

Executive Summary

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The purpose of this report is to construct a set of guidelines for effective communication which planners may use to educate the public on planning issues. The guidelines are developed through an evaluation of the materials used for the City of Kingston's citizen review of the 1996 Downtown and Harbour Zoning By-Law.

The city's planning department produced a preliminary draft of the zoning by-law and encouraged the public to view the draft and comment on any sections with which they had concerns at an open house organised by the City and the Planning Department. Other materials used for this review were maps, a computer slide show (Microsoft Power Point), and opportunities to sit with planners to discuss and clarify issues regarding the zoning by-law. My evaluation is based on the following materials: maps used in the open house (three in total), a draft of the zoning by-law, handouts, and the computer slide show.

I gathered participants (for my research) who represented a sample of a population that may be affected by the Downtown and Harbour Zoning By-Law, to assess the materials. My sample population consisted of "interest groups" which may be affected by the zoning by-law. The interest groups included: business owners, politicians, developers, restaurateurs, students, environmentalists, historical preservationists, market stall operators and the Kingston Social Planning Council. From these interest groups, individuals were chosen through the process of networking or through the process of "knocking on doors". Participants attended a "session" which was a simulation of the open house which was held by the City of Kingston's Planning Department.

During these sessions, the participants assessed the materials via two surveys I developed. Most questions in these surveys tried to relate to one of John Forester's (1989)

criteria of: comprehensibility, sincerity, legitimacy, and truth. Questions also asked participants

to provide recommendations on how the package and specific materials could have been more effective. Other questions asked participants what were the most effective elements of the package and why.

Reasons for the use of Forester's criteria are two-fold. First, other authors (for example, Healey, 1992; Lauria and Soll, 1996; and Tett and Wolfe, 1990) have used Forester's four criteria in their analyses of communication in planning and my use of the same criteria will allow for some consistency in this area of research. Second, the four criteria enable me to analyse the flow of information and possible information distortions which may affect effective communication and to do so on the basis of a thoughtful and persuasive theoretical construct (see Forester, 1989). Communication distortions can be minimised and effective communication may ensue if these criteria are followed. The criterion of comprehensibility looks at understanding of material. Sincerity examines the true intent of the communication exercise. Legitimacy measures whether the information is put in its proper context. In other words, is the information relevant to a person? The last criterion, truth, looks at the reliability and validity of the information contained in the information package.

The first survey included general questions such as: what is a zoning by-law?; how would it affect you?; and where would you find information on zoning by-laws?. Questions in survey two were both general and specific. Questions in this survey included: what terms best describe the maps; who would you consult if you had concerns on the validity of the information contained in this package; and what were the most effective elements of each material? From the answers the participants gave, I assessed whether Forester's four criteria were being met. Overall, most of the criteria were met with the exception of the sincerity criteria, and the material which was deemed to be the most comprehensible was the slide show. The material associated with the most varied responses was the draft of the zoning by-law. Half of the

participants believed this document to be clear and well written, and the other half believed the draft to be boring and jargon laden.

From all of the responses I received from the participants and my literature review on effective communication (with Forester's four criteria as my basis), I developed guidelines for effective communication in planning. These guidelines are general in nature and include both visual and written materials. Also, certain guidelines pertain to an information package as a whole.

- **Guideline Number One - Relevance:** Visuals should be realistic to show the relevance of what is being depicted. Being able to see the actual area which is shown, will enable people to familiarise themselves with the area immediately. This will aid in the comprehension of the visual. People will be able to relate to the graphic more if it is an actual graphic (or photo) of the area. Being able to relate to the graphic also aids in the legitimacy criterion which enables people to put the information received into its proper context.
- **Guideline Number Two - Contrast:** Visuals should be able to attract and maintain a viewer's interest. The use of colour assists in this factor. Colour can help delineate separate items (in this case, zones) more clearly and will aid in the comprehension of the visual. However, too much colour or detail may distract the viewer. A balance must be sought in order to give the immediate "message" a visual intends to send to a viewer.
- **Guideline Number Three - Senses:** The use of audio and text with visuals assists in the comprehension of the information given. The use of other media with strictly visual displays can help emphasise certain ideas contained in the visual. In the case of the maps, placards or captions of what the map is trying to depict will help ensure the receiver of the message understands the purpose of the visual. This increases not only the comprehension of the

visual, but the relevance of the visual which helps legitimise it. For example, why does this visual exist and why is it important?) This use of captions includes labels and legends on items such as maps. Also, the use of other media assists message retention and enhances learning through the use of more than one sense (for example, touch and sight).

- **Guideline Number Four - Timing:** In reference to the slide show, if some slides have more text on them for viewers to read, then the length of time for viewing the slide should be proportionately longer. This entails that a planner learns and know the particular software he/she is using. In this case, knowledge of Microsoft Power Point and the options this software offers is important to understand in developing a thorough and clear presentation. This guideline also applies to manually shown overhead transparencies, photographs, etc.
- **Guideline Number Five - Language:** Written materials should use simplified language. Although the audience one targets can determine how much technical jargon can be used, the use of technical jargon generally decreases the likelihood of a reader fully comprehending the information provided. If in doubt, simple language should be used. If the document is one which is legal in nature, such as a zoning by-law, then a definitions section should be included and this section should be comprehensive. A reader should not have to refer to other materials, such as a dictionary, to understand the terms used in a document he/she is reading.
- **Guideline Number Six - Structure:** For written lengthy documents, a detailed table of contents and index will enable readers to follow the material more easily. This assists in the comprehension of the document and can efficiently direct a reader to relevant sections of it.
- **Guideline Number Seven - Complementarity:** Ensure that all materials are complementary. If one material does not explain, for example, a viewplane and its importance to a zoning by-law, then another material should. This assists in the comprehension of what a viewplane is and shows the relevance of a viewplane, which are

factors of Forester's comprehensibility and sincerity criteria, respectively. The use of summary pamphlets or brochures is recommended to link all of the information in a package together.

- **Guideline Number Eight - Accountability:** It should be stated within materials who is responsible for the information presented therein and to whom one may go to if further information is required. This creates a sense of openness by showing the receiver there is no attempt to hide who is responsible for both the information and its dissemination. This assists in addressing Forester's sincerity and truth criteria.
- **Guideline Number Nine - Multi-Media:** The use of multi-media helps with information absorption and learning. As with using different media within materials, using different materials within a package also assists in absorbing and understanding the information that is being disseminated.
- **Guideline Number Ten - Purpose:** If the purpose is to inform, then the medium should not override this objective and should not dazzle or distract the receivers. Receivers may become more involved with the multi-media aspect of the presentation rather than the information that is being presented.
- **Guideline Number Eleven - Representation:** Graphics, language and audio-visual media used in planning communication should represent diverse publics so as to not marginalise certain members of the population (for example, women, visible minorities and persons with physical disabilities such as the visually challenged). This not only makes planning material accessible to various audiences but also depicts the pluralistic nature of our environment.
- **Guideline Number Twelve - Audience:** Planners should determine which target audience they wish to be involved in a decision making process. This will assist planners in determining, for example, what media should be used in disseminating information and how

much jargon may be used in materials. Also, determining a target audience will assist in the relevance factor of Forester's legitimacy criterion.