



This article discusses social planning and its long road toward legitimacy in B.C., as well as its role in social sustainability and community politics. **BY MATTHEW BEALL & KARI HUHTALA**

## Communitas populi: Social planning and the realization of community vision in the Lower Mainland

*“We have moved into an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society. We are still called upon to give aid to the beggar who finds himself in misery and agony on life’s highway. But one day, we must ask the question of whether an edifice which produces beggars must not be restructured and refurbished.”*

—Martin Luther King Jr., 1968

### Social planning is important and legitimate

Organizations, individuals, and families face an increasing challenge in the availability of consistent support resources. In Canada, we watch as the social safety net—our old populist agreement to protect everyone from the hardships of social and economic disruption—frays under the strain of corporate interests, the diminishment of real incomes, and the growing gap between the haves and have-nots. Powerful global forces continue to influence the way we shape our communities and plan for future health and prosperity. In this environment, social planning has become less a laudable community development exercise and more an essential tool we use to maintain and develop healthy, sustainable communities and ensure ongoing comprehensive municipal and

regional planning practices.

On its face, the goal of social planning is simple: improve, by process, the complete quality of life in a community. The realization of the means and ends of social planning, however, remains challenging and complex, and depends on a commitment to a collaborative social perspective and shared values. A complete understanding of social planning depends on many modern community development concepts, such as social sustainability, social capital, social inclusion, social involvement, the complete communities model, and the global community. Even so, at its root, the motivation for social planning lies in human rights and social justice: a recognition that beyond the basic rights of food, clothing, and shelter lay the universal needs of happiness, safety, freedom, dignity, and affection, all of which are inextricable from the idea of a truly healthy community.

To realize healthy communities, social planning depends on a comprehensive and inclusive process that comprises a fundamental commitment to security for all, recognition of the interconnectedness of all community members, a commitment to fairness and equity in social and

economic relationships, broad participation and contribution in any form, and a responsibility to represent diversity.

### **The development of social planning in B.C.**

The development of social planning in the Lower Mainland is typical of the evolution seen in other jurisdictions across North America, where the provision of basic community social services over decades of shifting economic, social, and political conditions led to the eventual adoption of social planning processes.

The Lower Mainland's history of social policy has its roots in the community-level social services offered by the City of Vancouver in the early part of the twentieth century. The City's early efforts, spurred by the realization that service provision was important to community building, became significant catalysts in the region's social planning efforts. Vancouver's civic leadership in this area was instrumental in the promotion and development of social planning as a responsible community service in B.C.

The City's original community service efforts, childcare for working mothers, relief payments, and old-age assistance, were undertaken by the Relief Department, which in time became the Social Services Department. Later, the department ran an old age home, offered medical services, and managed alcohol rehabilitation, among its more typical municipal services. During this period, staff tailored social service delivery according to local needs and resources, and is typical of how other regions of North America

responded. The lessons of this period, and the realization that other levels of government also had social service responsibilities, led many citizens to recognize the value of comprehensive, forward-looking social and community development planning.

**“At its root, the motivation for social planning lies in human rights and social justice.”**

The formal process of social planning grew in Vancouver in the 1950s and 1960s and culminated in 1966 when City Council approved the Department of Social Planning and Community Development. The new department, with a modest initial budget, built on the decades of social development work in the region. Early projects for the new department included backing Strathcona's Neighbourhood Improvement Program, funding the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, and improving hotel conditions in Gastown and Chinatown. The formation of the Social Planning Department also established sufficient validity and continuity to allow the department to expand its programming to include the sponsorship of a variety of arts and cultural initiatives.

In the 1970s, social planning in the region developed into several distinct streams. Social planners worked with other departments and community groups to strategically influence cultural planning, housing issues, social issues related to development, and community service

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es, like programs for people with disabilities, youth activities, and addictions services.

This type of work carried over into the 1980s and 1990s, when social planning organizations and projects proliferated across the region and began to take hold in other larger communities in B.C., like Kelowna and Victoria. These efforts fostered broad recognition that the processes of social planning were a fundamental aspect of planning for complete communities.

In fact, it can be argued that social sustainability—an increasingly popular model for social policy—can only be achieved and properly conceived of within a social planning framework. The region's path from the City of Vancouver running a day nursery in 1908, to forming the Social Issues Subcommittee of the GVRD in the 1990s is representative of not only the maturation of social policy across Canada over the same period, but also of the growing need for comprehensive, inclusive, and collaborative responses to social issues.

### **Social planning is a keystone of social sustainability**

Still, social planning faces many challenges. Increasing economic inequities, more restrictive and exclusionary global political and economic temperament, and rising costs of living mean that a concerted, organized local-level effort to improve quality of life is more difficult—and perhaps more important—than ever. Social planning organizations across North America are tackling a wide spectrum of social issues, including affordable housing, childcare, youth issues, homelessness, food policy, social exclusion, new-

comer integration, addiction services, senior care, and the vibrancy of social, cultural, and physical environments.

In many ways, the uptake of social planning by municipalities and community organizations demonstrates a commitment to a process by which to “restructure and refurbish” our communities. That citizens' groups and municipalities have embraced social planning in order to improve the quality of life for everyone in our communities indicates that Canadians still value community-level social policy. We must remain committed to the populist roots on which our nation was built and develop, through social planning, happier, healthier, and more sustainable communities. ■

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### **THE POLITICAL QUESTION WITH SOCIAL PLANNING**

As a footnote to this article, it is important to note that many elected councils are still uncomfortable with municipal involvement in social planning and with participating in local social service delivery programs. This is largely due to the continued perception that social services are the responsibility of senior-level governments. Further, while many communities recognize that they have a responsibility to ensure the development of sustainable and healthy communities, a dire need exists across Canada for the financial resources to assist municipalities in social service initiatives, particularly if current social planning efforts are to achieve the expected results of a decade of previous investments.

This debate has already begun in many municipalities and regions and is expected to last over the coming years. Many leaders are coming to realize that social capital and investment is an important building block for the creation of livable communities for today and the future.