

The condition of participatory planning in Serbia and how it can be improved

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Participatory planning theory, as a system of planning which is sensitive to the aspirations of citizens and protects public interest and values, is present in Serbian planning practice for more than a decade. It has legal basis and methodology modeled on global experience, but it is still very much reactionary model - thus it failed to fulfil its primary purpose, which is to include the citizens in the planning process from the very beginning. This article will address the current overview of the planning process in Serbia. It will briefly explain the legislative framework of public participation in spatial development, the steps in plan drafting process in which citizens are included and the political background of this process. It is important to mention the existing models of informing citizens and show why they work so poorly. It will also give a brief overview on the structure and work of the committee for approval of the plans. This summarizing of the current situation will show the problem of indifference of citizens to engage in the planning process as a coherent group with problems, visions and goals about their city. It will also address inadequate models of informing the citizens and almost non-existing models of active participation of citizens in the planning process. Besides the review of the current state, this article will feature a description of participation techniques from a literature review on the subject of participatory planning that can be applied in Serbia. Shifting the scale from national to municipality level, this article will also depict the opportunities and administrative constraints when it comes to drafting a spatial plan on a local scale, on the example of municipality of Požega. This is one of the rare examples of good practice when it comes to the communication of municipality and its inhabitants involved in the planning process.

Keywords: spatial planning, participatory planning process, Serbia, Požega, legal framework, models of improvement

Introduction

Participation has a long tradition in planning processes in Serbia – it has been an integral part of planning since the '70s. However, the current practice of urban planning in Serbia is characterized by the scepticism of professional elites and public administration in relation to participatory planning. Participation is considered as a relict of the past times of self-governance in urban planning, when planners had more power and thus were more efficient. Along this line, the regulatory changes in the last decade were moving in the direction of shortening the planning procedure and minimization of the importance of participation, precisely in order to accelerate the procedure for issuing building permits and to encourage investments.

Maruna (2013) claims that 'urban planning in Serbia is at a crossroads. Everyday experience of urban planning practice shows that the traditional planning is facing many difficulties in transitional circumstances. The democratic changes and market economy have created a new development framework which requires a whole new set of values and new way of thinking'. For professionals in Serbia, mostly educated in the socialist society and on the basis of engineering traditions, this kind of change is particularly challenging. Even though regulations in the field of spatial planning in Serbia is trying to formally promote the approach of parti-

cipatory planning, we are still practicing the traditional 'prepare – announce' approach.

Traditional definition of planning positions the role of planner as the first one to interpret both individual and public interest. He evaluates and judges them with the intention of formulating them in terms of development objectives as criteria for an optimal planned solution. In this case the planning team is the one who weighs the interests and decides who gains and who loses.

In 2005, the Mayor of Belgrade initiated a forming of Committee to prepare a strategic plan for Belgrade. The Committee members were also the members of the city administration and directors of several key institutions from the city. It was intended that they cooperate with the members of the Committee for the local administrations reform program (SLGRP) and with experts engaged in the drafting the strategic plan. The strategic plan was to be comprehensive in the way that includes not only the spatial development, but also budget planning, debt management, investment planning etc. The main objection regarding this strategy is not its outcome in terms of quality, but the drafting process itself: even though this project was backed up with substantial political support, it did not include the representatives of neither private or civil sector. Thus, the Committee formed of experts in the planning field remained incomplete and

incapable of recognizing and including all interests of Belgrade stakeholder groups.

Methods

The research method consists of literature review on subject of participatory planning, in general and in context of Serbia, and conclusions obtained by doing student professional practice in urban planning department in municipality of Požega.

Results and discussion

Advantages and disadvantages of legislative framework concerning spatial development in Serbia

As Vujošević (2004) puts it, participatory planning is 'based on the principles of balanced division of governance and planning power, decentralization and subsidiarity'. Participatory planning is a process where planners, politicians, administration and public mutually learn (Čolić, 2014). Until 2004, the law concerning spatial plan only predicted one phase in the process where the citizens could be included - phase of public review. Public review is announced after the draft of plan and consists of a 30 day long public plan display. The only way for private and civil sector to participate in this moment is reactionary comment - they can submit a written remarks and suggestions to the plan drafter. Plan drafters then revise the comments and write a document with their stand on the given remarks by the public. The documents is later on passed to the Municipality planning committee which organizes an open session with applicants of remarks, team for plan drafting and representatives of Secretariat for plans. In this phase citizens can discuss their problems and drafters stand on them. Final decision regarding citizens remarks is adopted in the next step, on a closed Committee session. Conclusion from experience in observing the planning process and exchanging experiences with employees in the municipality urban planning departments is that if there are some essential remarks on the plan draft, they are often not accepted and revised. The acceptance of those remarks would mean that the whole procedure of plan drafting has to go backwards to the very beginning, including redrafting and another public review. This is time consuming and costly, and a lot of municipalities is meeting the political resistance in this step because the plan is, from political perspective, seen as a procedural necessity which is draining the local budget, not a chance for better quality spatial development. As Milovanović Rodić (2006) says, 'participative planning reduces possibility of manipulation based on the power of different origin, i.e. it can prevent or at least reduce realisation of illegitimate interest enforced through various forces of power'. Unfortunately, this term 'various forces of power' often include the municipal political structure who fails to see the significance of spatial planning in the long

term spatial development and reluctantly approves more than minimal budgetary resources for this procedure.

As of 2004, spatial planning law introduced another participatory phase called 'early public review'. This was a major step forward in terms of citizens inclusion into process of planning. This was an attempt to give more opportunities for active public participation, not merely reactionary one. The position of phase of early public review is, in the structure of plan drafting procedure, at the very beginning. After the decision for plan draft and collected conditions from local and relevant republic institutions, plan drafting team prepares material for early public review that consist of: defined boundaries of the plan, short summary of conditions from higher hierarchy plan, description of the existing state, general planning goals, planned land use, proposal of basic urban parameters and expected effects of planning in terms of space usage. All comments are compiled into one document and, through Committee, delivered to plan drafting team to have better insight into current state and inhabitants wishes. Big advantage of early public review is that all interested individuals and groups have 15 days to express their needs, problems and existing conflicts before the long process of plan drafting. Although formally very progressive, early public review still has its faults. Plan drafting team is still in the position to adopt or reject suggestions collected in early public review without any formal justification. So we can say that the planning process in Serbia is still trapped into the paradigm of traditional planning where all decision power is in the hands of experts. After the plan drafting we have already mentioned public review phase and it is explained why it isn't effective. These two phases in the serbian planning process are the only one that can be characterized as participatory planning. Formally inclusive, they do not provide active participation of public in spatial development. Introducing the early public review, serbian planning practice made a huge step forward, but faces another problem when it comes to adequately informing and educating the citizens about the amount of influence they could have on the planing process.

Models of informing citizens during the planning process

Participation of the citizens can be taken lightly, reduced to a fetish, or used for manipulation. If the citizens are not aware and knowledgeable of what is possible, in which way and by which means to influence the process, and if the planners are not willing and able to provide that for them, participation of the citizens can turn into a tool for manipulation, control and rule of minority (Milovanović Rodić). Manipulation is in this case manifested by claiming that the planning process is participatory because its basis are included into legislative framework, and the reason behind its ineffectiveness is lack of public interest. Here by all responsibility is transferred to the citizens.

Spatial plan law says that informing of public is mandatory when: decision to initiate the plan drafting is made,

Overview of participatory methods in spatial development

Even though it is often more complicated and difficult to implement than a traditional „prepare - announce” approach, the participative planning and active involvement of different participants from early phases of the planning process represents a good method for providing an insight not only in the state of the local community and the needs of its inhabitants, but in the desires and ideas for future development (Milovanović Rodić, 2006). It is possible to avoid a single-sided view derived from the traditional planning process by using participation of a wide range of stakeholders and testing a variety of different development scenarios through prototyping before actually including them into the plan. These scenarios can be based on different values and priorities of different stakeholder groups, and can address both current social policy or individual incentives. One of the methods that Serbian practice should include more is advertising. It is a one-way of communication, but it is very efficient if it is preceded by an analysis of the target group and if the advertised material is clear, concise and comprehensive. Media can be chosen among newspaper, official gazette, radio, television, internet, etc. Information can be presented in a form of printed material, but also via broadcast announcements and ads. Having this in mind, maybe it is time to consider including the PR and marketing experts into plan drafting teams to help managing the spread of information between municipal administration and public. Other methods include using newsletters in form of promotional flyers, brochures and catalogues, internet advertising, exhibition panels placed in frequently visited public space, info points, workshops, public discussions, conferences, prototyping, internet consultations, choice catalogues, etc.

An example of good practice - Municipality of Požega, Serbia

During the time period 2001-2011. Požega was one of the partner municipalities in Municipal support programme (MSP) funded by the Government of Switzerland through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The programme was implemented in several key areas being important for development of local self-governments:

1. Modernization of municipal administration and institutional development
2. Strategic planning (strategic planning, urban planning, spatial planning, as well as sectoral planning...)
3. Financial management and fiscal decentralization
4. Participation of civil society in decision making processes at the local level
5. Inter-municipal cooperation
6. Improvement of service quality

In addition to the reconstruction of certain public facilities and improvement of infrastructure, the program dealt with the training of employees in the municipality. This has

significantly strengthened human resources and introduced urban planning department to contemporary methods of participation in spatial and urban planning. During the time of my student professional practice in urban planning department in municipality of Požega, I've seen that, despite having a very small budget for the implementation of the planning process, this department often goes beyond the minimal prescribed procedures given by the law. One of the examples is regarding the spatial plan of special purpose „Spatial plan of the regional water supply subsystem Ržav” and advertising the public reviews. Given that the target group of citizens living in the plan boundaries is from rural area and big percentage of them are elderly people, planners chose the most effective methods of advertisement. Besides mandatory advert in national papers, and posted information on info board and website of municipality, local radio and TV, they also thought about places which these people often visit – building of local community center and village grocery store. This action did not require any funds from the budget and the result was high public review attendance.

Conclusion

Serbian planning practice needs to revise its current methods of public participation in spatial development. More efforts and resources need to be directed into education of both planners and citizens. Disadvantage of adverts being used as the only participation method is that they are one-way communication method. By introducing the wider range of means and levels of participation it is possible to educate and empower citizens towards forming a community ready to take part into spatial development of their city. Insufficient amount of money in the municipal budget for the participatory planning is also a big problem that needs to be addressed nationally. Our administrations must realize that inclusion of citizens in spatial development is very important resource that can drastically improve the spatial or urban plan. Even though resources are scarce, Serbian professional practice need to raise awareness of this situation by implementing as much as possible contemporary participation techniques, in order to show just how big progress is possible through effort and innovative thinking. If we, as a profession, continue to wait for the changes to happen, either the better budget management or the change of the planning legislative framework, we will stay enclosed into the circle of traditional planning approach and achieve nothing.

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