systematic analysis of plan policies and will inform the design of other study components.

2. We will design and complete a **national survey of planning departments** in Canada to assess the strategies municipalities are using to coordinate their planning activities; to assess institutional arrangements influencing plan implementation; to identify opportunities and constraints that communities experience in coordinating outcomes; and to locate examples of notable practices in plan development and implementation. In cooperation with the DalTRAC transportation lab (which conducts research to develop empirical models of transportation and land use) we will design a customized web-based survey with telephone follow-up calls as required to ensure a high level (50 to 60%) of response. We will include planners across Canada from departments in most municipalities over 50,000 people along with a reasonable sample from communities between 20,000 and 49,999 residents; in larger planning departments we hope to recruit multiple participants. To achieve the desired sample we will employ two strategies: send the survey to professional planners (through our cooperation with the Canadian Institute of Planners); create a list of all eligible municipalities, conduct a web search for planning staff, and add their email addresses to the contact list. Follow up telephone calls will target missing municipalities. We will contextualize the results with census data.

We will analyze and synthesize the findings of these two components in the latter part of year 1 and early in year 2. We expect the studies to offer significant insight on research objectives 1 to 3. The analysis will help identify appropriate cities for follow up case study research. We will develop a common protocol for case studies to be conducted in year two. We will establish a **web page** to assist with disseminating findings to the profession and the public.

In **YEAR TWO** we will conduct **community case study analyses** of six notable examples identified in year one: these cases will differ in characteristics we wish to assess (e.g., growth rates, size, implementation approaches). Case studies prove especially helpful in qualitative research and permit a rich understanding of the “how” and “why” of practices in particular communities (Mason2002; Yin 2003). We expect to investigate some “success” stories, and some “failures” of plan coordination. For this component in each community we will: a) review policies, plans, regulations, and any documents which may affect land use; review documents regarding any recent land use disputes which affected implementation of integrated land use and transportation planning objectives; b) evaluate institutional arrangements and processes which may affect plan development, coordination, and implementation; c) conduct 15 to 20 in-person interviews with local planners, transportation administrators, other municipal staff, developers, and community leaders to investigate their perspectives and priorities, to understand local institutional arrangements, and to evaluate plan development, coordination, and implementation; and d) survey recent development projects to evaluate implementation effectiveness. We will prepare 4 or 5 papers to disseminate findings to date.

In **YEAR THREE** the team will collaborate to **synthesize, interpret, and disseminate** the research results. Triangulating results from the various methods and locales will help us address all four objectives. We hope to shed light on how planners across Canada develop and coordinate myriad plans and objectives within the context of professional discourses and particular institutional arrangements. We will identify any implications useful for land use theorizing and transportation demand modelling. We hope to employ a post-doctoral researcher to aid data synthesis and dissemination. We will prepare a further 5 to 7 papers to document our results. We will work with professional organizations like the Canadian Institute of Planners to mobilize opportunities to translate findings for practice.

**ANTICIPATED SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPACTS OF RESEARCH:** This original research program by a well-qualified team promises to deliver significant results on an emerging topic critical to contemporary Canadian planning practice. Through a national survey and detailed case studies in several provinces the research will contribute to the scholarly understanding of the tensions and challenges facing municipal planners and the governments they serve. It will enhance understanding of plan development, coordination, implementation, and outcomes. Planning practitioners and municipalities

can benefit from richer insights into the experience of communities experimenting with various plan coordination strategies. Local governments have limited research capacity and hence depend on the academy to provide useful knowledge about options and opportunities so that they may invest their dollars and staff resources wisely in appropriate planning interventions to achieve their mission to improve communities. Documenting best practices will prove especially useful to planners eager to find effective strategies to achieve land use planning objectives to enhance urban efficiencies, community livability, and long-term sustainability.

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