

# **This is an article about planning and the public in San Francisco\***

by David Prowler  
[david@proowler.org](mailto:david@proowler.org)  
[www.proowler.org](http://www.proowler.org)

*\* But it's also about fear, love, laundromats, change, and ritual.*

Here's how it's done in San Francisco. The Planning staff or the Planning Commission or even the Board of Supervisors decides to draw up a new plan for an area. Maybe it's because there have been too many controversies there, or because it seems like a good idea to either change or preserve the character of that neighborhood – how the buildings and streets look and are used. There is some squabbling about the boundaries, then the process begins. The public is invited to give input at community meetings, given handouts, shown power point slides and given a chance to ask questions or make criticisms. Six months later the planners come back with a modified version of the original, pass out handouts, show the power points, and ask for comments. This gets repeated for a decade.

Or somebody wants to develop a piece of property. Maybe they hold a community meeting and present the idea (which is probably pretty far along). Some people like it and drop out, opponents rally for a showdown. In the meantime, the Planning staff cranks up a study of all the environmental damage the project could do. Years later there's a hearing, then appeals.

San Franciscans are cut out of the process, nobody seems to have a clear idea of what city planning can and cannot do, and sometimes it seems that the process itself is the product.

It's not a great system.

We can do better.

---

It's hard not to notice at community meetings and public hearings that the crowd doesn't look much like San Francisco. Look around on the bus, in the streets, at clubs and at the grocery store. Are these the people engaged in the discourse about the future of our city?

Good chance *you* don't go to community meetings or hearings either. I don't blame you.

But people do want to be heard and, believe it or not, we'd have a better city if they were.

**It's easier to see why people *don't* participate than why they do:**

- **Irrelevance:** Unless their view or parking space is in danger, most people just don't see what city planning has to do with their lives. How would you explain to a single mom in the Tenderloin, a teenager in the projects, a couple starting to look for a place to buy, or a grocer what planning can do to make their daily life better or worse? It's too abstract.
- **Cynicism:** Even among people who believe that planning can have an impact, there's a lot of distrust left over from the Brown administration. After all, he cared so little about planning that he let the Commission close up shop for five months during a showdown with the Board over nominees. (One of his nominees was later indicted for selling advice to applicants appearing before the Commission he sat on, and Brown's Planning Director was golfing on a free membership at an exclusive golf club - with business before the Commission. That kind of stuff doesn't build confidence.)
- **Inertia:** Plans are underway all over the City; Treasure Island, Mid-Market, the so-called Eastern Neighborhoods which encompass fully 25% of the City, Market/Octavia, Transbay. All over the place. But they seem to never end.
- **Confusion:** Most people don't understand what planning does (set guidelines and rules) and doesn't do (cause or prevent growth or change; address economic or cultural needs). We expect too much and too little from it at the same time. Of course, we can't see what

a plan *prevents* because it doesn't happen. And we can't really identify what a plan *caused* because the genesis of a project is so complex.

- **Language and cultural barriers:** Not everyone is comfortable speaking out. Maybe you don't come from a culture with a tradition of community meetings and a government that wants your ideas. **(39% of San Franciscans were born in another country – more than were born in all of California.)**
- And these immigrants came here for a reason. They found where they were intolerable and made a decision to leave their roots and move on. Not to organize or participate in some political system: to leave. Why expect them to now try to influence land use decisions?
- Maybe your English isn't so great and you are shy about public speaking. (46% of San Franciscans speak a foreign language at home.) Is it realistic to expect that residents with different backgrounds and cultures would feel welcome at public hearings or community meetings? And plenty of San Franciscans are working hard and have kids at home and just can't slip away for a two hour meeting of Powerpoint presentation and comments.
- **Disinterest in the local future.** Americans are mobile. How many believe that they will be in the same neighborhood or community in a decade or that their children will be? So planning for a future you may not be a part of isn't that interesting. As a corollary, preserving a past you don't share isn't so compelling either.
- **Isolation.** There is a nationwide reduction in public participation. Used to be, people participated much more in civic life – they routinely attended PTA meetings, block clubs, League of Women Voters meetings, labor union meetings, even lodge meetings. Now, even poker is a solitary activity. People hardly even attend movies like they used to.

Often it's the same handful of people at every meeting, saying the same things.

There is a sub-culture of people who attend community advisory committee meetings and hearings just as there are subcultures of participants at poker games, sex clubs, book clubs, and AA meetings. We assume that people who

join the planning club are better informed about the city's issues and care more about the future of the city. But is that a fair assumption?

People come to community meetings and hearings for a lot of reasons. Sometimes it's to learn and share good ideas but sometimes the reasons are a little more obscure. Psychological reasons. Fear of change. Issues around control. Racism. Jealousy. Anger. And love: of the city and sometimes another kind of love:

From the San Francisco Chronicle of April 24, 2006, a quote from the opponent of a project in Alameda: **"I've done everything I can to keep that land open. This is my love affair"** said a "retired schoolteacher and grandmother of six whose husband is a former Navy lawyer."

One thing I learned when I was a Planning Commissioner: you can't solve psychological problems with land use decisions.

From reading the local press or attending public hearings one would think that every proposal is controversial, that traffic, views, and nostalgia for a simpler (white, blue collar, less messy) time prevails. But how true is that? How representative are attendees at meetings? Who do leaders speak for? We might get some surprises if we knew – and not everyone likes surprises.

**The way we plan now works well for some.** Planning Commissioners and elected officials get to step into the vacuum and make deals. Consultants get hired as guides; that's why our most political architect says "I love chaos, I thrive on it." The lengthy review processes help maintain the status quo. But meanwhile we have a type of "redlining" by planning. Who could know what can be done in a neighborhood while the rules are up in the air?

But not only are these exercises expensive and lengthy, they also squander the goodwill residents have toward planning, burning out participants and driving away others.

Maybe it's time to step back and ask what we expect from the public dialogue about the City. We can create a space to learn from San Franciscans about the cities they live and work in. I write "cities" because we each experience the city differently.

I have a map of Paris that illustrates this. It has no streets or landmarks, just the outline of the city and two colors, corresponding to "J'y vais" and "J'y vais pas": I go here, I don't go there.

The Vietnamese nail salon worker who lives in the Tenderloin and works in the Richmond, the widow who hasn't left the Sunset since I. Magnin closed, the student who lives at Parkmerced but spends all her time on Valencia Street, the kid from the projects who goes to Wallenberg, the undocumented dishwasher..... Each has his or her own way to use the parts of the city they use, with little overlap. And they each have a different relationship with the history of San Francisco and his or her own hopes for the city's future. We can't weave these narratives together in a meaningful way by starting at the end: the buildings and the spaces in between.

We need to look not just at the ways people use the city, but also at how they use buildings. What is an "office" in a city where 18% of the residents are self-employed and others probably work at home for others? What is a café where half the customers are working on laptops?

In Rincon Hill, an area recently re-zoned to accommodate about 3,000 new residents, the planners want more than a district of condos. So they mandated that new residents pay into a fund to purchase and develop a park site and to rent and rehabilitate a union hall into a community center. But no thought was given to how high-rise condo owners would actually use a park or a community center. Neither have an identifiable constituency.

How to involve such a heterogeneous crowd in the discourse?

The first step is to see our current practice for what it is: a tired 19<sup>th</sup> century relic, more meaningful as ritual, as ceremony, than useful as a tool.

**Here are some ideas. You probably have others:**

- Don't be afraid of new voices. It's easy to fall back on the self-identified "leaders". They're predictable and easy to find.
- Trust that out of an open welcoming environment some better ideas can come.
- Trust that if these ideas come from such a place, they'll come with a constituency. And even if it takes longer to get there, the civic leadership – commissioners, staff, mayor, and supervisors – might be a little more likely to take stands. Maybe there'd even be fewer appeals at the back end.
- City planning itself needs to be marketed. Walking down Market Street this morning I saw posters for hip hop albums, movies, products, and one, all text, about the Market/Octavia Plan stuck on a light pole. It

matched an ad in the Chronicle about planners “Seeking Input” (inevitably) for some other plan. Both, the opposite of inviting.

- Show how planning can be relevant to people’s real day to day lives. Make it less cumbersome and show the value of results – to city staff and officials as well as the public.
- Maybe it’s not just land use planning in a vacuum; maybe the discourse has to include crime, culture, jobs, education all in one place.
- Except maybe it’s not a place in the old-fashioned way. Experiment with media. Maybe the dialogue would be more inclusive on the internet, or by tapping into where people really communicate, like beauty parlors and laundromats. Maybe it’s like bookmobiles, moving around. Or groups of random people invited to talk about how they use the city, over dinners. Or a storefront. Maybe we should have an Office of Public Involvement helping all city departments not just planning. Or even just hire professional facilitators to look at the goal of each planning venture and design the right process for the job.
- Use the internet. We plan our vacations on line; keep in touch via email and text messaging; share our thoughts on blogs; buy, rent, and sell on Craig’s List. So why do we expect people to spend afternoons at City Hall waiting for an item to be called then get three minutes to speak? I get the Planning Commission calendars on line: why not enable people to click the calendar and comment? Comments could go to commissioners directly or in digest, staff could respond, maybe people could post responses to each other. Cases and other planning efforts could all have spots on a Planning Department website for people to weigh in.
- For people to feel welcome, you’ve got to speak their language. And the context has to be culturally comfortable too. How do groups make decisions in the Philippines, in Latin America, in China? It’s not enough to use the same old “7 pm Thursday in the community center/power point/ question and answer/thanks for coming/we’ll get back to you” format. It doesn’t translate.
- Let’s learn from how planning is done in Europe, Asia, Latin America, even other North American cities. It’s mind-blowing to see what planning has achieved in Berlin, Barcelona, even Portland. This might

require bridging the gaps between practice, academia, and groups like San Francisco Planning and Urban Research.

- Let's be frank and clear about what land use planning can and cannot do. It doesn't create buildings or good jobs. The City is trying to preserve blue collar jobs by zoning to prevent housing. But how about linking zoning with a strategy to create these jobs?
- Set timelines and the discipline to stick to them. The new ballpark had a deadline – Opening Day. It was a challenge and we stepped up to it. It was a blessing too. Here's a quote about the danger of going on too long: the head of Long Range Planning for the City, speaking about the plan for an area, "What we're concerned about is the length of time it takes. By the time we finish the plan, consensus is forgotten." Or this from the Bay Guardian, about the Bayview Redevelopment Plan: "This has been a long-term process: the City has been discussing the plan for some ten years. As long as there's significant opposition in the community...it seems a mistake to rush forward."
- Forget about consensus. We're not going to get it and too often the planners or Board delay decision-making while waiting for it. But it gets farther away. We need leadership, not consensus.
- Be clear about what is on the table, what a plan can and can't do, when a decision will be made. Make sure people understand the goals and the trade-offs. The Mission Bay Citizens Advisory Committee knew the bottom lines of the developer and the Mayor. Nonetheless, there isn't an aspect of the project that wasn't changed by the advisory committee.
- We discuss projects and plans within the framework of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which mandates addressing only how much damage can a proposal do to the environment. Not how can it help the city meet goals or help the regional environment by concentrating growth where there's infrastructure. Here in San Francisco, we hold up even small scale projects – such as the 17 residences and retail project proposed at the empty lot at 19<sup>th</sup> and Valencia by the longtime residents and owners of a popular Mexican restaurant. Really, in a built up city, along a transit street where just about every other spot is housing over stores, how much environmental damage could a project like this do? Because the Planning Department doesn't discern between big projects and little ones, the wait to even get a planner assigned to look at the impacts is *nine months*. Oakland has

a more reasonable attitude – they don't even bother looking at the environmental impacts of 100 unit residential projects.

- The planners should do a better job of differentiating between those projects that pose policy questions for the Commission and the city and the smaller ones. As it is, single family projects with disputes over a few feet can take up as much staff and commission energy as high rises. Most of these disputes are what's called Discretionary Review cases – all these share one thing: they comply with the Planning Code 100%, but some neighbor is still unhappy. So the Planning Commission hears the case. We need a better system of triage and we should show some more respect for the Planning Code and allow projects that comply to move forward.
- We need other venues for working out land use disputes and just for talking with each other. Maybe Community Board has more of a role to play in working out disputes among neighbors. Or a semi-social format where downtown types and Mission types and City Hall types and just regular people who care about the city can get together and have a laugh and maybe a drink.
- The biggest challenge is a cultural one, and culture is the hardest thing to change. The attitudes of this culture:
  - Opponents are heroes and we can't move forward without consensus. (This stems, in part, from the tradition of progressives as opponents, uncomfortable as leaders.)
  - A decade is a reasonable amount of time to produce a plan.
  - The voices we hear are sufficiently diverse.
  - We are so afraid of change that delays, appeals, and meaningless environmental review are goals in themselves.

I was struck by a description of Italy by the essayist Beppo Severgnini: "Controllers and controlled have an unspoken agreement. You don't change, we don't change, and Italy doesn't change. But we all complain that we can't go on like this."

- But we are a city of newcomers and they will inevitably change the culture. It's time to open the process, be alert to new attitudes about the city and about change itself.

After all, it's inevitable.



*David Prowler was a VISTA tenant organizer, Planning Commissioner, Community Planner in Chinatown, Mayor's Project Manager for the Ballpark and Mission Bay, and now advises public agencies, non-profits, and developers on development and planning. He is President of the Board of the Homeless Prenatal Progra,*

*Thanks go to Ashley Boyd (AmericaSpeaks); Martin Paly; Susan Lubeck (Community at Work); Brad Paul (Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund); Aaron Peskin (President, Board of Supervisors); Gabe Metcalf, Jeannene Przblyski, Jim Chappell, (SPUR); John Schlesinger (American Institute of Architects Public Policy Committee); Fred Pollack and Rick Williams (Van Meter Williams Pollack); the crew at Ideo (Jerome Goh, Beth Viner, Fred Dust, and Brian Rink); Dave Latina; Simone Perez; Debra Walker (President Building Inspection Commission, Chair, Arts Task Force); Kate White (Urban Land Institute)*

*Affiliations are for identification only and I bear responsibility for all opinions.*

Please get back to me with your thoughts.

[david@prowler.org](mailto:david@prowler.org)

415 544 0 445