

Abridgment

Improving Minority Participation in Regional Planning

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This paper describes the steps taken by one regional advisory group, the Citizen's Advisory Board to the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Planning Agency, to improve participation by blacks in the regional planning process. The Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan area, the characteristics of Omaha's black population, and the current citizen participation process in the metropolitan area are described and the impacts of regional planning decisions on minorities are discussed. Several actions are then recommended to improve minority participation including (a) recruitment, (b) education, (c) involvement, and (d) evaluation and feedback.

This paper describes how minorities currently become involved in the regional planning of the Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan area and presents recommendations for improving minority participation at the regional planning level. The suggested recommendations herein are based on some initial steps taken by the Citizen's Advisory Board (CAB) to the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (MAPA) to improve participation by black individuals and groups. Although it is much too early to fully assess the long-range impact of these steps on increasing participation by blacks in the regional planning of the Omaha area, I have chosen to present the approach taken by the CAB before it has been fully assessed in order to stimulate discussion among planning professionals.

The remainder of the paper is organized into five sections: (a) characteristics of Omaha's black population, (b) the impact of regional planning on minorities, (c) current citizen participation in regional planning, (d) improving participation, and (e) concluding remarks.

CHARACTERISTICS OF OMAHA'S BLACK POPULATION

The Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan area is a major midwestern region centrally located within the United States. The standard metropolitan statistical area (SMSA) is comprised of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, Nebraska, and Pottawattamie County, Iowa, and includes more than 20 incorporated cities, towns, and villages (1, p. 5). Among these municipalities, the three most important are the Cities of Omaha and Bellevue, Nebraska, and the City of Council Bluffs, Iowa. In general, urban development within the region has "...sprawled outward in a low-density pattern being serviced by lineal commercial development" (1, p. 9). This sprawling urban development has clearly impacted inner-city neighborhoods, many of which are inhabited by black residents. A later section of this paper discusses in more detail how these neighborhoods have been impacted by regional planning decisions that encourage sprawl.

In general, the residents of the Omaha-Council Bluffs metropolitan region enjoy a high quality of life. In 1978, Omaha ranked 12th in family income among the nation's 50 largest cities and the unemployment rate was 4 percent, approximately 2 percent lower than the national rate. Nonetheless, these favorable statistics for the residents as a whole do not apply to the black population, which comprises 7-8 percent of the 600 000 people within the SMSA. Compared with an unemployment rate of 4 percent among all SMSA residents, 17 percent of the black labor force is officially unemployed. One report even estimates that the true unemployment rate among blacks is between 35 and 40 percent (2, p. 12).

This high unemployment rate among blacks obviously causes low income--the median yearly income for a black family of four is \$7500 compared with \$15 000 for a white family of the same size. Moreover, approximately 42 percent of the black population is considered economically disadvantaged compared with 9 percent of the white population (2, pp. 11-13).

The living conditions for the black residents within Omaha are bleak. More than 90 percent of the black people in Omaha are located within an 8-mile² ghetto in the northeast sector of the city; compared with a density of 0.60 persons/acre² for the SMSA as a whole, the density within this black sector is 16 persons/acre². The average 1978 housing value in the black sector of \$7000, which contrasts sharply with the \$28 000 for a housing unit in the white sector, reflects the high-density condition. The fact that more than 30 percent of the housing is deteriorated and more than 2500 lots are vacant is another indication of the poor living conditions within this sector (2, p. 16).

Low educational levels significantly contribute toward the high unemployment and low income among Omaha's black citizens. Only 29 percent of the black population 25 years and older have completed high school, while 60 percent of the white population in the same age group have high school diplomas. Moreover, 50 percent of the eligible black school children drop out whereas 28 percent of the white children drop out. Although 13 percent of the white population has completed four or more years of college, only 3 percent of the black population reached this same level of education (2, pp. 9-11).

Black citizens in Omaha apparently lack faith in the economic and political system since only 11 percent of the eligible black voters in Omaha vote in major elections (2, p. 21). This voting gap among black residents has resulted in a limited number of black elected representatives, which include one state representative and a few members on the school board and other minor boards and commissions. Since blacks do not vote, they apparently believe their votes mean nothing. The irony, though, of the situation is that if blacks do not begin to exercise political influence, their economic condition may worsen. As the next section illustrates, regional planning decisions that do not reflect the needs of the black population may even worsen existing conditions within black residential areas.

IMPACT OF REGIONAL PLANNING ON MINORITIES

This section focuses on the direct and indirect impacts that transportation facilities have on black residential areas, two important issues to black residents.

The proposed North Freeway within Omaha, which cuts through the heart of the black residential sector, is an integral part of the 1995 transportation plan and is on the 6-year element of the transportation improvement program. The facility has gone through corridor planning and preliminary design stages, and a large portion of the land acquisition for the project has been completed. The North Freeway, as originally planned, would have been a north-south connection between east-west Interstates 80 and 680, and its completion would have completed an expressway loop within the city (3). In addition,

the proposed east-west airport connector will connect the North Freeway to the Eppley Airport, which lies to the east of the proposed freeway. The present plan calls for the North Freeway to extend only to the airport connector and not to I-680 as originally planned. Interestingly, the cut-off at the airport connector is the approximate division between white and black North Omaha. Most of the North Freeway will then lie within the black residential sector. This decision to cut off the freeway at the connector was apparently due to political maneuvering. Due to the large proportion of the total right-of-way for the proposed North Freeway that has been acquired, the project already has had a significant impact on the black sector. Neighborhood groups are now very active in working out the details of the design in order to minimize neighborhood disruption, noise pollution, air pollution, and so forth.

Regional planning can also have more subtle indirect impacts on these residential areas that may be of greater consequence to blacks than are the direct physical impacts. Earlier this paper noted that development within the Omaha-Council Bluffs region has sprawled out from the central cities. The generally well-developed radial and circumferential expressway system has significantly increased the accessibility to outlying portions of the region; thus, the outward expansion has been encouraged by the increase in transportation capacity. An analysis of preliminary 1980 census data verifies that significant numbers of people have migrated westward from the central city to the suburbs and, according to the data, the growth rate for Omaha as a whole decreased between 1970 and 1980 (4). Public investment in the highway system made through regional planning decisions has certainly contributed to this outmigration; but other types of policies made outside the regional planning process have also put pressure on western growth including utility expansion, mortgage, and busing policies. The net result of all these policies has been a deterioration of the commercial, industrial, and residential base within the black sector.

Regional planning decisions clearly have widespread implications for the viability of black residential areas. Blacks need to become involved early in the process and they need to participate consistently on a day-to-day basis in order to influence decisions.

CURRENT CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The Omaha-Council Bluffs MAPA was formed in 1967 under an Inter-Local Cooperation Agreement for the purpose of coordinating local planning and development activities. A board of directors implements policy and directs the planning staff, which carries out the day-to-day planning activities. The board of directors receives advice from several technical committees and from a Citizen's Advisory Board (CAB).

The CAB, which was formed to involve private citizens from all socioeconomic segments in the planning for the five-county region, can make recommendations to the staff, technical committees, and board of directors. The overall policy for the CAB's participation activities is set by an executive committee, but all substantive participation is carried out by the five working committees: (a) community involvement, (b) human resources, (c) regional growth and development, (d) natural resources, and (e) transportation.

At present, representatives of various minority groups serve on the MAPA technical committees of comprehensive planning, urban affairs, and regional economic development advisory committee, which have

been formed as part of a special economic development demonstration project. The groups represented on these committees include the Greater Omaha Community Action, Comprehensive Employment Training Agency, Chicano Awareness, and the American Indian Center. Minority participation on the regional economic development committee is much stronger than participation on the other MAPA committees because it is a special committee that deals directly with economic problems that impact minorities. But, in general, minority participation on MAPA technical committees is at a low level.

Participation by minorities on the CAB is also at a low level. Of the approximately 80 CAB members, more than 20 represent various community organizations, but only three individuals represent minority groups. One black person is on the executive committee and very active on the CAB and other civic organizations, but the overall participation by blacks and other minorities is very low.

IMPROVING PARTICIPATION

The CAB has taken initial steps to improve participation by blacks that are based on the current approach taken by the CAB to improve participation in general. The CAB annually identifies potential members, recruits new members by letter, presents an orientation session for new members, and immediately involves each new member in one of the five working committees. The same general approach with some important modifications is recommended here for improving participation by blacks and other minorities in regional planning. Of course, some types of actions are beyond the immediate control of a regional planning agency. For example, in my opinion, the level of minority involvement in the political and technical decision-making process depends on the general level of education and employment of minority individuals. However, regional policies impact education and employment levels only over the long run, not the short run. Regional decision makers cannot instantly create jobs, housing, and transportation; they can only influence gradual change in these things. In order to ensure that minority concerns are reflected by long-range regional policies, minorities must participate in the process now. In this regard, a regional planning agency can take immediate steps to encourage effective minority participation by considering the following actions: (a) All individuals within the area must be given an equal opportunity to participate in the planning process, (b) the participants must understand the planning process, (c) the participants must understand all the issues of choice, and (d) the planning agency must give due consideration to the participants' contributions.

Recruitment

Initial recruitment efforts should focus on key persons within the most vital minority organizations in order to recruit individuals who represent minority viewpoints and who will participate on an ongoing basis. An initial phone contact should be made with a minority representative, followed up by written material and followed up again by a personal contact. The planning agency representative making the contact should emphasize (a) the potential impact of regional planning on minority residential areas, (b) the existing citizen participation process within the region, (c) the role that citizens play in the planning process, and (d) the effectiveness of the participation process. It is suggested that during the initial contact the regional planning representative provide only general information and avoid detailed information that can be provided later.

Education

Once an individual is recruited into the citizen participation program, the next step is to educate him or her in the regional planning process. Of course, a clear understanding of the process can only be gained after spending many hours in participation activities. An initial orientation session is a valuable way to brief individuals on the functions of the planning agency and to explain what roles each person can play in the participation program. It is important that the person or persons in charge of the orientation session do not provide too much information to the new participants. Most people will quickly narrow down their field of interest. Therefore, it is not necessary that they be given a detailed breakdown on each activity; it is more important that they now become involved in their primary area of interest.

Involvement

One criterion for an effective citizen-participation program is that each participant understand the issues of choice in selecting various planning options, and active involvement is the key to a clear understanding of regional planning issues. One must dig in and sort out the issues with some guidance from planning professionals. Above all else, citizen participation must mean something; it must be important. No one wants to spend hours and hours of work on frivolous tasks signifying nothing. Thus, participation roles must be directed toward specific issues and specific projects. In another paper (5), I presented a detailed discussion of four types of participatory roles that a citizen can play: (a) review and comment, (b) advocacy, (c) advisory, and (d) participatory planning. I suggested that the review and comment and the advocacy roles have the highest potential among the four roles to encourage participation because they are usually oriented toward the specific project issues. Thus, a new participant should be quickly placed in either the review and comment or advocacy role. Both roles should whet the individual's appetite for planning while minimizing any personal confusion or frustration. As the participant gains experience in the planning process, he or she can then become involved in the advisory and participatory roles.

One additional comment on involvement is needed. Regional planning agencies must begin to emphasize minority issues in their citizen-participation process. All too often, participation activities are centered around majority issues such as environmental impacts, resource recovery, and recreational facilities. Minority issues such as direct and indirect transportation impacts, transit facilities, and housing impacts need to be stressed more often. Placing emphasis on such issues will provide an opportunity for the individual to impact regional planning decisions while helping to maintain the individual's interest in planning at the same time.

Evaluation and Feedback

It is important that the planning agency periodically evaluate the effectiveness of each participation role in resolving planning issues by addressing each one of the four effectiveness criteria: (a) Do all people within the region have an equal opportunity to participate, (b) do the participants understand the planning process, (c) have the partici-

pants understood the issues of choice, and (d) has the planning agency given due consideration to the participants' contributions?

Individuals must know whether or not their input to the process has impacted regional decisions. In some situations this will be easy to measure. For example, the acceptance of a citizen's comment on an A-95 case is immediate feedback to the citizen. But other situations will not be as easy to measure. The impact of a citizen's work on establishing goals and objectives, for instance, is not an easy thing to measure. The fact that the agency accepts or rejects the list of goals and objectives is easy to measure, but it is not easy to measure whether or not regional growth is in fact shaped by these goals and objectives. Of course, regional decision makers and citizen participants are going to disagree on many occasions and both parties will probably compromise before a final decision is reached. Thus, it is important that the participants be given feedback as to how their input has influenced the final decision. In this regard, a participant should ask the question: Did the decision makers openly receive citizen comments and did they adequately weigh the consequences of the comments in reaching a final decision? Given evaluation and feedback to their involvement, participants can then change the manner in which they carry out their roles in order to improve their effectiveness in the planning process.

CONCLUSION

This paper recommended several actions to improve minority participation in regional planning based on my experience on the Citizen's Advisory Board to the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Planning Agency. Although the best citizen-participation program is one that contains a mix of mechanisms, such as a citizen's advisory committee, community workshops, public meetings, attitude surveys, and mailouts, the recommended actions of recruitment, education, involvement, evaluation, and feedback would probably apply best to either technical or citizen advisory committees, but they could also apply to special community workshops or meetings. Minority participation in these committees must be improved and can be improved by contacting key persons within minority groups, showing them that regional planning can impact minority areas hard, convincing them that they can make a difference in reaching final decisions, getting them involved in meaningful activities, and then letting them know if they really did make a difference.

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