

# Too Many Plans? Factors Contributing to the Growing Number of Plans in Canada

## Summary

In the early days of town planning, communities typically had a single master plan, while contemporary cities have a large number of plans and strategies. Given financial, temporal, and other constraints, as the number of plans in a community grows policy-makers may not always coordinate new plans with existing policies. We administered a national survey of Canadian planning practitioners to help fill a gap in the literature concerning the nature of plan creation and coordination. Results support the proposition that communities have many more plans than in the past.

The survey has produced evidence about the factors perceived to contribute to contemporary plan creation. For the most part, planners perceive new plans as reflecting ‘professional expectations.’ Planners are expected to be responsive to current issues and local risks, while engaging in behaviours recognized as ‘good practice’. These expectations were perceived by those surveyed as bearing significant responsibility for the growing number of plans in Canadian communities. Other factors contributing to plan creation, such as political pressure, vary between regions and between organizations. As municipalities continue to respond to emerging issues like climate change by creating new plans, planners must ensure coordination with existing documents. By improving the coordination of plans and policies, planners can increase the efficiency of government planning and action, resulting in more useful plans and, ultimately, better communities.

**Key words:** Plan creation, plan proliferation, plan coordination, professional expectations

**NATHAN HALL** is enrolled in Dalhousie University’s Master of Planning program (class of 2015). He can be reached at: [nathan.hall@dal.ca](mailto:nathan.hall@dal.ca)

## **Introduction**

In the early days of town planning, communities typically had a single master plan, while contemporary cities have a large number of plans and strategies. Comprehensive planning has been a persistent theme throughout the history of planning, while contemporary plan making is incorporating new themes like environmental planning and stakeholder engagement. Given financial, temporal, and other constraints, as the number of plans in a community grows policy-makers may not always coordinate new plans with existing policies. While planning professionals are generally aware of trends in plan creation and while authors have documented themes in planning, there has not been a study of the factors that have informed these observed themes. We conducted a nation-wide survey of Canadian planning practitioners that has helped uncover these factors, while providing support to the perception that communities today have many more plans than in the past.<sup>1</sup> For the most part, Canadian planners perceive new plans as reflective of ‘professional expectations.’ Planners are expected to be responsive to current issues like climate change and the local risks that go along with them. They are expected to engage in behaviours recognized as ‘good practice’. Planners also respond to pressure from the public, politicians, or other external forces. These may vary considerably depending on organizational culture and local or regional characteristics. Survey respondents rated the importance of policy coordination very highly. By controlling for overlapping or contradictory policies or objectives, planners can practice more effectively and ensure that plans remain coherent and useful.

## **In Defense of Plan Creation**

Regulatory-oriented planning has traditionally been justified through the pursuit of the ‘public welfare’ or ‘public interest’ (Meyerson and Banfield, 1955; Barry, 1964; Altshuler, 1965; Faludi, 1973; Moore, 1978; Campbell and Marshall, 2002). In the pursuit of a ‘public interest’, land use plans have been employed to articulate formal planning policies and to deliver specific planning rights to land owners and stakeholders (Alfasi, Almagor, and Benenson, 2011).

Hopkins (2001) disputed some common criticisms of plan creation, arguing that the literature too often focuses on describing ideal plans and processes that are rarely realized, or over-generalizes by using the infeasibility of such ideal plans and processes to argue that plans are never useful in a real-world context. Citizens often imagine plans to be unrealistically all-controlling, comprehensive solutions at best, or authoritarian disruptions to individual decision-making at worst. These attitudes give inadequate credit to the potential usefulness of plans. Not all plans are created equal, but the potential usefulness of plans is not degraded by the failure or perceived failure of some. Plans are versatile, and can work as agendas, policies, visions, designs, or strategies. According to Kaiser and Godschalk (2007, p. 365), “Not only do... plans help decision makers to manage urban growth and change, they also provide a platform for the formation of community consensus about land use issues, now among the most controversial items on local government agendas”.

When faced with a decision, governments must decide whether or not to plan. According to Hopkins (2001, p. 6), communities gain by making a plan if:

1. “The value of the results of a decision now depends on other decisions;
2. The decision cannot be made in infinitesimally small steps;
3. The decision cannot be reversed later without cost; and
4. We lack complete knowledge of the future.”

In its most basic iteration, the decision to plan depends on the belief of the decision-maker that the cost of making a plan is compensated by the gains from considering additional options before taking immediate action (Hopkins, 2001). In this sense, the decision to plan or not to plan is a purely rational one. A government is motivated to make a plan to support its own investments and regulations or to provide a collective good to the community. Plans can be considered public goods that would be underprovided without collective action. As is the nature with public goods, individual demand for plans is likely understated. Plans create value by introducing a level of certainty to urban development, and the value of that certainty is shared across the whole community. Sometimes plan creation may occur for irrational, emotional, or cultural reasons. In some cases social norms may promote planning, or planning may be ‘in fashion’. Plan-making can sometimes be sufficiently engaging in its own right such that plans are created without the requirement that they bring value to the community.

## Themes in Plan Creation

Whatever the justification behind plan creation, the behaviours of individual planners can be explained in terms of tasks that yield plans (Hopkins, 2001). It is clear from both the literature and from casual observation that municipalities continue to create plans in large numbers. A 1994 tabulation documented 2,742 local comprehensive plans prepared under state growth management regulations in twelve states (Kaiser and Godschalk, 2007).<sup>2</sup>

Plans have always been created with consideration for current issues. The general consensus around the use of traditional land use plans represented the culmination of planning ideas that had been growing since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kaiser and Godschalk, 2007). Gradually, planning branched out to deal with public participation, environmental protection, growth management, fiscal responsibility, and effective implementation under turbulent conditions. The new plans took the form of land classification plans, growth management plans, strategic plans, and more. Many of these new planning approaches became integrated into modern comprehensive plans, but the emergence of new types of plans to deal with specific emerging issues had become a clear trend. Foreseeable developments in planning may include “...continuing concerns over issues of diversity, sustainability, and quality of life, calling for planners’ ability to analyze and seek creative solutions to complex and interdependent problems” (Kaiser and Godschalk, 2007, p. 366).

From a sample of over 350 plans drawn from thirty-four English-speaking Canadian cities, Burns and Grant (2014) found that all except one city had produced comprehensive land use plans such as a Municipal Planning Strategy, Development Plan, or Official Community Plan. The next most common plans included active transportation (AT) plans, corporate (strategic) plans, and transportation or transit plans. Twenty-five or more of the thirty-four communities had such plans. Recreation plans and cultural plans each appeared in more than half of sampled cities. Environmental plans, including Integrated Community Sustainability Plans (ICSPs), climate change adaptation plans, and general environmental or sustainability plans, were present in over half of the cities. Green space plans, including parks plans and open space plans also appeared in over half of sampled cities. Most of the plans had been prepared recently, with about half produced in 2010 or later.

Figure 1: Frequency of plans in 34 Canadian municipalities (Burns &amp; Grant, 2014)

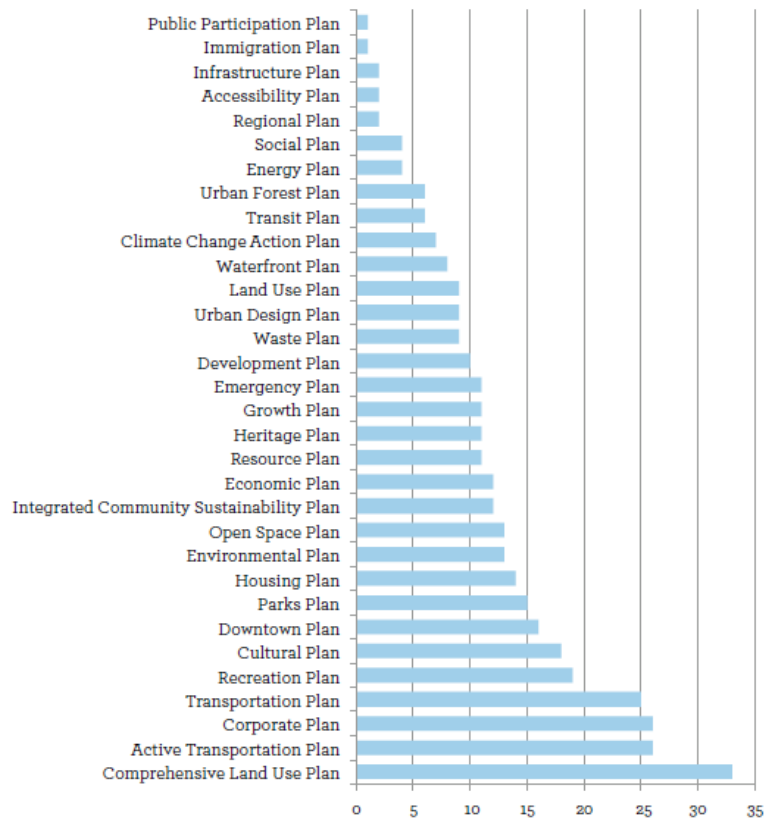


Figure 3: The number of each type of plan collected from the sample of 34 municipalities.

Burns and Grant (2014) found that every city sampled except one had some form of comprehensive land use plan. These plans act as overarching documents that guide planning policy within municipalities. Despite an insufficiency of research into implementation and effects, comprehensive land use plans are generally considered a core element of good planning and are commonly used in regulatory-oriented planning systems (Hopkins, 2001; Alfasi, Almagor, and Benenson, 2011). They are often mandated by provincial or state legislation (Burns & Grant, 2014).

Comprehensive land use plans continue to play a central role in statutory land use planning. Corporate (strategic) plans were also among the most common plans in Canadian cities (Burns & Grant, 2014). These plans outline municipal budgets and business plans, align planned municipal services according to the wants and needs of residents, and establish short and long term goals as per a community vision. Active transportation (AT) plans have become extremely common, as well as transportation and transit plans. Recreation and cultural plans are now common. Green space planning is a primary concern for contemporary cities.

Environmental plans (including climate change action plans, and general environmental or sustainability plans) are becoming increasingly common in Canadian municipalities (Burns & Grant, 2014). This reflects increasing concern in land use planning with issues including climate change and sustainability (Berke & Conroy, 2000). Planning for environmental hazards is becoming increasingly common among all levels of government, including at the local level (Burns & Grant, 2014). Plans dealing with local risks take the form of strategies for adaptation to

sea level rise and other measures. Hazard mitigation and land use planning can both be powerful tools for reducing the costs of disasters and improving community sustainability (Godschalk, Kaiser, and Berke, 1998). Hazard planning produces plans intended to help communities avoid or mitigate harm from natural disasters, and to recover from disasters when they occur. Scholars have called for greater reliance on land use strategies to mitigate damages from flooding (Stevens and Hanschka, 2014). Land use plans implemented at the municipal level have been effective in helping reduce losses from natural hazards partly by directing new development to locations that are relatively safe from hazards like flooding.

Another current issue that is prompting the development of new plans is health. Cities like New York and London have developed health equity strategies (Wong and Gardner, 2013). While these plans are typically not developed by land use planning departments, the impact of the physical landscape and structures of the city are increasingly recognized as contributors to health and equity. Consequently, a growing number of health departments are working with planning agencies to incorporate health considerations into general plans and guidelines for land use decisions.

An additional observable theme in the plan creation process has to do with public involvement. The importance of public participation in local democracy has waxed and waned throughout modern community planning (Moynihan, 1969; Grant, 1994; Thomas, 2013). Most cities and regions with comprehensive planning strategies now emphasize or require community participation (Wong and Gardner, 2013). The role of the citizen who seeks to influence the creation of a plan is extremely variable. The vast majority of members of the public never become involved in the planning process (Grant, 1994). Consequently, those citizens who become involved are rarely representative of the entire population. Those who do become involved may do so at any time and for various reasons including wanting to prevent or control change. Citizens seek to persuade decision makers by asserting their own understanding of community values, defining the ‘public interest’ as congruent with their own interests.

Political pressure may influence plan creation significantly. As early as the 1950s, municipal politicians and managers in the United States became more interested in planning as it became a responsibility of local government (Kaiser and Godschalk, 2007). Authors like Wong and Gardner (2013) have noted the influence of higher levels of government on local plan creation. Municipal authorities operate within a larger political landscape shaped by provincial, state, or federal governments.

Municipalities may not always have the resources to undertake desired policies. As a result, local governments often rely on funding or technical support from higher levels of government. Frequently this funding is conditional on the creation of legally mandated plans. From approximately 1949 to 1981, the American federal government required municipalities to produce plans in order to receive funding through various programs for urban development and transportation (Hopkins, 2001). Under the Housing Act of 1954, municipal governments in the United States were provided with funding to create long-range general plans (Kaiser and Godschalk, 2007). Adoption of these comprehensive plans made local governments eligible for federal grants for urban renewal, housing, and other programs. Federal funds have also induced the creation of other, more specialized planning such as neighbourhood plans and transportation plans (Hopkins, 2001). Several states including California, Florida, Oregon, and Washington require local governments to plan. In 2005, the Canadian federal government made available to municipalities up to \$11.4 billion in revenue collected from an excise tax on gasoline consumption (Stoney, Hilton, Adams, and Philips, 2008). This became known colloquially as the

‘Gas Tax Fund’ (GTF). Funding provided through the GTF for infrastructure projects has required that municipalities develop Integrated Community Sustainability Plans (ICSPs). By 2011 in Nova Scotia, the provincial government had received ICSPs from all municipal units (Canada-Nova Scotia Infrastructure Secretariat, 2011).

Developer pressure may also influence plan creation. As the normal proponents of development projects, developers play an important role in planning activities (Grant, 1994). Samsura, Krabben, and Deemen (2010) argued that a developer’s optimal strategy around pursuing projects depends on market conditions, with greater development activity taking place during times of greater economic activity. Developers’ primary motivation is to maximize profits. The coordination of overall land use planning is not a normal consideration of the rational developer.

Innovation is widely considered an important aspect of good planning. However, the discipline has faced criticism for being too cautious. Seasons (1991) has called for greater creativity and innovation to help planners cope with an increasingly complex and uncertain future. Studies often reveal, however, that in practice planners favour familiar approaches to problems. In a study of municipal climate action plans (CAPs), Bassett and Shandas (2010) found that communities favoured well known land use and transportation solutions to the climate challenge, such as enhanced transit or compact community design.

In a study of public administration literature, Hill and Lynn (2004) found that most authors have documented a shift away from hierarchical government. Governments are increasingly favouring more horizontal structures, relying less on a central authority or bureaucracy. Canadian municipalities in recent decades have increasingly separated municipal functions between specialized departments (Tindal & Tindal, 2009). Municipalities with large numbers of staff and many functionally specialized departments benefit from greater levels of staff resources and expertise, but often have difficulty drawing the resources together into a coordinated operation. Over the years, modifications to the structure of municipal government have also involved the introduction of executive committees to improve coordination and executive direction at the council level, as well as coordinating officers to improve coordination and leadership at the staff level. While standing committees have provided benefits including accelerating the work of Council, small municipalities have frequently spawned committees that have been unneeded given the volume of work. Another criticism of municipalities’ growing reliance on committees is that they tend to reinforce the departmentalization inherent in the organization, contributing to a fragmented outlook. Members of a committee may place the interests of their department(s) first, making a coordinated approach to municipal problem-solving difficult. These coordination challenges have compounded as the committee system has expanded along with the number of municipal departments in Canadian communities. The increased departmentalization of municipal government has resulted in a greater number of specialized strategic non-land use plans, such as economic plans.

## **Coordinated Planning**

In general, coordinating land use planning in a context of multiple plans has not been well documented. However, some related areas of theory have been studied in more detail. Policy integration has exhibited a greater level of discussion in the literature. In Canada, authors have discussed the challenges of integrating cultural planning in the Queen West neighbourhood of Toronto as well as the effectiveness of cultural planning in Ontario in general (McDonough

and Wekerle, 2011; Kovacs, 2011). Reese (2006) compared the integration of planning goals with economic development policies in Canada and the United States. Other authors have studied the relationship between coordination and policy implementation (Gordon, 2002; Erickson, 2004; Connelly, Marky, and Roseland, 2009). Collaborative regional planning methods in the Okanagan Valley and Wood Buffalo may improve implementation outcomes (Utz and Frigo, 2007; Kittel, 2012). Some authors have offered examples of the challenges of coordinating policies among different levels of government (Tornberg, 2012; Li and Wu, 2013). Some articles have identified opportunities for integrating environmental policies with urban land use planning (Simeonova and van der Valk, 2009; van Stigt, Driessen, and Spit, 2013). Pemberton and Winstanley (2010) identified barriers to collaborative governance and discussed the possibility of using Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) to improve integration of policy formation. A study of mandated coordination of transportation and land use planning in Virginia identified multiple best practices for improving coordination (Miller, Howe, Hartman, and Goswami, 2004). Wong and Gardner (2013) discussed the importance of collaboration in generating positive outcomes in health planning.

## **Rationale for the Study**

A review of the relevant planning literature has revealed a substantial body of knowledge relating to trends in plan creation. Comprehensive planning has been a persistent theme throughout the history of planning, while contemporary plan making is incorporating emerging issues like environmental planning and stakeholder engagement. While planning professionals are generally aware of trends in plan creation and while authors have documented themes in planning, there has not been a study of the factors that have informed these observed themes. Likewise, the literature on coordination in planning has not addressed issues of coordination in the context of multiple plans managed within a single local government. By utilizing survey data drawn from practitioners across Canada, we seek to address this gap in the literature. Our intention is to provide a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to the creation of the types of plans we have observed in contemporary plan-making while providing evidence for the phenomenon of plan proliferation in Canada.

## **Methodology and Participant Profile**

Early in 2014, we administered a web-based survey to Canadian planning practitioners. Recruitment of survey respondents was done in several stages. In the first stage we inserted a link to the survey web page in several online newsletters that were distributed in February and March 2014 to members of the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP). Secondly, we emailed participation requests to planners and other professionals involved in planning. Most of these requests were sent to individuals whose emails we had collected from municipal government websites. We sent additional mailings to members of the Intergovernmental Committee on Urban and Regional Research (ICURR) as well as alumni of the Dalhousie University School of Planning. Finally, invitees were asked to share the survey with coworkers. We conducted the survey using ObjectPlanet's *Opinio* software. We activated the survey on January 22, 2014, leaving it open for responses until March 22, 2014. We collected a total of 736 responses (471 complete and 265 partial responses). We included partial responses in the analysis to gain a more

robust sample size for critical questions. Consequently, the number of responses (N) varies between questions.

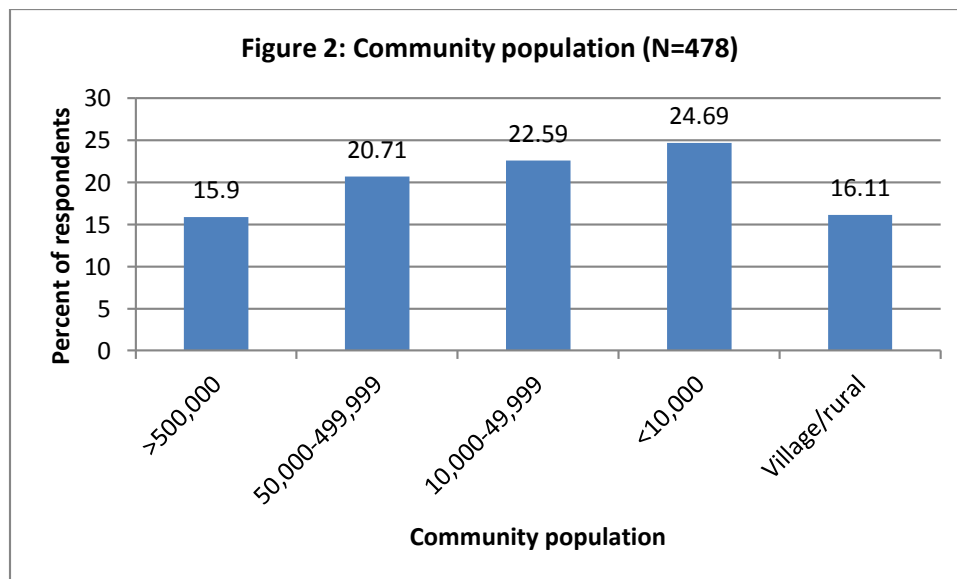
**Table 1: Survey responses**

Response category	Count
<b>Total responses</b>	736
Complete responses	471
Partial responses	265

The majority of respondents reported having a significant amount of experience in planning. Almost 54% had at least ten years of experience, while about a quarter indicated that they had 5-10 years. Nearly 70% stated that they were either “Very involved” or “Often involved” in producing plans in their communities, and almost 80% indicated that they were either “Very involved” or “Often involved” in implementing plans.

Almost all respondents (97%) identified as some type of planner, with nearly 60% working as municipal planners (because the question allowed multiple selections, respondents could select more than one role). Regional planners, planning consultants, other types of planners, and development officers responded in large numbers. Politicians, architects, and a mix of other professionals involved in planning decision-making also responded to the survey.

Respondents were asked to give the population size for the community in which they most frequently worked. Over 40% of respondents worked in communities with populations less than 10,000, while 16% worked in cities of over 500,000 people.





## **Findings**

### **Perceptions of Coordination in Planning**

Survey results supported the widely held belief that Canadian communities are contending with a growing number of plans that need to be coordinated. The vast majority of respondents agreed that communities have many more plans to coordinate than they had ten years ago. This indicates a pervasive perception among planning professionals that the number of plans within Canadian communities has been on the rise.

	<b>Absolute frequency</b>	<b>Relative frequency (%)</b>
<b>Strongly agree</b>	236	40.41
<b>Agree</b>	276	47.26
<b>Neutral</b>	52	8.9
<b>Disagree</b>	16	2.74
<b>Strongly disagree</b>	4	0.68
<b>Total</b>	<b>584</b>	<b>100</b>

Results indicate that plan proliferation has been experienced more acutely in more populated municipalities. Respondents from the largest communities were almost twice as likely as those from the smallest communities to agree that communities have many more plans to coordinate than ten years ago. In response to a similar question and with the exception of participants from smaller communities, most respondents (over 58%) did not agree that having a limited number of plans had eased coordination efforts in their communities.

Achieving coordination in a context of rapid plan creation poses many challenges. Respondents, especially those from large cities, generally agreed that coordinating conflicting policies and priorities had always been an issue in planning. In total, almost 70% of respondents agreed. There was not a consistent level of confidence among participants in the ability of their communities to coordinate implementation across plans effectively. Responses were nearly evenly split into thirds between agreement, disagreement, and neutrality on whether coordination was not a problem in their communities because they could coordinate implementation across plans effectively. Respondents working for areas with small populations were more confident in their communities' abilities to coordinate effectively. While a majority of respondents (about 67%) indicated that policy and plan coordination were priorities in Canadian land use planning, a slightly lower percentage of respondents (61%) felt that coordination was a priority in their own communities.

### **Factors Contributing to the Growing Number of Plans**

In this section we provide an overview of survey data respecting the factors contributing to plan creation. Respondents rated the importance of ten potential factors in response to the question, “What factors explain the growing number of plans that Canadian communities are

producing?” We also draw evidence from comments where respondents had the option to write in additional text.

Factor	Rating of importance (% of respondents, N=567)				
	Very important	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Very unimportant
Responding to current issues	26.1	61.02	9.88	2.65	0.35
Strategic priorities of agencies or departments	24.56	54.95	17.67	2.83	0
Good planning practice	19.61	59.01	16.43	4.59	0.35
Responding to local risks	16.08	56.71	18.37	7.24	1.59
Community driven	13.76	53.62	21.34	10.41	0.88
Political pressure	21.38	48.23	22.79	7.6	0
Funding programs availability	22.05	36.68	28.22	10.93	2.12
Budget availability	21.34	35.8	27.34	13.4	2.12
Being innovative	15.37	40.11	29.68	12.54	2.3
Developer pressure	10.78	37.63	27.74	19.79	4.06

Table 3 shows that respondents rated “responding to current issues” as the most significant factor contributing to plan creation, with 87.12% saying it was important or very important. “Strategic priorities of agencies or departments” came next (79.51%), with “good planning practice” third most important (78.62%). Around 70% of respondents thought “responding to local risks” (72.79%) and “political pressure” (69.61%) were important or very important factors driving the proliferation of plans. A majority perceived that community influence, funding programs, budget availability, and innovation played important roles. Participants saw “developer pressure” as the least important factor. Table 4 indicates that participants perceived professional expectations as playing a key role in the drive to create more plans.

Factor grouping or theme	Factor	Perceived importance (% of respondents who rated factor as “Important” or “Very important”, N=567)
Professional expectations	Responding to current issues	87.12
	Good planning practice	78.62
	Responding to local risks	72.79
	Being innovative	55.48
Regionally or organizationally characteristic pressures	Strategic priorities of agencies or departments	79.51
	Political pressure	69.61
	Community driven	67.38
	Funding programs availability	58.73
	Budget availability	57.14
	Developer pressure	48.41

In our analysis, we divided factors contributing to the growing number of plans into two broad groupings. ‘Professional expectations’ are those factors that represent planners’ trained responses. These expectations influence the behaviour of practitioners, and have an effect on the creation of plans. ‘Responding to current issues’, ‘good planning practice’, ‘responding to local risks’, and ‘being innovative’ were designated ‘professional expectations’. The grouping of factors in this manner was supported by survey comments that suggested that these factors were largely given as influencers of plan proliferation in Canada.

The remaining factors contributing to the growing number of plans were designated ‘regionally or organizationally characteristic pressures’. These represent pressures external from the planner that may contribute to the creation of new plans. ‘Strategic priorities of agencies or departments’, ‘political pressure’, ‘community driven’, ‘funding programs availability’, ‘budget availability’, and ‘developer pressure’ were assigned to this group. The extent to which individual planners experience these pressures and the way that they may influence plan creation is variable. Organizational culture, political climates, and unique regional characteristics may make ‘pressures’ more or less significant as contributors to the growing number of plans in Canadian municipalities.

### *Professional Expectations and Plan Creation*

Our findings suggest that planning practitioners generally perceive that factors considered ‘professional expectations’ have contributed the most to the growing number of plans in Canadian communities. Responding to current issues was perceived as the most significant factor contributing to new plans. Many respondents commented on the importance of environmental issues in precipitating plan creation. This is consistent with the growing popularity of environmental and sustainability plans. Issues identified by respondents included climate change, hazard mapping, planning for environmentally sensitive areas, and increased interest in biodiversity and wetland conservation. One participant from a small town in Ontario reported that secondary plans are most often precipitated by current issues. For example, the protection of established neighbourhoods had prompted the creation of secondary or neighborhood plans. Comments identified responding to growth pressures, archaeological considerations, and planning for increasingly complex urban environments as examples of current issues that precipitated plan creation. Planners are trained to be responsive to current issues: making plans is a common response strategy. The perception among survey respondents was that trained responsiveness to current issues has played a significant role in the growing number of plans in Canada.

Related to the notion of responding to current issues is responsiveness to local risks in the creation of plans. Seventy-three percent of participants agreed that responding to local risks was an important factor contributing to plan proliferation. Professional planners are expected to take the local context into account when planning for current issues. How might a rise in sea-level affect the community? How will the local economy cope with a global hike or decline in oil prices? The planner has a role in ensuring the responsiveness of planning policy to local risks. By responding in a timely manner to urgent and popular issues like climate change, planners demonstrate responsiveness to public concern through proactive policy making. The expectation to respond to local risks often results in the creation of new plans.

Good planning practice is a clear professional expectation. While the planning discipline is continuously evolving, there are some predominantly agreed-upon practices that reflect ‘good

planning'. For example, the creation of a comprehensive plan that captures a broad community vision for the future has been historically recognized as a core tenet of good planning practice (Kaiser and Godschalk, 2007). For the most part, new plans are perceived as reflecting good practice. Almost 79% of respondents agreed that good planning practice has been an important contributing factor to the growing number of plans in Canada. In the words of a survey respondent, planners want to create 'higher quality communities'. Some challenges stand between good planning practice and achieving better communities, however. One commenter lauded the phenomenon of plans being produced to deal with emerging issues like climate change, but was less optimistic about communities' ability to coordinate many new plans. Despite the coordination challenges associated with the growing number of plans, planners generally perceived new plans as worthwhile.

While planners appreciate the importance of being innovative, results from our survey suggest that practitioners perceived a shortage of innovation in plan creation. Being innovative was seen by about 55% of respondents as an important factor contributing to the growing number of plans in Canadian municipalities, with participants from the smallest communities more likely to rate it as important. Participants perceived significant barriers to innovative plan creation. Bureaucratic inertia may impede innovation with municipal organizations. Furthermore, mandatory plans imposed by higher levels of government typically take precedent over community-led initiatives, and are sometimes seen as obstacles to engaging in innovative plan creation at the local level. The several comments made by participants about innovation in planning were pessimistic, expressing concern about the lack of innovation in plan creation:

*"Even though community driven and innovative plans can be important, in the long run they fall to the back burner compared to mandatory plans from politicians."* (Ontario planner)

*"Sometimes you are forced to be innovative in order to implement a vision or objective. You do not start off this way."* (Survey respondent)

Some readers may find the relatively low rating of innovation as a contributing factor of plan creation discouraging. In practice caution seems to take precedence over bold planning action. Survey comments suggest that plans mandated by politicians and upper levels of government often take precedence over innovative new plans. Political or staff will are often insufficient. Limited budgets push decision-makers toward the creation of plans that come with funding. Time and resource constraints understandably drive municipalities to create tried and true plans while avoiding the risk inherent to innovation.

### *Regionally or Organizationally Characteristic Pressures and Plan Creation*

Planners are not the only government actors responsible for the proliferation of plans in Canadian municipalities. Many factors that contribute to plan creation are external to the planning practitioner. These 'regionally or organizationally characteristic pressures' vary considerably from one municipality to the next, but often exert significant influence over the creation of new plans. Generally, however, survey respondents rated these 'pressures' as less significant than 'professional expectations' as factors contributing to plan creation.

The survey ratings of the importance of strategic priorities of agencies or departments were an exception. Almost 80% of participants rated 'strategic priorities of agencies or

departments' as an important factor contributing to the growing number of plans in Canada, with greater perceived importance among participants from larger communities. The increased specialization of departments like engineering, economic, and environmental services was seen by at least six participants (those who commented) as contributing to the growing number of plans. This perception is consistent with literature on Canadian municipal government. Agencies may create non-land use plans that add to the total number of government documents. The result of increased specialization of government agencies has been a greater number of regulatory plans and policies that deal with issues separate from land use. These plans must be coordinated with traditional land use plans and with each other, necessitating not just coordination between plans, but cross-agency coordination.

Planning practitioners are responsive to political leaders. As elected representatives of the public, politicians possess the legitimacy and authority to direct the planning process. Seventy percent of survey respondents rated political pressure as an important factor contributing to the growing number of plans in Canada, while sixteen participants (more than for most other factors) commented on the question. Commenters agreed that politicians often dictate the planning dialogue, determining what plans are created. It is clear that while the creation of plans is often seen as resulting from the actions of planners according to professional expectations, politicians bear much of the responsibility for the quantity and types of plans that are produced.

Fifteen of the participants (the highest proportion to comment on a single theme) proposed that political pressure from higher levels of government was a significant factor contributing to the growing number of plans at the municipal level. Sometimes responsibilities like the provision of affordable housing may be downloaded onto municipal governments. Meeting these responsibilities can be a challenge given the limited budgets of municipalities. Other times, funding is provided to municipalities contingent on the creation of certain plans. Federal, provincial, or state governments may identify issues of particular importance and mandate the creation of plans to address them at the local level. This was the case when the Canadian federal government mandated the adoption of Integrated Community Sustainability Plans in 2005. Planners often seek out new funding opportunities to supplement limited municipal planning budgets. In addition to the provision of funding, mandated plans may bring benefits to municipalities. A commenter suggested that greater accountability and comparability of plans are benefits of plans mandated by upper levels of government. Government initiatives or standards may force the creation of higher quality, innovative planning documents:

*“We are producing much more sophisticated planning documents at the local level than ever. Much of this has to do with upper government initiatives and standards that municipalities are obliged to follow...”* (British Columbia planner)

While planners may be legally and ethically required to abide by mandates imposed by nonlocal governments, some potential challenges arise from such a top-down approach. The act of mandating plans may distort planning priorities at the municipal level. One participant was critical of plans imposed by higher levels of government for lacking local context:

*“Plans are generated at levels above local communities but impact planning programs of local communities without adequately taking into account context [or] different circumstances.”* (Alberta planner)

This distortion is more acute if local priorities are not closely aligned with the priorities of higher levels of government. Proper contextualization of mandated planning processes is critical to ensuring alignment of local and regional or national planning priorities. Planners are expected to account for the local context when creating plans, even those mandated by higher levels of government. In many cases it is possible to allow sufficient latitude for municipalities to ensure mandated plans are designed sensitive to local context. Higher levels of government may set broad policy objectives such as ‘sustainability’ while allowing municipalities to work out the details of achieving the mandated goals. For example, in completing required sustainability plans, Canadian municipalities were allowed significant leeway in setting local objectives according to five pillars of sustainability defined by the federal government.

As a public servant, the planner is expected to respect the use of public funds when developing plans. However, budget availability is a factor outside of the control of planners that can have a significant effect on the planning process. Many participants seemed concerned with budget constraints in plan creation. Budget availability was perceived by about 57% of respondents as an important factor contributing to the growing number of plans in Canada, with those from smaller communities significantly more likely to rate it as important. In some communities experiencing rapid population and economic growth, municipalities are seeing growing budgets. On the one hand, this may permit a higher level of planning activity and the creation of more plans. On the other hand, one commenter argued that greater budget availability may be correlated with less rather than more plan creation. They suggested that plan creation is cheap compared to plan implementation, and that plans are often created but not implemented in tight fiscal times. During boom periods, municipalities may have greater capacity to implement visions laid out in existing plans and engage less in the creation of new documents.

In practice, planners concerned with the conscientious use of public money will seek external funding sources. Related to political pressure from higher levels of government is the notion that funding programs availability has contributed to the creation of new plans. Funding programs availability was rated as important by about 59% of respondents. It was rated more highly among participants from small communities, where budgets may be more limited. Upper levels of government often provide incentives for local governments to create and implement certain planning policies deemed of importance at a nonlocal as well as a local level. While funding is offered to incentivize municipalities to enact such policies, they are often mandated by law or regulations.

*“Senior government agencies are promoting various planning initiatives and are requiring things such as Regional Growth Strategies, Integrated [Community] Sustainability Plans, Housing Plans, Agriculture Plans, Heritage Plans, [and] Trails Plans in order to, sometimes, qualify for funding.”* (British Columbia planner)

Planning practitioners are expected to concern themselves not only with the creation of quality plans, but also with the implementation of policy once it has been created. One participant was critical of government funding programs for providing the impetus for plan creation without also backing up the implementation of policy:

*“Despite the fact that there is a surplus of funding available for such plans and projects, the public is growing increasingly frustrated with the fact that there is no accompanying funding for the implementation of the policies.”* (Ontario planner)

In addition to being responsive to the demands of elected politicians, planners are accountable to the public. Pressure from communities was perceived as a somewhat significant factor contributing to the growing number of plans. About 67% of survey respondents rated ‘community driven’ as important. Survey responses suggest a diversity of experiences and opinions concerning public involvement in plan creation. In some cases members of the public are becoming more educated on planning matters, as two commenters suggested. This may foster greater interest among community members in planning matters, and spur more participation by citizens in public engagement sessions. Other respondents were skeptical that community pressure can explain plan creation. One commenter suggested that, like developers, the public actually tends to desire fewer (or simpler) plans. Some participants suggested that planners have a role to play in interpreting the needs and wishes of the public, and ultimately must decide, along with political leaders, when it is appropriate to create a new plan.

In addition to citizens and politicians, developers are a major group of stakeholders interested in planning decisions. Survey results showed that developer pressure was perceived as the least important factor overall, with less than half (48%) of respondents rating it as an important or very important factor contributing to the growing number of plans in Canada. Respondents from larger communities viewed developer pressure as more important than those in smaller communities. Developers in larger cities may have more influence over the development of plans because large scale projects require master plans. As a respondent noted, developers may also have significant influence with council:

*“In my experience developer pressure can become the equivalent to political pressure when the development is deemed important to Council.”* (British Columbia planner)

However, it is important to distinguish between developers seeking approvals or amendments and developers pushing for plan creation. Typically developers do not desire additional policy documents. It is more likely that higher levels of development activity in cities generate greater pressure for communities to develop plans to regulate that activity. High levels of development activity associated with population growth may spur the creation of secondary, area-specific plans.

### *Other Factors Contributing to the Growing Number of Plans*

Participants who left comments in the survey suggested plan creation factors that were not included in the questionnaire. One such respondent argued that greater data availability has increased the ability of municipalities to create plans, resulting in more plans overall. A participant suggested that the increasing complexity of community building has necessitated the creation of more plans. Another respondent argued that new plans are sometimes created instead of updating existing documents:

*“One of the main reasons that there is a growing number of plans is that sometimes it is easier to create a new plan rather than amend existing plans. This is especially true in the context of plans that are dated and haven't been reviewed in a comprehensive fashion for a long time.”* (Nova Scotia planner)

Some commenters pointed out that planners themselves are sometimes guilty of precipitating excessive plan creation. In the words of one planner from British Columbia,

“[Planners] get paid to make plans. The more plans that are 'required' the more work there is to go around.” This comment reveals a startling level of cynicism toward the planning profession and toward plan creation: the idea that planners may benefit through increased professional opportunities. One participant cited the growth of professional planning organizations as a factor that has helped encourage ‘plan happy’ land-use planners. It is in the nature of planners to create plans. The drafting of new planning documents may be the preferred tool of the profession for dealing with new issues. A respondent described plan creation as the ‘knee jerk’ reaction that municipalities have to new issues, while another criticized bureaucracies for being reactive rather than visionary in nature.

## **Conclusions**

Municipalities are producing plans and policies in greater numbers than in the past. Ensuring efficient governance requires effective coordination of plans and policies, which may be more challenging in a context of many plans. Our survey of planners practicing across Canada has helped identify significant factors contributing to the observed proliferation of plans. Generally, planners consider new plans to result from professional expectations, reflecting the ideals of responding to current issues and local risks, as well as good planning practice. These professional expectations may apply not only to planners working in a Canadian context, but to practitioners elsewhere. Our survey indicates that such professional expectations have played a significant role in precipitating the proliferation of plans at the municipal level.

Another set of factors that have been perceived as contributing to the growing number of plans in Canada are external to the professional expectations of planners. These ‘regionally or organizationally characteristic pressures’ were generally perceived as less significant contributors to plan proliferation in Canadian communities. Some factors, like strategic priorities of agencies or departments, however, were rated as highly important.

Despite the fact that new plans are generally perceived as resulting from virtuous professional expectations, planners understand that coordinating large numbers of plans remains a challenge. Given financial, temporal, and other constraints, policy-makers may not always coordinate new plans with existing policies. The emergence of non-land use plans, created by engineering, economic, and environmental departments add another layer of documents that need to be coordinated. As municipalities continue to respond to emerging issues like climate change by creating additional plans, planners have a critical role to play in ensuring coordination with existing documents. By improving the coordination of plans and policies, planners can increase the efficiency of government planning and action, resulting in more useful plans and, ultimately, stronger communities.

## **Notes**

1. This research is part of a three-year research study by 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. The project is exploring how Canadian communities are dealing with planning and policy challenges that arise as the number of plans that must be managed increases. Research is being conducted in partnership with the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP) and the Dalhousie Transportation Collaboratory (DalTRAC). Funding has been provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Insight Grant program.



2. This figure understates the total number of comprehensive plans across the United States, which would include all those plans prepared in the other thirty-eight states and in the non-coastal areas of California and North Carolina (Kaiser and Godschalk, 2007).

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