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CPAA 2019 Student Essay

Intersection of Planning and Politics

**Broadening a Perspective on the Collaborative Work Within Cities
and Tackling Affordable Housing.**

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Prior to the 2019 Community Planning Association of Alberta conference, I had a narrow perspective on the conference, its presenters and participants, and topics. As a student at the University of Lethbridge in Urban and Regional Studies, I was eager to learn more about the industry and the conference provided a great step in this direction. My knowledge and understanding of planning had been, to date, shaped by the perspectives at the University of Lethbridge; for me a positive, stimulating and insightful academic environment. (I know I'm young and eager, but I love planning and development!) The conference was an opportunity to open my mind further and discover more on planning, the industry, and the various ways of evaluating topics. On these points, I had never considered the intersection of planning and politics. My knowledge of planning is rooted more in the history of planning and applying historical context to current development issues. To date, I have not considered extensively planning's connection and interaction with the political sphere. I made the connection that politics is linked to planning, as most social and economic issues are, but I never understood the importance of politics in planning. Through the CPAA conference, I was able to broaden my knowledge and learn more about the industry.

The conference provided a large selection of current and contemporary planning issues. Each issue or topic presented a variety of challenges and an equal number of solutions; in part owing to the presenters and their backgrounds. I was personally drawn towards development topics in cities and municipalities. For example, densification and affordable housing. I believe the topic of the conference - intersection of planning and politics – is acutely present in cities and municipalities; planners must work with politicians to achieve a final goal under the critical eye

of taxpayers and the media. It is important to question how valuable a city's development and urban plans are to a politician. Do politicians truly prioritize planning and development? Is it important for their political vitality and can their city's be positively impacted through the development of affordable housing and densification?

I was excited to attend the Liisa Tipman and Jared Copping panel on *Striving Towards Consensus: The Calgary Metropolitan Region Board (CMRB)*. Their talk was appealing because they stressed the importance of evaluating all aspects of a community. This quotation was taken from the summary of their presentation and depicts the goals of the CMRB - *promoting long-term sustainability, ensure environmentally responsible land-use planning, growth management and efficient use of land, develop policies regarding the coordination of regional infrastructure and promoting the economic well-being and competitiveness of the Calgary Metropolitan Region*. I found their goals to be very comparable to the CPAA vision. Liisa and Jared are working towards allowing each industry within their city to have their voice heard through understanding the value of every industry within a city. For example, allowing planners to develop/redevelop areas and promote a healthy balance between new infrastructure and the well-being of the economy. Allowing politics to have a voice by ensuring the concerns of future infrastructure are heard and accurate policies are implemented. CMRB values the growth of Calgary and wants to ensure that every aspect of the city is accounted for. Liisa and Jared understood the value of a city's internal infrastructure, not only to planners but to politicians. I believe the work they are undertaking and implementing is very important to the city's future. In order to solve issues within a city or municipality, there must be a leader (or leadership) who can ensure that every industry's needs are accounted in the decision-making process. To amplify further, Liisa and Jared presented an Interim Growth Plan (IGP). The plan is focused on

collaboration. The IGP follows a detailed approval process ensuring that every planning item is documented and addressed. Liisa and Jared were very informative; I gained knowledge and understanding that there is more to planning than background/historical context and final redevelopment plans. The in-between steps, which account for the initial ideas to the approval process, are what brings the final product to life.

The next topic I felt was valuable were the various talks on affordable housing. Affordable housing is a large issue that every city and municipality confronts. As a young adult, it is intimidating to consider the future and know the opportunities to purchase a house, or find suitable housing, are becoming more and more limited and challenging. Patricia Maloney and Kristen Harder from Dillon Consulting Ltd presented an insightful and relevant discussion - *The Affordable Housing Conundrum*. Homelessness is an ongoing issue in our cities and requires constant attention. However, as our economy changes, so does the rental market. Patricia and Kristen stressed the importance of a changing housing market. It is not just the homeless or unemployed looking for housing but rather minimum wage workers, and our economy depends on and needs everyone. Can a city be impacted positively or negatively through the development, or lack of development, of affordable housing?

I have previously discussed and reviewed images similar to the one below, although, I never evaluated them in the way Patricia and Kristen described. The image is simple and easy to understand. However, since it is becoming harder to own a home, many individuals transition to the rental market. This cycle continues until the homeless and unemployed are pushed out of the chart and off the spectrum.

Housing Spectrum



Addressing affordable housing is important not only to planners but to those involved in politics. Since minimum wage workers are starting to slip into social housing categories, it creates demand for more rental opportunities. However, urban sprawl (excessively large homes for wealthy segments 30 minutes outside of a central business district) can complicate and compromise inner city living and affordability. Affordable housing is a constant and growing issue and it is important that all members of the planning community (including politicians) work together to solve this issue.

I believe that a city can be positively impacted through improvements to affordable housing. If individuals are able to have more access to affordable housing then that would begin to alleviate stress on social housing, support services and homelessness. The spectrum of housing options would be complete and protected, creating economic opportunities for everyone along the spectrum, not just people requiring places to live but businesses servicing the various segments.

Is it possible that Liisa and Jared's IGP strategies could be applied province-wide? I am sensing that other municipalities might have similar collaboration strategies. Would it be smart to legislate these strategies and create a legal structure around them? In light of the opposition to

the federal government's Bill C69, it is doubtful any political leader in Alberta would advocate such a strategy. Maybe the best solution is to keep the dialogue going and have our political leaders at the table more, whether it's conferences, at universities, or in other places where planning topics are being discussed. If political leaders can connect the importance of planning to votes and voters, perhaps it will become an important priority. I believe the work Liisa and Jared are implementing is important to Calgary and the planning community. If municipalities could implement similar plans, and political leaders could take ownership, it would stimulate true and real collaboration, consensus and progress.

How would I solve affordable housing? I do not believe there is one solution to solve affordable housing. However, awareness of the housing spectrum would help all stakeholders to see the problem. Everyone is impacted including businesses and wealthy neighbourhoods. Maybe one idea is for affordable housing to be viewed as an opportunity, not a problem. If everyone within the industry acknowledges the importance of change then everyone could collaborate and participate on a solution. It's an opportunity and positive things can happen to the economy.

There are many examples throughout Alberta of developments that have provided affordable housing. Often, the options for rental properties are old, outdated and the least desirable. However, if newly constructed apartment buildings and townhouse complexes are developed as rental properties, it can bring minimum wage workers to these developments and enrich the spectrum noted above.

Considering the CMRB, it is apparent the goal of Liisa and Jared's work is to evoke collaboration among all industries involved in planning, including political leadership. And in a similar way, affordable housing is also a wide community touchpoint, affecting everyone and

demanding leadership. In the end, that is the primary take-away from the CPAA 2019 conference. Every challenge and every solution needs the work of all citizens; especially planners and politicians coming together and sharing their backgrounds. Through this, solutions can be implemented, and the challenges of development, infrastructure and affordable housing would get resolved.

I am grateful to have attended the CPAA 2019 conference. I was able to expand my knowledge of planning and learn more about the industry and relevant issues that need to be addressed in today's economy. I am eager to take what I have learned at the conference and apply it to my final year at the University of Lethbridge. Specifically, I am excited for the first week of classes and sharing my experiences at your conference. Thank you for letting me be a part of it!