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A Public Planning Perspective on Strategic Planning

Jerome L. Kaufman and Harvey M. Jacobs

Strategic planning based on corporate practice is being put forward and used as an approach to more effective communitywide public planning. This article critically assesses the approach by comparing it to ideas common in the planning literature and by interviewing practitioners exposed to exercises in corporate-style strategic planning in their communities. We conclude that most of the ideas subsumed in this approach have been a part of planning education for decades and that most practitioners trained as planners view the approach as "old wine in new bottles." Nevertheless, we argue that planners should view the new popularity of corporate-style strategic planning as an opportunity to revive interest in planning.

Twenty-five years ago, at a planning conference session on the newly minted Community Renewal Program—in which many in the room spoke enthusiastically about the potential of this new program—a skeptic got up and stated bluntly: "The Community Renewal Program is just the latest fad to hit town. Sooner or later it, too, will fade away into oblivion." Whether or not the corporate strategic planning approach to planning in the public sector will prove to have been another passing fad remains to be seen. But there is no doubt that it is the center of a lot of attention nowadays.

In the past five years a rash of articles have called on state and local governments to use the strategic planning approach developed in the corporate world (Olsen and Eadie 1982; Eadie 1983; Boyle 1983; Sorkin, Ferris, and Hudak 1984; Toft 1984; Denhardt 1985; Bryson, Van de Ven, and Roering 1986; Eadie and Steinbacher 1985; Tomazinis 1985). During the same period, strategic plans based on the corporate model have been undertaken for an increasing number of governmental jurisdictions: cities such as San Francisco, San Luis Obispo, and Pasadena, California; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Albany, New York; Memphis, Tennessee, and Windsor, Connecticut; counties such as Hennepin in Minnesota, Dade in Florida; Prince Georges in Maryland, and Prince William in Virginia; and states such as California, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The number of conferences on how to do strategic planning in the public sector is also on the rise. Even the Reagan administration has become a strong supporter of the strategic planning approach for communities. A key section in the administration's 1982 National Urban Policy Report, "Strategies for Cities," reads as if it were taken from a textbook on corporate strategic planning, with its liberal use of terms such as "strategic approach," "external factors," "threats and opportunities," "internal strengths and weaknesses," "comparative advantages," "strategic issues," and the like. The emergence of corporate strategic planning in public planning parallels the rise of economic development in the late 1970s as a focus of local planning. But corporate strategic planning is not limited to economic development planning. It can be and has been applied to transportation, health, environmental, and other functional planning areas. Likewise, it can be and has been applied to planning at the regional and state levels as well as at the city level.

Proponents of corporate strategic planning claim numerous benefits will accrue to communities that follow it. The authors of the Strategic Planning Guide funded

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by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (Sorkin, Ferris, and Hudak 1984), for example, contend that the approach can result in getting important things accomplished, educating the public, building consensus, developing a shared vision that extends past the next election, positioning a community to seize opportunities, shedding new light on important issues, identifying the most effective uses of resources, and providing a mechanism for public-private cooperation. Some academics contend that, “when done well, strategic planning offers one approach to the revitalization and redirection of governments and the public service” (Bryson, Van de Ven, and Roering 1986).

But there is another side to corporate strategic planning that directly challenges the public planning profession. Some proponents of the approach explicitly or implicitly fault traditional public planning for not having done the job, accusing it of falling short of the mark. They see the corporate strategic planning approach as better suited than more traditional public planning to helping communities cope with changes induced by a dwindling resource base. Given the criticism of traditional public planning approaches and the growing popularity of the corporate strategic planning approach, the field of urban and regional planning may well face crises of both relevance and professional identity.

It is the purpose of this article to examine strategic planning from a public planning perspective, stressing the application of this approach to communitywide planning, the traditional focus of public planning. This is distinct from the application of strategic planning to organizations, which might focus on how the city as a public corporation or a single city agency can accomplish its missions more effectively. We first define the corporate strategic planning approach examined in this article. Then we examine the approach in terms of its similarities to and differences from other public planning approaches, based on a review of literature familiar to most public planners. We supplement the literature review with an exploratory study of 15 public-sector planners who work in communities where corporate strategic planning is under way, in order to assess practitioners’ perspectives on how this approach is similar to and different from other public planning approaches. We close with speculations on how public-sector planners might view the advent of strategic planning.

**A definition**

Strategic planning originated about 20 years ago in the private sector. Its roots are tied to the need of rapidly changing and growing corporations to plan effectively for and manage their futures, when the future itself appeared increasingly uncertain. By the end of the 1960s, Steiner (1969) estimated, three-quarters of the large industrial corporations in the United States had formal strategic planning in place. By the mid-1980s more than half of the publicly traded companies were using some form of strategic planning (Denhardt 1985).

As it developed, strategic planning began taking a variety of paths. Taylor (1984) identifies five main styles of corporate strategic planning that have emerged in recent years: central control, framework for innovation, strategic management, political planning, and futures research. Bryson, Freeman, and Roering (1986) also distinguish among five models of strategic planning: the Harvard policy, portfolio, industrial economics, stakeholder, and decision process models.

The central features of public-sector strategic planning are captured in the acronym SWOT, a derivative of the Harvard policy model. In general, a community assesses its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats as a basis for devising action strategies to achieve goals and objectives in certain key issue areas. Recognizing that variations are possible in the sequencing of, time spent in, and analytic depth devoted to each phase of the strategic planning process, Sorkin, Ferris, and Hudak (1984) identify the following as the basic steps in strategic planning at the community level:

1. Scan the environment.
2. Select key issues.
3. Set mission statements or broad goals.
4. Undertake external and internal analyses.
5. Develop goals, objectives, and strategies with respect to each issue.
6. Develop an implementation plan to carry out strategic actions.
7. Monitor, update, and scan.

In this conception of corporate strategic planning, opportunities and threats are assessed in step 1 and used as the basis for action in steps 2 and 3. Strengths and weaknesses are developed most pointedly in step 4, but they also serve as the basis for refining decisions in steps 2 and 3 and formulating strategies in steps 5 and 6. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are used together in step 7 to evaluate a plan and determine its continued viability.

For our purpose, we use the above conception as the definition of strategic planning as it is applied in the public sector. Our concern is with the application of strategic planning to communitywide planning, the traditional domain of public planners. Eadie and Steinbacher (1985) and Bryson, Freeman, and Roering (1986) note that strategic planning can be, and has been, applied to both communitywide and line agency planning. The approach outlined above applies broadly to both. The strong history of strategic planning, however, is as a management tool for organizations. It is the proposed application of strategic planning to communitywide issues that is new and raises issues of theory and method for public planners.
The view from the planning literature

Consider the following scene: Two rooms adjoin each other with a door between them. In one room, people are busily at work developing and refining the strategic planning model for use by private corporations. In the other room, a similar intensity of activity goes on as people work at developing and refining planning process models for use in the public sector. No movement, however, takes place between occupants of the two adjoining rooms. The door between the rooms is shut tightly.

This metaphor is intended to describe what we believe went on from the 1960s to the early 1980s in the respective spheres of corporate strategic planning and public planning. People were hard at work in both spheres, but little or no interaction took place between them. We doubt that more than a handful of corporate strategic planners ever read the articles and books that were cornerstones of reading lists in graduate planning theory courses—for example, Altshuler (1965), Davidoff and Reiner (1962), Etzioni (1967), Meyerson (1956), and Friedmann (1973). Likewise, readings on the corporate strategic planning approach probably were never assigned to students who took planning theory courses before 1980—for instance, the works of Drucker (1954), Chandler (1962), Ansoff (1965), Steiner (1969), and Steiner and Miner (1977).

But in the 1980s the door between the two rooms has opened, and some of the occupants are moving between them. Some planning academics are walking into the corporate strategic planning room, looking around, and coming to the conclusion that the corporate strategic planning model has applicability for public planning (Bryson, Van de Ven, and Roering 1986; Lang 1986; Tomazinis 1985). Likewise, some proponents of the corporate strategic planning approach (Eadie 1983; Sorkin, Ferris, and Hudak 1984; Toft 1984; Denhardt 1985) are strolling into the public planning room, gazing around, and arriving at a similar conclusion—that the corporate strategic planning approach can be of benefit to communities that public planners traditionally have served.

Some proponents of strategic planning point to significant differences between this approach and the conventional public planning approach. A few are taking some healthy whacks at public planning for its shortcomings. One, for example, says city and regional planning has lost “its flexibility to change dramatically the subject matter of its concerns, the process of its explorations, and the tools of its inquiries” (Tomazinis 1985, 14). Another is even more sweeping and caustic in his criticism: “The history of public planning is replete with tales of overexpectation, underestimation of costs, and disillusionment . . . [It] has proved increasingly less useful” (Eadie 1983, 447–48).

Rather than focus on the harsher criticisms of public planning, we want to look more carefully at the distinctions that proponents of strategic planning draw between that approach and public planning. We want to assess whether these distinctions are real or imagined and, if they are real, whether they are only differences of emphasis or raise truly new points. We will draw on an analysis of the public planning literature with which most graduates of planning schools are familiar.

What, then, are the main distinctions that proponents of the corporate strategic planning approach see between it and conventional public planning?

• Corporate strategic planning is oriented more toward action, results, and implementation;
• it promotes broader and more diverse participation in the planning process;
• it places more emphasis on understanding the community in its external context, determining the opportunities and threats to a community via an environmental scan;
• it emphasizes assessing a community’s strengths and weaknesses in the context of opportunities and threats.

We believe proponents of corporate strategic planning are essentially correct in contending that their approach differs significantly from conventional planning in those ways, if by “public planning” they mean long-range comprehensive or master planning. And there is reason to believe that that is the conception many strategic planning proponents hold of public planning (Eadie and Steinbacher 1985; Denhardt 1985; Toft 1984; Eadie 1983; Sorkin, Ferris, and Hudak 1984).

But that conception of public planning has been the subject of longstanding critiques in the planning literature—critiques that have been widely recognized. Several strong strands in the planning literature have moved beyond the notion that public planning should be long-range comprehensive or master planning. Strategic planning proponents may be fixing on a model of public planning that planning authors no longer acknowledge as representative of contemporary planning thought or professional practice. In fact, we contend that most of the principal distinctions that strategic planning proponents draw between their approach and public planning are, as evidenced by contemporary planning literature, much less pronounced or do not exist.

Action and results orientation

A major claimed distinction between corporate strategic planning and public planning is that the former is more oriented toward action and results, in other words more relevant for decision making. Yet the call for more decision-relevant planning information and analysis has been the basis of the first important set of critiques of
comprehensive planning that began in the 1950s and continue into the present. Walker (1950) raised questions about the organizational position of planners and the independent planning commission and called for a more direct link with decision making and decision makers. Beginning with their groundbreaking study of planning practice (Meyerson and Banfield 1955), Meyerson (1956), Banfield (1959), and then others (e.g., Altshuler 1965; Bolan 1967) began to argue that, even if comprehensive planning was a good idea in theory, it was largely unattainable in the real world of politics and policy.

In his well-known critique, Lindblom (1959) argued that comprehensive planning was an impossible undertaking. It required more intelligence and information than was ever available. Banfield (1959) argued further that, in many cases, organizations neither wanted to nor could engage in rational comprehensive planning. As a result, these authors and others (e.g., Meyerson 1956; Bolan 1971; Benveniste 1972; Catanese 1974) began to articulate models of more decision-relevant planning that were also more limited in scope, shorter-range in time frame, and more sensitive to the decision environment in which planners operate. One of these authors (Meyerson 1956) specifically warned planners that their role could be usurped if they did not move in these directions.

On this one point, then, we contend that planners have long had their attention drawn to the need for being more oriented toward action and results and have been presented various ways of achieving those ends. The abundance of applied policy analysis techniques in planning curriculums, the actual philosophical shift of certain planning schools in that direction, and the support of planners for middle-range, action-oriented programs like the Community Renewal and Model Cities programs suggest that practitioners and academics have gotten the message. We believe the need for policy relevancy has been widely recognized and is, with perhaps only recent dissension (e.g., Isserman 1985; Kreditor 1985), the mainstream of opinion about the appropriate role of planning.

Participation

A second claimed distinction of corporate strategic planning is that it broadens the basis of participation in planning. Denhardt (1985) is an example of a strategic planning proponent who suggests that the constituency for planning is too narrow. Again, as in the above discussion, Denhardt (1985), Eadie (1983), and others seem unaware of the many calls for broadening participation in planning from planning academics (Burke 1968; Friedmann 1973; Rosener 1978) and planning practitioners (AICP Code of Ethics 1981).1 Advocate and progressive planners, in particular, stress the need to bring people into the planning process who, by design or practice, have not participated (Davidoff 1965; Armstein 1969; Goodman 1971; Clavel 1983). Like proponents of corporate strategic planning, all these authors argue that diverse participation will lead to more insightful and responsive planning.

So, as with the issue of policy relevancy, the call by strategic planning proponents for more participation in planning is not, in and of itself, a new call to the public planning profession. For more than 20 years we have had vigorous debates on and experiments in participation in planning. What is emphasized more by some strategic planning proponents is the suggestion that we might need greater participation from selected segments of the private business community, although the call for public-private partnership is not absent from the planning literature (Catanese 1974; Branch 1983).

Environmental scanning

An important contribution that corporate strategic planning has to offer public planning is the idea of scanning the environment. According to Denhardt (1985, 175), under strategic planning "the organization is not assumed to exist in a vacuum, but rather both the organization's objectives and steps to achieve those objectives are seen in the context of the resources and constraints presented by the organization's environment." This environmental sensitivity allows the organization to do smarter, more focused planning and improves its ability to understand the relative risks associated with alternative courses of action. The environmental scan encourages an organization to look beyond itself in space and time.

This basis for planning fits well with the interest in futures studies in general and the work of Naisbitt (1982) in particular. The world is understood to comprise limited resources and certain unchangeable circumstances that need to be accepted and creatively used. Within the context of an environmental scan, an organization then assesses its strengths and weaknesses. That is, strengths and weaknesses are determined relative to opportunities and threats, which are themselves given and essentially unchangeable.

Although the emphasis on environmental scanning is both well developed and, from our perspective, well deserved, it also is not entirely new, though it is perhaps less well accepted within the planning community. As far back as the 1920s and 1930s Lewis Mumford, Benton MacKay, and their associates in the Regional Planning Association of America wrote plans and developed planning theory that explicitly called for planning within broad social-economic-technological contexts (Stein 1926; MacKay 1928; Mumford 1938). Under the Roosevelt administration, the work of the National Resource Planning Board, especially in its early years, similarly
reflected the importance to planning of broad trend analysis (National Resources Board 1934a; 1934b; National Resources Committee 1937; Clawson 1981).

More recently, planners from many different subfields have stressed the importance of understanding and planning for an organization within a broad context. Environmental planners base much of the justification for their practice on the relation of local activities to broader environmental systems and activities (e.g., McHarg 1969). Planning for air pollution, water pollution, groundwater contamination, farmland preservation, wildlife habitat, and forest management, for example, all require planners to examine resource use and economics regionally, nationally, and even internationally. Likewise, in the field of economic development, planners have available ample literature that stresses the importance of planning for plant location within an understanding of intra- and international changes in population, economics, and technological investment (Perry and Watkins 1977; Bluestone and Harrison 1982). Similarly, in social planning, the definition of key problem areas and target populations for service delivery is commonly based on analysis of broad demographic and economic trends. Etzioni (1967) has formulated an approach to planning in general that stresses what corporate strategic planning proponents call environmental scanning. As noted earlier, Etzioni’s work is a source common to graduate planning theory courses, and thus scanning. As noted earlier, Etzioni’s work is a source common to graduate planning theory courses, and thus environmental scanning is an idea to which public planners have long been exposed.

**Competitive behavior**

Another feature of corporate strategic planning is how it encourages a community to embrace competitive behavior. Its proponents are quite explicit in this regard. For example, Toft argues that “what is called for in most situations . . . is competitive strategy. A successful community must view itself as a competitive product.” In the 1980s, “governments and community organizations . . . must be proactive given a more erratic and uncertain environment where there will be winners and losers” (Toft 1984, 6, 7).

That cities, counties, states, and regions are in a competitive position with each other is no news to planners. It is the basis of much of the frustration in planning; to wit, communities searching for an ever-increasing tax base, the related inability to rein in municipal boundaries, the difficulty in managing regional environmental resources, and the companion proposals these frustrations have engendered: tax sharing, councils of governments, and regional and state land use planning reform (Williams 1970; Long 1977; Scott 1975). Practicing planners have long acknowledged the competition of a city with surrounding suburban communities (Catanese and Farmer 1978; Krumholz 1982). Recently, planners have become more acutely aware of interregional and even international competition for jobs and industrial plant location (Perry and Watkins 1977; Bluestone and Harrison 1982).

What is different about corporate strategic planning is not its recognition of competition but its perspective on that competition. The traditional perspective on competition in public planning is to view it as damaging to the economic and social health of a community. Planners and planning theory strove to seek out and foster cooperative, shared solutions. Under strategic planning, competition is seen as inevitable. Communities therefore are exhorted to identify their competitive niche and exploit it or suffer the consequences.

**Community strengths and weaknesses**

The final distinctive feature claimed for corporate strategic planning is the community’s critical appraisal of strengths and weaknesses relative to the environmental scan of opportunities and threats and within the parameters of the other features discussed above—action orientation, public involvement process, and competitive perspective on intergovernmental relations. This, too, we conclude, is not an entirely new idea for the planning community, though the exact terms used to describe the exercise and the emphasis accorded this phase of planning may be different under corporate strategic planning.

According to proponents of strategic planning, traditional public planning (i.e., long-range comprehensive or master planning) too often perceives the world around and within as one-dimensional. That is, goals, objectives, and policies that are developed and stated in a plan too often seem to cover all topics of possible concern to the locality and assume that the planning, policy, and administrative units of the government have equal capacity and incentive to act on the plan’s recommendations. In contrast, strategic planning is supposed to encourage an honest assessment of a community’s capacity to act, seeking to maximize strengths and minimize weaknesses in the context of opportunities and threats. As with the points discussed above, however, this perspective is not entirely new to planning theory or practice, though it may not be as well developed, for reasons that point up one of the main differences in public and private planning.

The discussion of strengths and weaknesses borrows directly from the economic literature on competitive advantage. In fact, it can be seen as nothing more than a shifting of the competitive advantage idea from the market to the organizational and community sector. At the community level, Tiebout’s (1956) formulation of local expenditures and the public choice school of economics has kept the issues of competitive advantage and strengths and weaknesses before the planning
community for a long time. Practitioners such as Krumholz (1982; Krumholz, Cogger, and Linner 1975) have shown how planners with particular ethical orientations can pointedly address the strengths and weaknesses of current city planning processes and move an organization toward maximizing its strengths. Likewise, certain traditional and well-regarded plans, such as New York City’s (1969), explicitly address the weaknesses of certain city agencies and activities. Other plans we are aware of, such as Chicago’s (1966), had similar sections in early drafts that were later edited out to reduce organizational friction and to help generate diverse support for the plans. At one level, identifying strengths and weaknesses, especially the latter, has been a politically unwise and difficult undertaking. But it is not an idea to which planners have been unaccustomed.

Thus, when we examine the planning literature, we find that the components of corporate strategic planning that proponents say are fundamentally different are not really all that different. Many of the implied and explicit criticisms are directed at the comprehensive, long-range, or master planning model. Most of these criticisms are longstanding within the theory and practice of public-sector planning. Planners have been told of the need to be more policy relevant, to involve more and different types of people in the planning process, and to do their planning within a realistic assessment of the systems and networks of which they are part. Planners also are aware both of competition and of the idea of identifying and acting on strengths and weaknesses.

What, then, is different about strategic planning from the point of view of the planning literature? We note two differences. The first is the framework of corporate strategic planning, which brings all the above points together. It may be true that the literature has drawn planners’ attention to most or all of the points that proponents claim are distinctive about strategic planning. The strategic approach is distinctive, however, in pulling all those elements together into a coherent planning structure. Continuing to highlight the importance of individual elements and stressing their interrelationship may help planners to do better planning.

The second difference is the ideological and programmatic usefulness of corporate strategic planning. By introducing a model of planning that is seen to come out of the private sector, the practice of planning—which nowadays is under attack in some quarters—may be seen as more legitimate. Corporate strategic planning thus may be shifting the debate in public-sector planning from whether to do it to how to do it. In these times, that would be a significant shift.

The view from the planning trenches

Strategic planning applied to the public sector is a relatively recent development. The preceding analysis of literature indicates that key features of the strategic planning approach, which proponents claim are distinct from the conventional public planning approach, are well ensconced in planning theory and recognized in some of the writings on planning practice. But the exhortations of academics are not necessarily guideposts that all practitioners follow. As we know, the gap between what planning theorists say and what planning practitioners do can be wide (Krueckeborg 1971; Kaufman 1974).

For that reason we decided to examine how planning practitioners view strategic planning as it has been applied at the communitywide level. We wanted to get firsthand information about how planners steeped in the public planning tradition felt about a planning approach that, although nurtured in the corporate world, is being implanted in the public-sector vineyard. Do planners see important differences between strategic planning efforts and the approaches followed in public planning? If so, what are these differences? What are planners’ attitudes toward community-based strategic planning ventures—enthusiasm? acceptance? skepticism? hostility?

To answer these questions, we conducted phone interviews with 15 public planners about their views of strategic planning efforts under way at the communitywide level. Each planner interviewed worked either in a community where a strategic planning program was under way or in one where such a program had been completed recently. These planners represented communities for which strategic planning was far enough along to allow for an informed interview. Therefore, they could give opinions about the contrast, if any, of the strategic planning process with other, more traditional planning approaches. It was important to the validity of the study that each planner had held his or her position long enough before the introduction of strategic planning that they could discuss its differences and similarities with other forms of public planning in the community. The interview group was small, reflecting the newness of corporate strategic planning. Given the size of the group, we want to stress the exploratory nature of these interviews and to offer these data as the basis for more extensive research in the future.

In a recent paper, Tomazinis (1985, 14) said, “Strategic planning has the potential to revitalize public planning . . . by invigorating the planning agencies, revitalizing the interest in planning of top elected officials, and helping cities and regions rediscover and redefine their crucial problems.” We read this positive statement about strategic planning to the group of planners as the opening to our telephone interview, asking whether and why they agreed or disagreed with it.

In general, these planners were divided in their opin-
tion about strategic planning. A few were quite positive about its value. Others were mildly supportive, seeing some benefits but also having some reservations. And some were downright skeptical.

One enthusiast, for example, stated that he unequivocally agreed with the Tomazinis statement. Another supporter saw strategic planning as an opportunity to put planning on a more vigorous footing. Still another commented that the strategic planning program in his community definitely had value in revitalizing elected officials’ interest in planning.

Skeptics responded differently to the Tomazinis statement. One said planning in his community was already vigorous, top elected officials already had a strong interest in planning, and crucial problems were being addressed continually by his agency; strategic planning therefore was not really needed. Another said strategic planning “was just an advertising gimmick to sell the old stuff in a new way.” Other skeptics saw it as trendy. As one put it, “Nowadays it’s the way to get federal bucks for planning. You have to use the right buzz words to get a share of the dwindling dollars.”

Going beneath these surface reactions, we sensed that a planner’s attitude toward strategic planning was conditioned principally by two factors: the planner’s educational background and the perceived status of the planning function in the community where the planner worked.

We observed that planners with degrees from planning schools were generally less sanguine about strategic planning than those with degrees in fields other than planning. As one planner with a graduate planning degree said, “I don’t see the strategic planning process as significantly different from what I learned in planning school.” Another planning school graduate put it this way: “Strategic planning is like pouring old wine into new bottles.”

In contrast, a supporter of strategic planning who had a degree in economic geography justified his support by criticizing the planning done in his agency as producing “too many plans that are just damn inventories.” He went on to say, “Just as one of Congress’ problems is that it has too many lawyers, one of the problems with planning agencies is that they have too many planners.” Likewise, an economist who has worked as a planner for many years suggested that “comprehensive plans that planners prepare tend to be too illusionary. The interconnectedness of goals, objectives, and policies is not always clear. Strategic planning avoids these pitfalls.”

A cross-cutting factor affecting a planner’s attitude toward strategic planning was the perceived status of the planning function in the community. Where public planning was perceived to be more vigorous, respected, and involved in community issues, planners viewed strategic planning as unnecessary or redundant. Where the public planning function was perceived to be weak, then strategic planning efforts took on a rosier complexion in the planner’s view.

The following comments about strategic planning were made by planners who saw their planning programs as strong and healthy:

In our community, we have an ongoing and lively discussion of issues. Interest in public affairs is high. I don’t think we need a strategic planning approach.

An aggressive planning department like ours is already doing the things that strategic planning proponents are saying strategic planning does. I don’t think the strategic planning done by the Chamber of Commerce has much value. It’s regarded as a business advocacy plan. It has neither been adopted nor has it had much influence on public policy.

In our agency, which has lots of professionals who are broadly educated and policy-sensitive, strategic planning is not needed.

This last planner, however, acknowledged that in a community where the planning function is weak, “strategic planning might help to invigorate the planning agency.” Likewise, one planner, who admitted he worked for an agency that was not well regarded, saw definite advantages to the strategic planning approach: “It pushes us to be more focused on issues, and it increases our chances of getting things implemented.” Another who worked in a community where planning was not considered strong liked the strategic planning approach because it emphasized community strengths as well as weaknesses. He claimed it had led to the realization that “we have some good things going for us in our community, counteracting the tendency to knock ourselves too much.”

Whether they were favorable or unfavorable toward strategic planning, the planners we interviewed agreed that it was not fundamentally different from good traditional public planning.

Some skeptics offered these contentions:

Strategic planning doesn’t strike me as much different than the kind of middle-range, policy-sensitive planning we do now in our community.

We do essentially the same things in our planning program that proponents of corporate strategic planning claim that approach accomplishes.

Strategic planning doesn’t represent much of a change from what we already do. For the last 10 years in our agency we’ve been taking a strategic approach, looking at strengths and weaknesses of our city, focusing on crucial issues, developing ac-
tion strategies. Strategic planning is not a new direction.

Even strong supporters of strategic planning saw no fundamental differences:

Intuitively we were doing strategic planning before. But we didn’t have a model that we could specifically cite, like strategic planning, to give a name to what we were doing.

Although we’re doing strategic planning for economic development, the approach is not new; the basis of it isn’t any different from what you expect from good comprehensive planning.

Although in agreement that the two planning approaches are not fundamentally different, both the supporters and the skeptics of corporate strategic planning cited differences in emphasis between the two approaches. Both groups seemed to agree that the strategic planning approach tended to be shorter-range in focus and targeted on more realistic and feasible proposals. In addition, they were in agreement that strategic planning efforts at the local level emphasized marketing of communities attractively, packaging action proposals in ways designed to excite the public and policymakers, and highlighting the community’s competitive advantages—all ideas consistent with the private-sector origins of the model. Differences of opinion did surface, however, between the supporters and the skeptics. Whereas supporters tended to assess strategic planning efforts as more analytically rigorous, as involving a broader cross section of the community in planning, and as achieving more implementation success, skeptics—as befitting their label—disagreed with those contentions.

Differences of opinion were sharpest over the limitations of the corporate strategic planning approach. Although supporters acknowledged that strategic planning had some weaknesses (e.g., it can be very time-consuming, it’s difficult to maintain the interest level of top decision makers in the process, and it can be a costly undertaking), their criticisms were decidedly tamer than those of the skeptics. The latter were especially blunt in their contentions that strategic planning programs were too narrowly based, reflected too much of a business community agenda, had much less influence on policy decisions than its advocates credited it, and seriously underestimated the problem of implementing priority actions in the decentralized, pluralistic decision-making system of the public sector. Given their contention that their planning agencies were already active both in identifying crucial community issues and in thinking and acting strategically long before strategic

planning came on the scene, one senses that planners who hold strong reservations about strategic planning see little value in it. Quite clearly, their views are not shared by all the planners we interviewed. As we said, a few were quite enthusiastic about the strategic planning efforts under way in their communities, and more who were lukewarm were still positive about some features of the approach.

Conclusion

It is the purpose of this article to examine, from a public planning perspective, the adaptation of the corporate strategic planning model to communitywide planning. We have examined five points that proponents of corporate strategic planning put forth as distinguishing it from traditional public planning. We argue that the implied or explicit critique of so-called traditional planning is, at base, a critique of comprehensive, long-range, or master planning; that this is only one mode of planning; and that it is a mode that has long sustained criticism for the very points highlighted by proponents of corporate strategic planning. From the planning literature, we find that the critiques and suggestions embodied in strategic planning are longstanding, well developed, and well known. We note, though, that corporate strategic planning is distinctive in bringing these points together into a coherent planning process model.

In addition, we conducted telephone interviews with 15 planners around the United States whose communities have engaged in strategic planning. We found them divided in their assessment of the approach. A few were quite supportive, some had mixed feelings, and still others were decidedly skeptical. All, however, found that strategic planning was not significantly different from good comprehensive planning; it was different in emphasis, they said, but not different in kind.

We are aware of the limitations of the methods used to arrive at the above and subsequent conclusions. Our examination of planning literature, founded in the survey by Klosterman (1981), represents the material we believe is central to debate and development in planning theory. Others whose assessment of the literature is different may find our argument less compelling. In terms of the interviews with practicing planners, the size of the study population was small and necessarily non-random. As such our data are exploratory. A more verifiable assessment of what practicing public planners think about strategic planning efforts at the local level would require a larger group of interviewees and a more rigorous interview structure. Nevertheless, we believe the phone interviews provide an accurate snapshot of how selected public planners with exposure to strategic planning view it today. Further, these data provide a
basis for developing hypotheses about planners' perceptions of corporate strategic planning and its application in current planning practice.3

In the way of general conclusions, we offer the following thoughts. First, recent introspection about corporate strategic planning (e.g., Kiechel 1982; Business Week 1984; Hayes 1985) reflects an emerging skepticism toward its application to the management of corporations. Bryson, Van de Ven, and Roering (1986) and Eadie (1983), proponents of corporate strategic planning, show a growing sensitivity to the complexities of transferring this approach to the public sector.

Second, we stress that, at least in the short term, strategic planning will remain an issue in the public sector. Especially in the area of economic development, strategic planning has become an important technique to develop a program of action based on a public-private partnership. As noted earlier, in certain ways we believe that is good for public planning. In a time of fiscal constraint and possible crisis, strategic planning is redefining the nature of the public planning debate. It may be that corporate strategic planning will help turn the discussion from whether to do planning to how to do planning.

This suggests our third set of thoughts. The public planning community can look at the advent and popularity of corporate-style strategic planning in any of three ways: as a threat, as an opportunity, or as another fad. As a threat, strategic planning seems poised to replace the way public planners have done planning and even the planners themselves (see, for example, Denhardt 1985, 175). Even if planners embrace strategic planning, however, it is possible that, although they may become more integrated into decision making, the planning they do may be little different from the management-type planning undertaken by public administrators. Success with strategic planning thus might be bittersweet. Seen in that light, strategic planning is something to be either avoided or fought against so as to preserve the place and style of existing public planning. How successful this posture would be is unclear, especially given the strong support that corporate strategic planning receives from influential members of the private sector and political communities.

On the other hand, strategic planning seems to offer significant opportunities for public planners. If we are correct in our assessment of the components of strategic planning and its relation to existing planning theory, planners already should be well exposed to its concepts and techniques. Even its jargon is becoming familiar to planners. In this case, public planners should be well positioned to play significant roles in strategic planning programs at the community level. They can stress their skills in facilitation, communication, analysis of secondary data, and forecasting. If strategic planning in the future follows the examples of the recent past, substantial amounts of money will be available for such programs. If they look at strategic planning as an opportunity, public planners could be central to deciding how and for what those funds get used. Otherwise, the torch for planning will be carried by other professionals and groups.

Finally, corporate-style strategic planning may be just another passing fad. Like planning-programming-budgeting systems, it may be bursting onto the scene with a great deal of fanfare only to slip into relative obscurity later (So 1984). That is an unknown now, and we attempt no prediction. Instead, we close by noting that, since it is unknown, planners would do well to treat the advent of strategic planning seriously and to view it, in the parlance of the approach, as an opportunity rather than as a threat.

Ultimately public planners will need to wait for more data before making definitive judgments about corporate strategic planning. More strategic plans need to be prepared, and existing strategic plans need to be acted on. Only then will it be known if strategic planning can bring about more effective public planning.

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Notes
1. The American Institute of Certified Planners Code of Ethics (1981) states clearly that planners "must strive to give citizens the opportunity to have meaningful impact on plans and programs." Participation is defined as "broad enough to include people who lack formal organization or influence."

2. Interviews were conducted with top-level planners in San Francisco; the Philadelphia area; the Minneapolis-St. Paul area; Dade County, Florida; Fort Collins, Colorado; Pittsburgh; Madison, Wisconsin; Memphis, Tennessee; Oxford, Ohio; and Albany, New York. For the purposes of this article, the names, titles, and positions of the interviewees are omitted.

3. A broad range of research questions could be pursued with regard to applications of corporate strategic planning in the public sector. For instance, why is strategic planning used in some communities but not in others? Is it a function of leadership, organization, business influence? Who benefits from strategic planning efforts, and how are those benefits realized? Do strategic planning efforts strengthen the planning function? Do strategic planning programs that involve widespread public participation reflect broader consensus or more watered-down compromise? Is the idea of regionalism advanced or weakened when communities follow a strategic planning approach that emphasizes competition?

References

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