

# "Community Pilots"

## The Way Ahead

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**M**unicipal planners are now key players in economic development. We have observed that planners are responding to the challenge of economic development and real estate re-use in many different ways. Not all planners are comfortable, or prepared to take on the added duties and responsibilities which an economic development mandate entails. Some find the transition difficult and retreat to the comfort of regulation and control. Ontario municipalities need action-oriented planners. This article profiles four types of planning behavior, and suggests a model for self-development.

### Four Types Of Planners

Understanding the behavior of municipal planners involved in economic development can provide valuable lessons for those facing the same challenges. Four profiles, ranging from the "Community Policeman" to the "Real Estate Cowboy", typify the broad cross-section of planners currently dealing with economic development in Ontario communities.

- The "**Community Policeman**" is quickly disappearing, but is still among us. The prevailing attitude is one of suspicion and mistrust, arising from a regulator mentality. The "Policemen" often view themselves as guardians of the community's virtue, and tend to be inflexible in their interpretation of development policies and regulations.
- The "**Cautious Progressive**" categorizes many of today's planners. They are open-minded and interested in guiding growth and the resulting changes in their communities. Often their ability is hindered, however, by a lack of market and financial expertise. As a result, "Cautious Progressives" can be slow to respond to "hot" opportunities as they generally lack the experience and confidence to be pro-active. In order to gain assistance in decision-making, the "Cautious Progressive" will often retain a consultant to provide an expert opinion.
- The "**New Wave Planners**" describes the growing mainstream in Ontario. The "New Waver" starts with the same open attitude as the "Cautious Progressive" but tends to have

a more positive outlook. These planners stress data collection and micro analysis. Unfortunately, they often view a development in isolation. There is a risk that the "New Waver" will become "data jammed" and lose sight of the overall strategy.

- The "Real Estate Cowboy/Cowgirl" sees himself/herself as a superstar breaking new ground. As a group, they are reactive and jump on a good idea with a view to the short term only. The Cowboy/Cowgirl is very much project oriented, and goes for the quick deal in search of immediate success or gain, without much thought to an overall strategy. A weakness often observed with this type of planner is their vulnerability as a lone wolf/high risk taker.

Each of these planner profiles has its weaknesses and bias, yet many of these characteristics exist among planners in Ontario municipalities. The opportunity exists to re-orient planners toward adapting a more strategic role in addressing the challenge of economic development. We call this new role - the "Community Pilot" and recommend it as a model for staff development.

### The Community Pilot

The "Community Pilot" has four main strengths:

- A **pro-active attitude** merges the intensity of the Cowboy/Cowgirl and the experience of the Policeman. Having the necessary economic data base and development information available makes the task of merging planning and economic development easier.
- A **strategic outlook**. Planning a strategy ahead of time and evaluating each opportunity in the context of that strategy encourages rational and confident decisions.
- An **awareness of the working environment**. Knowledge of the political scene, economic activity and market trends both in your community and at a broader level will enhance success. The value of keeping tabs on these factors will be borne out in the long run.
- A **creative and open approach** to meeting the needs of the public and private sectors and a willingness to consider progressive designs and mixing of uses is key.

To capture it in one phrase, the Community Pilot measures a development proposal by its fit with the community's development strategy.

Without this, municipal planners will be frustrated in their attempts to deal with planning and economic development issues, and may find themselves backing unproductive or inappropriate proposals.

### How To Groom Yourself/Your Staff

You now have a role model. The question remains; how to adopt it?

1. **Develop the expertise** by reviewing and understanding feasibility studies, and examples of policy and re-zoning applications from other municipalities. Also, treat your exposure to developers and industry as a learning experience. Above all, ask questions!

2. **Maintain a comprehensive data base**. Tracking of market trends in assessment, rents, and sales in both your own and competitive communities can provide a critical advantage in negotiations. Similarly, demographic data on existing labour force, employment and employers is invaluable in targeting potential activity. All sources of information should be explored.

3. **Develop a strategy**. Comprehensive strategies should be devised for the residential, industrial and commercial sectors. Base this strategy on realistic market assessment and community wide goals and see that it is tested regularly as conditions change.

4. **Build awareness and develop contacts** through field trips, attendance at conferences and membership in organizations such as the Ontario Professional Planners Institute, the Urban Land Institute, the Urban Development Institute, the Ontario Industrial Development Council and the American Economic Development Council.

### Ontario Needs More Community Pilots

The rewards of adopting the "Community Pilot" role model can be immense, both for you and your staff, and your community. Tops on the list for individual planners is job satisfaction stemming from the challenge of working at a higher level, making greater contributions to the community and an exposure to a wider variety of projects. Further, the municipality benefits from the enhanced skills and perspective which the planner cum community pilot can provide.

Finally, but equally important, is that these efforts can go a long way to enhance the image of planners as being receptive, informative and effective as development advisors to their municipalities.