PLANNERS' VIEWS OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST

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PLANNERS' VIEWS OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST

The problem of the role of the idea of the public interest has bedeviled planning for years.* Traditionally it was accepted as a natural and necessary guideline to action, a way of talking about the fundamental purposes planning was supposed to serve. However, a number of empirical studies of the political role of planning have cast doubt on the usefulness of the idea.

Meyerson and Banfield's *Politics, Planning and the Public Interest* (1955: Ch. 11) describes the clash of two quite different concepts of the public interest in decision-making on the location of public housing in Chicago. The concept which was used by the central power holders of the city's political machine was what we will later be calling a descriptive, aggregate concept. They were concerned with the maintenance of the party organization. Parties survive by getting votes, so their idea was to appeal to the broadest possible range of individual interests. Their view of the public interest is contrasted with that of the planners in the public housing authority who held a normative, collective idea of the planning interest in which social justice was the primary goal. Meyerson and Banfield identify the bosses' idea of the public interest as private-regarding and responsive to the wishes of working class voters. The planners' concept, on the other hand, was public regarding and basically middle class. While the well-known "note on the conceptual scheme" (Meyerson and Banfield, 1955:322-329) presents these and other concepts of the public interest as equal, the analysis of their case study clearly presents the planners' normative concept as naive and elitist, and the bosses's aggregative one as sensible and democratic.
Ten years after Meyerson and Banfield, Alan Altshuler's analysis of four planning controversies in Minneapolis-St. Paul made a somewhat similar distinction and basically shared the values of its predecessor. In discussion the way the comprehensive planners in his study were guided by their concept of the public interest he argues that

Those who contend that comprehensive planning should play a large role in the future evolution of societies must argue that the common interests of society's members are their most important interests and constitute a large proportion of all their interests. They must assert that conflicts of interest in society are illusory, that they are about minor matters, or that they can be foreseen and resolved in advance by just arbiters (planners) who understand the total interests of all parties. (Altshuler, 1965:303).

Such a concept of the public interest is an extreme form of the collective ideas we will be examining later, though it seems to be less normative and more descriptive than the collective idea of Meyerson and Banfield's public housing planners.

Altshuler contrasts this "harmonious collective" concept of the public interest with the idea of the aggregation of individual interests which underlies market and political decisions. He argues that since actual decision-making is conflicting, pluralistic and incremental, the planners' idea of the public interest renders them largely irrelevant to the decision-making process. As a result of this marginality, planners' ideas of the public interest were not only elitist but vague

They believed that the phrase "public interest" denoted much more than a useful myth, and that no ethical planner would knowingly subordinate it in his plans to anyone's private interest. But these shared beliefs rested on fundamental ambiguity. The values to which planners should be true, the content of the public interest, and the relationship of public and private interests in a democracy were not clarified by them. (Altshuler, 1965:399)

He ends with a call to planners to develop a more coherent normative theory of planning, focusing especially on the most important ends of planning.
Such a theory, he argues, would be a more useful guide to both decision-makers and to planners tempted to substitute expediency for principle in the hope of being more politically effective (Altshuler, 1965:403).

Then in 1979, in his study of Politics and Planning, Michael Vasu again took up both Althsuler's definition of the public interest and his challenge to the profession to develop a normative theory of planning. His empirical data came from a 1974 closed-ended mail surveys of a national sample of members of the American Institute of Planners.

Vasu lays out what he sees as two internally consistent but different models of planning. One is the traditional comprehensive idea taken from Altshuler, where the value neutral comprehensive planner uses his special knowledge of the common interests of the community to coordinate and guide its development. The other is Davidoff's idea of advocacy, where the value committed planner works in a pluralistic political process as an advocate for the interests of some particular interest group. Such a planner rejects the idea of any common public interest (Vasu, 1979: Ch. 2)

Proponents of comprehensive rational planning . . . postulate a conception of the state as an organic whole with a public interest that is, metaphorically, larger than the sum of the individual interests of the body politic. From the comprehensive rational planning perspective the public interest is an operational criterion to which specific policy alternatives can be compared. To the pluralist, the public interest is merely an expression of the policy equilibrium produced by the political process. Interest-group pluralism, as Lowi notes, replaces planning with bargaining and the establishment of deliberate goals with the evolution of policy. (Vasu, 1979:181)

Vasu is critical of planners because his survey data indicate that planners in recent years have come to combine elements of both of these mutually exclusive models of planning. Thus a majority accept the premise of the advocacy model that planners and plans are not value neutral. At the time a majority also believes that comprehensive rational planning is still possible in a pluralistic society; something which Vasu rejects as theoretically
impossible. Since a majority of his respondents rejected the statement that "there is a solitary public interest in which all social and political groups hold a share", he argues that they "have by default left the determination of the public interest to special-interest groups, of which planners are but one of many" (Vasu, 1979:185). He then renews Altshuler's call for the development of a more coherent normative theory of planning.

The thread that runs through these empirical studies is clear. Their authors argue that planners have traditionally used an elitist, collective idea of the public interest quite different from the democratic aggregative ideas of decision-makers and interest groups. Initially this rendered them politically ineffective, and in trying to deal with that problem Vasu argues that they have thrown off the traditional idea of the public interest without developing a logically coherent normative substitute.

Between the first and the last of these studies 24 years have passed, years in which both planning and its political context have changed. How correct are these images of planners' views of the public interest today? In this article we will ask the question of how planners use the concept of the public interest now. The methodology is different from that of any of the three prior studies in that it uses not case studies or surveys, but in-depth personal interviews with 100 planners in five states. Indeed, the question of the public interest arose out of a larger study of planner's ethics. Originally we did not plan to ask about the public interest, but once we began to do the interviews, it was obvious that the idea of the public interest was used by planners and was closely related to their ideas of ethics.

This particular analysis is based on the responses of 48 planners—19 in Tennessee, 19 in Maryland and 10 in Northern California. The interviews, conducted in the summer
of 1982, were very open-ended and the interviewing strategy with a concept like the public interest was not to ask about it directly, but if the respondent raised it himself or used an idea that seemed to be close to it, we would ask what it meant or how he knew something was in the public interest. This was not done in every case. Sometimes interesting issues do not get explored because the flow of the interview would be spoiled by too many digressions. On the other hand, the information we did get is good information. People were not responding cold to a questionnaire item; the information on the public interest arose out of wider discussion of their approach to planning. If their ideas about the public interest were clear and coherent, it was because they were clear about their approach and the principles that guided them. If their ideas about the public interest were inchoate, it was usually because the context they came out of was also.

In general there were three somewhat overlapping ways that the idea of public interest could come up in the interview. Some used it as a principle in discussing some particular ethical dilemma they had dealt with; some mentioned it explicitly when asked what ethical principles guided them in their work; and some mentioned it in some other context. If it was a central concept for them it would come up in all three ways. If it was marginal it might come up in only one. Looking at all three, there were 15 planners with whom we did not have any extended discussion of the public interest, but seven of these used it in discussing ethical dilemmas (3) or principles (2) or both (2). Of the remaining eight, it was clear that four used a substantive principle like equity or the idea of a balance of competing claims which played the same role in their thinking that "the public interest" played for others. It seemed to be contrary to the logic of this kind of in-depth
interviews to exclude these people from the analysis just because they had not explicitly used the term "the public interest". This leaves four planners who not only did not use the term, but who did not appear to have any concept of this nature. They were excluded, leaving a group of 44 planners for the analysis.

In the analysis the central questions I wanted to address were very simple. The first was how did the planners use the idea of the public interest---why did one use one idea and another use a different one. The second question was whether, out of all the ways that philosophers have thought about the public interest, there are some concepts that planners use and others that they reject.

Thus the analysis proceeded along two rather independent tracks which are reflected in the first two major sections of the paper. First I wanted to look at what planners talked about when they talked about the public interest, without imposing any framework from the outside, whether from philosophy or from earlier writings on the public interest in planning. Then I wanted to survey quite independently the range of philosophical theories of the public interest, regardless of whether they seemed relevant to planning or not. Thus the first two sections are largely descriptive. The third section brings the two threads together. In fact, planners do use some particular philosophical concepts more than others, and why they do gives us some insight into the nature of current planning practice.

Planners' ideas of the public interest

What sort of things did planners talk about when they did talk about the public interest? It is not surprising to find that there was no single, unanimous definition. The most commonly mentioned characteristic---a concern
with the broad view, and with benefits to the whole community or region as opposed to those to some narrow constituency—was discussed by over half (61.4 percent) of the sample. At the other extreme, there were a number of characteristics that were mentioned by only two to four people.

However, the 20 characteristics that people mentioned do seem to group into three general categories dealing with (1) planners' own definitions of the public interest, and their views about the role of (2) the public and (3) of decision-makers in determining the public interest. In fact, the possible and actual conflicts between these three ways of defining the public interest were the primary common themes, with 62 percent of the planners mentioning all three and another 31 percent discussing at least two elements.

Planners' own definitions of the public interest included a variety of characteristics. A concern with the broad view and the good of the whole community was discussed by 61.4 percent. A closely related idea was a concern for the future—the long-term effects of decisions on the community (40.9 percent). Not surprisingly there was a good deal of overlap between these two definitions—thirteen planners (29.5 percent) mentioned both; and almost three quarters (72.7 percent) of the sample mentioned one or the other or both. Two people put it this way:

... the planning board's function is, institutionally our charge is the future generations of ... county residents, and that's one of the things that my dealings with the implementing agencies and so on is the long term or the comprehensive perspective as opposed to the short term and the expedient thing.

I'm serving not just one interest group or a few, but I'm trying to give recommendations for community development which in my opinion are serving the best interests of everybody, including future populations.

For somewhat more than half (54.5 percent) of the planners, some substantive principle contributed to their idea of the public interest. In a few cases these were rather technical principles such as efficiency (5 people) or protecting the health and safety of the public (2 people). But in general,
substantive values served as broad guides to action. Several older planners had quite a distinct idea of the nature of a good community or of good land use which guided them. Four planners mentioned downtown development as their special concern, and one which they clearly did not view as a narrow special interest issue. As one put it:

I believe that the projects we’re working on . . . need to be achieved, and I believe that the benefits to the city in both the short, and particularly the long term, will be tremendous.

Seven planners mentioned protecting the environment in various ways, and rather than the one sided environmentalists that one might expect, several explicitly talked about the "public interest" as a balance between protecting the environment and allowing for development. The planner's contribution to striking such a balance would be to do technical studies of environmental impacts and carrying capacity, and proposing ways to mitigate negative effects. It was not surprising that the two planners who talked about the public interest in terms of collective goods or externalities were two of the environmentalists. In discussing what drew him into planning, one described the deterioration of a lake where he had summered as a child

The reason it was becoming [polluted] was because of a lot of the development around the lake. A lot of it was runoff problems that were caused by landowners just kind of looking out for their own parcel while not caring about this public amenity out there.

Four other planners had a concern with equity or social justice and redistribution to low income groups. For three of these people it was one of several concerns, but the fourth was a committed advocate who held a job in which such advocacy was possible and perhaps even necessary. He did not actually talk about his equity goals in terms of the public interest, though the others did; and as an advocate planner he might have rejected the idea.
Several other substantive values were also mentioned by planners which
obviously played the same role but were more particular to planning. One
person was guided by a commitment to good transportation planning, and
especially to personal mobility, seeing it as one of the major shaping forces
of land use and economic activity. Several others had an equally strong
commitment to the idea of good urban design, and the creation of aesthetically
pleasing environments for people to live in.

Most people who discussed such substantive goals as central to their
view of the public interest were clearly influenced by them in fundamental
ways—in their choice of jobs, and in the way they approached planning
issues. For 13 of these 18 planners, the entire interview was permeated by
their influence. Such a commitment is different in quality from simply being
in favor of some principle. One of the urban designers said rather wryly
that his staff tended to think of good design as a "holy mission."

Finally, a third general kind of guide to the public interest that
22.7 percent of the planners used, was the laws, plans and official policies
of the jurisdiction they worked for. Such a guideline has much less substan-
tive content than substantive principles such as good design, protecting the
environment or social justice. It is much more closely related to decision-
makers' views of the public interest, since these laws, plans and policies
derive their legitimacy as guides to the public interest from being
officially adopted. As one planner said of the public interest:

A lot of times it doesn't seem like that big of a problem--sort of
routine little problems that come along that [don't] seem to be that
serious, and the other times you have controversial situations and the
public interest conflict really becomes apparent, you know, when you've
got two public interest groups there. Both of them think they're right
and they both come to the public hearing. I try to fall back in a
situation like that on the planning documents that have been developed
and on thos policies that have been established by the local planning
body, and I try to make my recommendation based on those,
as 'best' I can . . . . [You have to] make the assumption that the
public interest will be met if you follow those [plans and policies], because that's your whole purpose. You've had those people appointed and established the whole framework of planning for that purpose, ultimately.

However, before we get to planners' views of the decision-makers role in defining the public interest, it may be useful to discuss the way they think about the role "the public" plays in defining its own "interest". Planners work with many images of the public, and sometimes a single person may hold several simultaneously. The central problem, of course, is that as experts, they often hold views about what would be "best for" or "in the interests of" the public which are contrary to what the public appears to actually want. Add to this basic dilemma the fact that "the public" is frequently not in agreement on what it wants, and this obviously becomes a very complex issue.

How do planners deal with this? The largest group, one third of the sample, talked about the public's role in an open participatory process of decision-making. The next largest group basically had a negative view of the role of citizens (26.7 percent). A third group (20.4 percent) thinks of "the public" as a kind of disembodied mass—"the whole public." Only 15.9 percent talked in positive terms about the active role that citizens either could or did play; and a final 13.6 percent didn't talk about them at all.

This means that exactly half were optimistic about the role that citizens could play in defining the public interest. This optimistic image is supported by their scores on a scale measuring attitudes about citizen participation (see Table 1). Those with a positive view of the citizen's role had the highest score (3.78 on a scale from 1 to 6), while the process people were somewhat lower (3.44). At the other extreme, the pessimists had the lowest
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<td>Negative view of citizen role</td>
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of the citizen participation scores (2.97). The remaining people who were rather vague about the role that citizens should actually play, had scores in the middle. 3

This optimism or pessimism appears to be related to the planner’s own view of what the public interest is, and begins to suggest striking differences in planner’s personal styles or roles. Thus, eleven of the twelve people who had negative views of public participation also were committed to the idea that the planner should defend the broad long range community viewpoint. Invariably, they saw citizen groups as narrow and parochial in their views.

I have never run into organized public groups that had a grasp of the picture larger than their own narrow interest . . . They can't weight that big a picture. I think that's the planner's job to do. or

[in relation to planning commission decision on zoning cases] I don't feel like these adjoining neighbors ought to make or break [the decision] . . . The planning commission should look at the overall community—the overall neighborhood and not base their decision on what a few people say. Use all the available information they can get, but leave that [the political decision] up to the elected public officials.

This is certainly the traditional image of the planner, concerned with the long-range, comprehensive view and fighting off the ravening hordes of self-interested citizens and developers in the name of the public interest. However, this conflict between the broad view and what the public wants can create difficult choices for planners. The case of a transportation planner who was the point-man on the location of a new subway station was especially striking. He was presented with a petition signed by 2,000 area residents saying they did not want the station. It was only after considerable soul searching and elaborate argument about the needs of the broader, future community that he could justify disregarding it.
In fact, there were almost no planners who were willing to say unequivocably that planners should only do what the public wants. Only one was quite definite on this score, and he represented a low income constituency which he viewed as "the people". The rest included it as one element in the public interest calculus, mentioning citizen participation processes surveys of opinion or empathy with the desires of the community as ways of knowing what they would choose.

Such an idea of a calculus or a balance brings us to the substantial number (34.1 percent) of planners who talked about "the public" in terms of an open political process. The most enthusiastic proponent of this view put it this way

[talking about a major issues with many conflicting interests]: How do you orchestrate that—take all those differing points of view and emerge with what is the correct thing for the city in the long run in that area . . . It is up to the professional planner to bring about some sort of balance in all of that . . . the planning function needs to orchestrate that; needs to emerge from that process with what is the public interest . . . [you collect information but] information isn't going to make the decision. You try to provide leadership in [the planning process], with what you yourself and what [the planning] department thinks is the correct approach. And with always the sense that what you're proposing has enough in it so that all interests can see their interest in it. That's an art! . . . That's what separates us from an engineer, from an architect, or whatever. It is the planner saying: I see this piece of ground. I sense what's needed here from my own training and so forth. I know what all the interests are . . . I've got all the information I can get. Now, how do I provide the leadership so that there's enough of that interest in there for everybody to be [satisfied]. I'm not an advocate planner.

Not all planners were so ebullient about it; and not all saw themselves in this leadership role; but the idea of orchestrating a balance between conflicting groups is the hallmark of this approach. Such planners were optimists. There was virtually no overlap between them and the pessimists. Only one planner out of 26 was simultaneously a pessimist about the role of the public and a believer in this open political process.
While they see themselves as engaging in the clash of interest group politics, as the quote suggests, they don't necessarily eschew their planners' values. Virtually all of the process-planners (93.3 percent) are people who still see themselves representing the broad, or long-range, viewpoint. But rather than fending off the public, they accept the inevitability (if they are not very political by nature), or even the usefulness (if they are), of doing it in a broader process. As one regional planner said:

It's a public service job. There's a public interest to be served . . . I have an obligation to make sure that the process is open, above all things; and my regional interest in terms of the public interest, may be offset by the local interest. But I have an obligation to input the regional interest into. I'm less concerned with the outcome of the decision than I am with the process . . .

The process planners also included a substantial number (40 percent) of planners who are committed to substantive values. In this case, unlike the pessimists, they appear to think that their chances are better if they battle it out in an open political process.

Finally, the "disembodied" view of the public is quite a different one from that of either the pessimists or the optimists. The public is thought of as a single unit, a whole, not as a collection of disparate interests. Planners who use this idea talk about "the citizens of South Succotash". One quite sophisticated planner, talking about wanting to get results—a building or a law or a program, said:

something that serves to (I know this sounds hokey) to help the citizens of ________ more than they were before. It benefits them in a positive fashion.

Such a concept seems to be exceedingly vague, but planners appear to use it as a guide in thinking about action. Several talked about the choice between loyalty to the public or to their agency as a quite real issue, for example. In many respects it is similar in function to the idea of the broader good, and 60 percent of the people who used this image of the public also talked about the broad or long range view.
While there was virtually no overlap between the optimistic and the pessimistic groups of planners, there was some overlap between these ideas about the role of the organized public and the more general idea of the disembodied public. One might be negative (2 people) or positive (1 person) about the role of specific citizen groups, or believe that the public interest arises at least in part out of a participatory process (3 people), and still hold an image of "the public as a whole" as the ultimate client. For 9.1 percent of the respondents, this was the only image of the public that they discussed.

Beyond these major ways that planners thought about the public's role, there were several other ideas mentioned by a few planners that deserve at least brief notice. Three people talked about the people in terms of "the majority". Surprisingly, also, five planners discussed the importance of consensus. Four described how in their communities there was a general public consensus on both the benefits and the nature of planning. The fourth discussed how his style of planning differed in his present community where there was no consensus, compared to his previous job where there had been.

Given all these ways of thinking about the public, it is not surprising that some planners use multiple ideas to express their often ambivalent feelings about the public's role. Thirteen planners used at least two ideas. When I asked the planner quoted above as wanting to get concrete benefits for "the citizens", how he knew if something was in the public interest, he said:

Unfortunately, well ... in your own mind after a while you can make that decision. Explaining that to the general public is next to impossible. I never would have thought myself an elitist planner, but there are some times when you know. I mean you're absolutely positive (it might not be true, but in your own mind you know) that what you're doing would help this community or this individual, or whatever, and they just don't want to hear anything about it. That's really frustrating. ... If you think you know what's right, and nobody else agrees with you,
you're probably wrong. However, you might not be, so you still give it your best shot. If you can't convince anybody, either you're wrong or your argument's so weak that you may as well forget about it . . . If you can make a case and if you can convince anybody, then you're probably on some kind of right track . . . If you can get yourself in a situation where you can maintain some kind of dialogue, whatever it would be . . . you can usually find some midpoint, and maybe somebody has to give a little more than some other, depending on how strong their argument is or their information is.

In this short space, he started with the idea of the disembodied public, went on to a negative view of the citizen's role, and finally ended up with the more optimistic idea of a process of give and take. He was also one of the people who said that his community had an underlying consensus on the benefits of planning!

The Role of Decision-Makers

The third leg of this public interest "stool" is elected and appointed officials. Planner's attitudes about decision-makers are considerably simpler than their ideas about the public. Partly this is a result of the legal structure of planning, where planners have no final authority to decide, and decision makers do. Thus, 41 percent of the sample said pretty explicitly that in their communities officials made the final decisions about what was in the public interest. For another 18 percent it could be pretty clearly inferred that they would have said the same thing.

However, the degree to which they really believed that this was the case varied a good deal. A number said that they worked with excellent appointed and elected officials whose judgment they respected. Some discussed "guiding" their officials to better decisions, or getting them closer to the planner's definition of the public interest by incremental steps and constant effort. A few just loyally tried to trust them to decide for the best, sometimes despite evidence to the contrary.
Beyond these degrees of faith, there was a substantial minority (29.5 percent) who were quite sceptical about the devotion of their decision-makers to any concept of the public interest that would find favor with a planner.

Here we can see a planner struggling with this problem:

A planner has as his ultimate client the public... as opposed to the officials who are maybe on his board or commission. Where a local official may be putting some political pressure to do something the planner feels is not in the public interest, that raises some ethical questions, but it's a fuzzy grey line because, you know, especially elected officials do represent the public, but not always in the public's best interest.

Sometimes decision-makers were corrupt or favoritistic in the way decisions were made. In one city, the planning board sued the city council for blatantly violating the zoning ordinance. Some officials didn't believe in planning as a useful governmental function, while some were simply described by the planners involved as narrow or expedient in their approach to planning issues.

Having faith in decision-makers did not seem to be related to whether a planner took a broad view of the public interest. Eleven planners who took such a view did have faith, and nine did not. Overwhelmingly (9 to 3), however, people with strong substantive ideas of the public interest were among the ranks of those who had faith, largely because they had political styles which involved having good relationships with decision-makers. And in a similar vein, even one of the people who had a rather low opinion of decision-makers, said he liked his present job because he worked more directly with them and had more impact.

What about the relationship between attitudes about decision-makers and those about citizens? There were six people who had little faith that citizens would know the public interest but who did accept the idea that decision-makers could properly make this determination. On the other hand, there were five others who one might properly call cynics, who were negative about both citizens and decision-makers.
Among the 18 planners who were optimistic about the role of the public, only four were sceptical about decision-makers. Four were quite explicit that officials could represent the public and another five basically agreed.

Thus, it appears overall that among the 35 planners for whom information on all 3 groups was available, there was a kind of continuum of faith. A few (five) planners had faith in their own judgment of the public interest, but not in either the people's or their decision-maker's. These five planners created some cynical distance from their setting, but continued to work actively to achieve what they thought were important ends. Two no longer worked as planners, not entirely by choice.

Next came the planners who believed either in the public (4 organized, 3 disembodied) or in decision-makers (6 people) but not in both. The former group is odd in that three of the people had a rather weak idea of the public and two others worked for the same regional agency, where they seemed somewhat justified in their judgment. The latter group was made up of fairly traditional loyal advisers with a concern for the broad view of the public interest.

Finally, there were seventeen planners who, in varying degrees, had faith in both the public and decision-makers. Nine were planners who explicitly thought of planning as part of a political process of give and take. Most were content to let decision-makers make the final judgment as long as everyone had their say. In fact, for some who adopted a traditional neutral technical style because of their job situation or their personal style, it was the planner's job to propose the technically "best" solution and the decision-maker's to balance his own and the public's views of what would be in the public interest. At the other extreme were four highly political planners who seemed to want to be more explicit about the balance involved, and did not stress the final role of the decision-maker.
Thus, for most planners determining the public interest is a balancing act between their own views of what is best for the public, and the views of the public itself and its representatives. This is a central problem which came, during the course of the study, to be called the problem of "the Right versus the Best"; the right being what the planner thinks should be done, and the best being the best he can get through the political process, either of which can be seen as a way to define the public interest. This formulation was made by a California planner, but it was raised in similar forms by 43 percent of the sample.

The planners had different ways of dealing with this problem. Some made their best case for what they thought was right, and accepted the outcome, whatever it was, as better than it would have been without the arguments. Some let smaller decisions go, but stood as firm as possible on ones that involved principles or important cases. Some tried to approach the right through an incremental process of persuasion. Some act-utilitarians, for whom the end (read "the public interest") justified the means, were willing under some circumstances to pull out most of the political stops and do battle. A number of planners said that if the best they could get consistently
diverged "too much" from their idea of "the right", they would quit; but we
didn't find any planner who said explicitly that he had.

Perhaps not surprisingly, 78.9 percent of the people who gave examples
of right-versus-best issues used a broad or long-range view of the public
interest, so that it is not difficult to see how they would feel a tension
between what they say as being in the public interest and what they could
get through the process.

Concepts of the Public Interest

While planners, other professional public administrators, decision-makers,
interest groups and the press all use the idea of the public interest in
practical debate, the responsibility for explicating what it is in some syste-
matic way has been the job of political philosophers. Discussion and argument
over the idea goes back to Plato and Aristotle and was further developed by
the Utilitarians of the 18th and 19th centuries, and by Rousseau and Hegel.
In the 1950's there was even a largely unsuccessful movement among political
theorists to declare the idea of the public interest. (Sorauf, 1957 and 1967;
Schubert, 1957, 1960 and 1967). This idea stimulated considerable useful
debate which generally seems to have concluded that the idea of the public
interest is a useful one (Leys and Perry, 1959; Friedrich, 1967; Diggs,

However, there is no more agreement among philosophers than among planners
on one single concept of the public interest. In fact, there are four dominant
ideas which are shown in Table 2 and discussed below (Meyerson and Banfield,

Individual Interests

Before each of these categorizations is explored for its relevance to
the experience of our planners, it is important to discuss one general point
about how the various approaches differ. Every theory of the public interest is actually a theory about how, in some political system, the interests of individuals relate to the interest of everyone taken together. This means that each theory uses, either explicitly or implicitly, some idea of individual interest.

The reason this idea is so problematic is that interests can be defined subjectively, objectively or anywhere in between; and this has a great deal to do with whether a particular view of the public interest is "democratic" or "elitist". If an individual is considered to be the only judge of what is in his interest, this constitutes a subjective view. One may be willing to admit that a person may be mistaken in thinking that some action will serve his interest. Indeed, largely because many policy issues present difficult or complex technical problems, planners and other analysts are hired to provide expert advice about what the implications of possible actions would be. However, such advice need not raise any questions about the validity of the ultimate end or interest involved. Under a subjective view of interest, an individual cannot be mistaken in his interest itself (Barry, 1964). However, it is quite another matter to argue that an individual is not able to judge, or is wrong about what he defines as in his interest. This may be a legitimate stance in the case of a child or someone who is mentally incapacitated, but for a competent adult, this denies something that most of us think of as a fundamental right. This is why Marx' idea of false consciousness, which imputes to people an objective interest which they do not recognize themselves, is so controversial. It is also why Burke's idea of virtual representation of unattached interests is considered by most people to be unattractively elitist (Pitkin, 1967: 170; Benditt, 1975; Flathman, 1975:286).

It is exactly because the public interest is closely tied to the idea of individual interests that many of the planners in the sample discussed the
TABLE 2

Concepts of the Public Interest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leys and Perry</th>
<th>Meyerson</th>
<th>Held</th>
<th>Idea of Interest</th>
<th>Approach</th>
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<td>Subjective</td>
<td>Descriptive/empirical</td>
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<td>Unitary concepts</td>
<td>unitary</td>
<td>Objective</td>
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<td>communalist</td>
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</table>
role of the public in determining the public interest. Certainly the seven planners who talked about responding to what the public wants, would accept the proposition that they do know what they want. In addition, the fifteen who talked about an open, participatory process made the same assumption (overlap of 4). Even among the twelve planners who were quite negative about the public’s role, eight were quite willing to accept the idea that these narrow citizens groups were accurately representing their own interests. Only eight planners altogether suggested that individuals or groups in the public might not know their interests, and even here, they were not often the haughty elitists one might expect. One health planner cited a mistake in Barry’s terms--people may want a hospital on every corner, but this is only because they do not realize that indirectly they are paying for them. Two planners thought that popular knowledge of options in the fields they worked in was not very developed, so they saw public education as one of the planner’s tasks. In a related vein, the planner quoted earlier, who felt frustrated when some group wouldn’t listen when he thought something was in their interest, still maintained that it was the planner’s role to try to convince them, and to listen in return. Two others talked about the problem that what people want now might not be what they would want at some time in the future, and how it was their duty as planners to represent that future. Only two really seemed to think that in some particular situations planners know what is in people’s interest better than they do themselves, and that it is legitimate to act on this.

This general consensus did not mean that planners felt they had a duty to do what the people or groups concerned thought was in their self-interest. At least ten gave examples where they had not, and we will get to their reasons shortly. But by and large planners accept the rational ability of individuals and groups to judge what is in their own self-interest.
Concepts of the Public Interest: Formal

There is one concept of the public interest in which the relationship of individual interests to collective ones has little relevance. Leys and Perry call this the formal concept of the public interest and introduce it in this way

... there seems to run through most of [the complex issues of the public interest]--like a thread--the problem of priority as between public policy and public interest. Which determines the other? (Leys and Perry, 1959:11)

The formal public interest is defined by existing laws and policies adopted by elected decision-makers. Planners and administrators, in implementing these laws and policies, serve the public interest. However, they do not independently define it.

Concepts of the Public Interest: Utilitarian or Aggregative

Probably the idea that most people think of when they think about the public interest is the utilitarian or aggregative concept. This idea starts with a subjective idea of individual interests, and argues that the public interest is simply the sum or aggregate of these individual interests (Held, 1970: Ch. 3; Musgrave, 1967). This is the most obviously democratic idea of the public interest. It is deeply imbedded in our thinking because in a capitalist democracy we accept as second nature the idea from Locke, Hume, Adam Smith and Bentham that people are primarily motivated by individual self-interest, and that through the working of the "invisible hand" the interaction of these separate individual interests serves our best economic and political interests.

In fact, it turns out that this idea has been difficult to operationalize in ways that make "common sense". Although Bentham spelled out a system of "political arithmetic" for aggregating preferences, economists have stumbled over the problems of interpersonal comparisons of utility and over Arrow's
famous "General Possibility Theorem" in their efforts to develop a social welfare function. Political scientists such as Altshuler have dealt with the problem of aggregation of incompatible preferences in a different way, proposing a pluralistic process of political bargaining between interest groups (Held, 1970:78-82; Altshuler, 1965).

Perhaps the central problem of these economic and political models, at least for the purpose of defining the public interest, is that of free riders. A system which aggregates individual preferences through either a market or a political mechanism assumes that people will express those preferences. But in a situation where a commodity or a public policy confers collective benefits, it will be in peoples' self interest not to express their preferences in the hope that someone else will be sucker enough to incur the cost of getting the product or policy, and they will be able to enjoy the benefits free (Samuelson, 1955; Olson, 1965:48).

Concepts of the Public Interests: Common Interests

Here one sees the idea of "the public" not as the aggregate of the self-interests of its members but as their common interest. In the theoretical literature there is a continuum from the idea of interests that all members of a society hold in common, which is simply the culmination of the subjective aggregate view, to ideas of common interests which have a somewhat more objective cast.

Quite a number of philosophers have devoted attention to the goals that all members of a society hold in common. Utilitarian thinkers from Hobbes to Bentham attributed the willingness of man in the state of nature to give up some of his freedom and to enter into a civil society to his desire for security, subsistence, equality and abundance (Gunn, 1968). This same
line of thinking is still being used (Bodenheimer, 1967; Colm, 1967), perhaps because it is a way to explain that all people want not only basic individual goods such as food, shelter, clothing, education, or self-initiative, but also things that are what Klosterman (1980:327-328) calls emergent properties of a social system. These are characteristics that individuals by themselves cannot achieve without collective action—social cohesion, a diversified economic base, a healthful, pleasant environment and a responsive government.

Here one can see the transition from the subjective aggregate idea of interest to the more common one. Oppenheim argues that the preferences that are aggregated to make up the public interest are

the individual preferences of all members of P, or at least most of them, their individual preferences for what they deem collectively beneficial to all, or rather, the preferences they would have if they accepted the collective welfare point of view (Oppenheim, 1975:266).

He calls this individual agreement on collective benefits "quasi-unanimity".

Both Oppenheim and Barry (1964:9) use this idea of the interests of the public qua public and the latter attributes it to Rousseau. For Rousseau the "will of all" is the sum of what each person would want at the expense of everyone else. In the case of collective goods, each person's egoistic self-interest would be to be a free rider, and there would be no expressed demand for the good. This would be the utilitarian aggregation of preferences. However, the "general will" for Rousseau is what people would want, taking their wants in common with everyone else.

Such a general will does not require unanimity as long as the interests of all, i.e. of the public, outweigh those of individuals or groups who might be opposed.

such policies promote the welfare, not of each, and not even necessarily of the most, but of the public as a whole. . . A policy to be in the public interest, must advance the collective welfare of any of its members (Oppenheim, 1975:265).
How do you know that something is in the public interest in this sense? Rousseau's general will used to be thought of as a somewhat mystical entity, partly because it was seen through a rather Hegelian perspective (Barry, 1964:9). Oppenheim says that a governmental decision-maker "must assess, on the basis of the available evidence, what the quasi-unanimity in P (if there is one) would prefer if it cared above all about the welfare of the community as a whole" (1975:270), which still leaves a good deal of leeway. It is certainly true that many issues that come up in political debate have no collective character. But Klosterman (1980) argues that the idea of market failure and of the comparable failure of pluralist politics discussed by Olson (1965) gives planners a well accepted, empirically based model for arguing that certain actions may objectively serve the public or common good, even if they are not supported by a majority of public opinion (Barry, 1964:17), and even if there are organized interests in opposition.

The "public interest" remains of prime importance in politics, even when it runs against the net interest of some, because interests which are shared by a few can be promoted by them whereas interests shared by many have to be furthered by the state if they are to be furthered at all. Only the state has the universality and the coercive power necessary to prevent people from doing what they want to do when it harms the public and to raise money to provide benefits for the public which cannot, or cannot conveniently, be sold on the market: and these are the two main ways in which the "public interest" is promoted (Barry, 1964:16).

Concepts of the Public Interest: Moral

The last idea of the public interest is rather different from the other three. Indeed, as we shall see, it can and does subsume the others.

To say that a concept of the public interest is a moral one suggests that it is probably vague, abstract, maybe utopian or moralistic. Certainly older ideas of what I am calling moral concepts of the public interest do seem to us rather utopian. Plato and Aristotle, and especially Hegel, presented an idea of the public interest in which the interests of individuals
are at one with those of the state, which is the ultimate unity—the "actuality of the ethical idea". Held calls these unitary concepts because of this idea of the unity of the individual and collective interests. Meyerson calls them organismic and it seems to be this idea of the public interest which Vasu associates with comprehensive planning. It hardly seems surprising that they have not been taken very seriously by people primarily concerned with practical policies or administration.

In recent years, however, a somewhat different approach has been taken to the idea of the public interest, which shares the normative approach of these earlier theorists. Writers such as Flathman (1966) and Held (1970) see the public interest as a normative judgement, arrived at by a process in which various interests assert and justify claims that their alternatives would be in the same public interest. Theoretically, the difference between this and the pluralist political process is fundamental. This is a process of normative argument, not the aggregation of interests based on political strength or a majority of public opinion. In actual fact, they may appear to be quite similar.

As Table 2 indicates, this idea of the public interest is obviously the most normative of the four, and it uses the most objective idea of individual interests. Oppenheim presents his idea of the common interest as a descriptive one, and distinguishes it from normative ideas of the public interest which assert that on some issue the public is not actually unanimous but should be (1975:273-274). But some ideas of the common interest, including Rousseau's, are normative, and Oppenheim's own idea is quite similar to that put forth by B. J. Diggs, who insists that the public interest is a moral concept. Diggs (1973) argues that if people live together in a moral community, where they are interdependent, then they must accept the idea that there should be common principles and rules. In both developing
and applying these rules they should consider not just self-interest but each other's desires and points of view, and must work out conflicts in order to achieve fair solutions. This is also similar to the thrust of Friedmann's argument in "The Public Interest and Community Participation" (1973).

Between Oppenheim and Diggs we cross the invisible line between the descriptive and the normative or moral ideas of the public interest. It is no accident that the language changes as one crosses this line. Utilitarians talk about the "public interest", where the word interest derives from and continues to suggest the clash of individual, private interests. Writers of the normative school, on the other hand, tend to talk about the "common good" which suggests both the normative (good) and the common aspects of the moral version (Diggs, 1973; Flathman, 1966:Ch. 1 and 2; Friedmann, 1973).

For a planner, however, the most interesting aspect of Held and Flathman's moral concepts of the public interest is the way it is decided that something does or does not serve the public interest. The decision is made by a process of justification. As Held describes it (1970:Ch. 6), the primary characteristic of any political system is that it makes authoritative allocations of values (Easton, 1965:50). She argues that this is the same as saying that it validates normative claims that certain actions are in the public interest. Anyone can assert a claim that some action would serve the public interest, but any claim must be justified with a rational argument for why it would be in the public interest. These normative claims are then weighed by the decision-makers who have authority--either formal, or informal but effective--to decide such claims. Flathman (1966) adds the requirement that people making claims must consider the impact of actions on others, and must accept what he calls the "generalization principle", that what is argued to be right or wrong for one person, must apply to all other people in the same circumstances.
It is perfectly possible in such a process for one group to say that something is in the objective interest of some other group, but this is a normative assertion subject to justification just like the assertion that something is in the public interest. It presumably does not carry any conviction unless the group addressed is actually convinced. This robs the objective idea of interest of much of its elitist tinge. As one of the planners quoted earlier said, "if you can't convince anybody, either you're wrong or your argument's so weak that you may as well forget about it."

It is equally possible in such a process for an individual or group to assert its egoistic interest, but without an argument for the generalizability of this interest, this would carry little weight.

Analysis

The four different ways of thinking about the public interest do illuminate the way the planners talked about it. Table 3 gives a summary cross-tabulation of both perspectives. The patterns are quite striking. First, almost all the planners use both a normative idea of the public interest and one of the descriptive ones as well. This means that most appear to think of the public interest as a normative process of justification, but the terms of that justification, the kind of empirical arguments they would use differ considerably.

Second, most planners use one primary descriptive idea of the public interest. In Table 3 all but four planners could be assigned to one category without doing violence to the complexity of their ideas. It is also striking, though perhaps not surprising, that very few planners used the utilitarian or aggregative idea of the public interest, whereas collective views were used a great deal. We will see that this distribution indicates that planners use descriptive ideas of the public interest which are appropriate to their particular situations.
Table 3: Summary of Planners' Views of Public Interest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Formal</th>
<th>Utilitarian</th>
<th>Collective</th>
<th>Vague</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Externalities</td>
<td>Balancers</td>
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<td>3 100</td>
<td>26 100%</td>
<td>4 100%</td>
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<td>3 100</td>
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<td>5 83</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37 100</td>
<td>37 100</td>
<td>13 50</td>
<td>0 1</td>
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<td>- 0</td>
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<td>2 50</td>
<td>1 17</td>
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<td>1 10</td>
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<td>3 11</td>
<td>2 50</td>
<td>0 - 0</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>3 100</td>
<td>14 38</td>
<td>9 24</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>1 17</td>
<td>14 38</td>
<td>9 24</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>- 0</td>
<td>14 38</td>
<td>9 24</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>- 0</td>
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<td>Views about Decision-Makers</td>
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<td>Trust DM's and public</td>
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<td>2 67</td>
<td>14 38</td>
<td>9 24</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust only people</td>
<td>2 33</td>
<td>1 33</td>
<td>14 38</td>
<td>9 24</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust only DM's</td>
<td>- 0</td>
<td>- 0</td>
<td>5 14</td>
<td>9 24</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cynics</td>
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<td>5 14</td>
<td>9 24</td>
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<tr>
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<td>- 0</td>
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<td>1 33</td>
<td>11 30</td>
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<td>2 33</td>
<td>1 33</td>
<td>11 30</td>
<td>9 24</td>
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<td>Collective</td>
<td>Vague</td>
<td>Normative</td>
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<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Externalities</td>
<td>Balances</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>- 0</td>
<td>- 0</td>
<td>- 0</td>
<td>1 17</td>
</tr>
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<td>1 33</td>
<td>14 54</td>
<td>1 25</td>
<td>1 17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This latter point is perhaps most clearly seen in the case of the planners who use the formal idea of the public interest as determined by existing law and policy. As we have seen, ten planners mentioned this as a way of defining the public interest and size are classified in Table 3 as primarily using this idea. This was especially true for planners doing regulatory planning where seven out of the ten planners doing zoning and subdivision control cited the law as their guide, compared with only three of 34 planners who worked in other areas.

If any group fits the image of the traditional technical planner, this one does. Most work primarily in jobs where the technician's neutrality was an appropriate, sometimes a necessary stance. But there was still quite a range of situations and styles. At one extreme was a planner working in a clean, very professionalized system, administering an incredibly complex zoning ordinance with obvious professional expertise and authority. At the other extreme was a planner working in a city with traditional, corrupt, machine style politics. He said that when councilmen came in to "inquire" about zoning cases for constituents or friends, his best defense to get them to back off was to ask if they were suggesting that he should violate the law as laid down in the zoning ordinance. Each of these planners appeared to be skilled in operating within their own system, and each found the formal idea of the public interest useful.

The aggregate model of the public interest is not much used by these planners. Initially it seemed likely that the 18 optimist planners, especially the ones who saw planners involved in an open, participatory process, would be using an aggregative model of the public interest. They did all accept the idea that individuals or interest groups could define their own interests. But only three planners talked at all explicitly about the process as producing
a balance of these individual interests that could be seen as the public interest. Two of these were quoted earlier. Eight other planners certainly talked about the importance of the process in making planning decisions and linked it in one way or another to the public interest. Six others stressed the importance of the process but did not link it to the public interest which was for them a separate, definable, often substantive entity.

For those who made some link between the process and their idea of the public interest, what was their role in the process? Two held jobs which institutionally made them advocates for particular interests—recreation and urban design; a third chose to advocate downtown development. Three others saw themselves largely as facilitators of the process.

Somewhat counter to what one might expect, all but one of these eleven planners also said they tried to represent either the broad or the long-run view of the public interest or both. In fact, one planner explicitly made the argument that it was the role of politicians to attend to the short run, and of planners to be concerned with long-run impacts of any policy proposal. If one does accept the model of the pluralist process as defining the public interest, this latter role for the planner might be viewed as correcting some of the bias against broad, unorganized interests.

But for six of these eleven planners the idea that it is the process that defines the public interest was not satisfactory. They could accept it at one level, the empirical one, but not at the normative level, and so they talked about the difference between the right and the best. At least three others were equally ambivalent but not so articulate. One started by talking about how, after eight years as a planner, he had begun to see that he was having some impact in a generally incremental system.

Once you start seeing this, you see that the system does work. It doesn't work perfectly, but it works . . . You start putting together in your mind a scenario for how you can operate within the system . . . I sort of put together . . . a rationalization for how I
can operate as a professional within this political decision-making process, still maintain what I hope are high ethics as far as I'm concerned, and still be able to live with the end result which maybe isn't . . . the most professionally sound decision at the end, but still realizing that if I wasn't there it would have been worse.

For these process-people, having an impact is important and they are willing to sacrifice some of what their professional judgment tells them would be in the public interest to see results. In this they may be no different from other political actors willing to make compromises, but it does not produce an image of the aggregate public interest that they accept as ideal. By and large they continue to maintain a mental idea of some outcome that would have been "more" in the public interest.

Thus, it turns out that only three members of the sample really seemed to accept the idea that the political process could produce an outcome that satisfied their idea of the public interest. Two of these people worked in clean political systems which had a high degree of citizen involvement--ideal situations for the use of this model. One was a skilled, aggressive political actor, the other, a technician, not by default but because her institutional role called for it. Both of these planners trusted their decision-makers to make final judgments that would, in fact, serve the public interest. The third was a not very political regional planner whose most distinctive characteristic was his almost fatalistic faith in the process. The rest of the "process" planners, though obviously not negative about it, did not see the outcome as necessarily serving the public interest.

In contrast to the aggregative or utilitarian view, the collective idea of the public interest was used by many planners. Initially two groups seemed likely to use this idea--the four who talked about the importance of consensus, and the 32 (72.7 percent) who talked about the broad scale/long range view of the public interest. In fact, 27 of these 36 planners
did primarily use a quite clear, concrete idea of the common or collective interest to guide themselves. The other nine either used only a rather vague idea of the collective interest, or, as with some of the aggregative/utilitarian and some of the formal planners, this idea of the public interest was secondary to some other one.

Those who had quite specific idea of the collective interest primarily worked in fields where externalities were common or the political process did not adequately represent the groups affected. Of these 23 planners, only two talked explicitly about collective goods or externalities when discussing the public interest. However, this group included all but five of the 17 planners who were guided by some substantive idea of the public interest such as good design or environmental protection. A look at the jobs of many of these planners indicates why they think about the broad or long-run public interest. One health planner was responding primarily to the political problem of a weakly organized, broad "public" constituency opposed by well organized and powerful provider groups. The other 20 dealt more with "collective goods" in the economic sense. Seven of these planners talked particularly about experiences they had doing environmental, open space or agricultural land preservation planning. One worked to raise the general level of urban design in his community. Four talked about the problem of regulating land use from a city-wide perspective. Three each explicitly discussed the broad public benefits of economic development or downtown revitalization, the problem of a more even balance of socio-economic groups in their communities, or the construction of large public works which had negative impacts on specific groups. Certainly these are exactly what one means when one talks of collective decisions. None involve goals that could effectively be achieved by the action of the private market.
Moreover, these were all controversial issues. It does not seem surprising that a number of these planners saw themselves as the advocates of the broad interest countering the views of narrow, self-interested groups. This was especially true for the environmental planners and the planners concerned with zoning and rational land use patterns. On the other hand, it is interesting to see that the planners who were trying to improve the socio-economic balance of their communities (with one exception this meant trying to increase low income housing) did not see the public opposition in such a negative light.

The four planners who talked about consensus in their communities concerning the role of planning also had a quite specific idea of the collective public interest, one which seems quite similar to Oppenheim's idea of quasi-unanimity. Two, from the same place, argued that there was basic agreement on the need for downtown and neighborhood revitalization. A third said that in his experience as a local assistance planner for state government, people in different communities wanted pretty much the same things such as good roads and good schools. The fourth said that when public hearings were held on the programs he worked with, "I'd say 90 percent of the citizen testimony is supportive."

While of these 28 planners in all used the collective idea of the public interest as a specific, concrete guideline in their work, they differed considerably in professional style or the type of roles they played. They cover the whole range of political styles, with nine planners of the "pure political" type, five of the "pure technical", and the rest shading from one to the other. What they have in common is their commitment to a broad scale, long range view of the public interest.
The nine pure political types are very similar from an analytical point of view, though as people they differed a good deal. All were politicians or hybrids, with a strong political orientation. They clearly liked the political side of the work and appeared to be skilled in it. They all were committed to particular substantive goals or projects of a collective nature. All trusted that the decision-makers they worked with cared about the broad public interest or could be brought to see it. Six were positive about the role of the public and organized interest groups in the process, a seventh saw himself as operating in a situation of substantial consensus. Only two were negative about the role of citizens. These planners were activist and optimistic. Their own strong views of the public interest may have tended toward elitism, but their active involvement and acceptance of the political process pulled them back. Three discussed explicitly situations where they had been concerned about conflicts between their own personal views of the public interest and those of active groups in the community. This conflict did not stop them from advocating their views, but one was quite explicit that it made him especially careful about the objectivity of his research and the carefulness of his justification. In fact, it appears that these planners saw it as their role to advocate the long-term, broad scale view of the public interest, and they did this as effectively as they could. Very few (3) were troubled by the problem of the right versus the best.

Several of these people were old-timers who had been used to working within the power structure to get things done for many years. They talked less than the others about broad citizen participation. Some of the younger ones came into the field with the idealism of the 1960's. Their radicalism has become muted, in a couple of cases into cynicism, but it still guided them.
At the other extreme are the pessimists. They were all technicians, and have a negative or disembodied view of the role of the public. Several were quite elitist, but all except one trusted and were loyal to their decision-makers, which balanced their elitism in practice. Also they were not driven, as the politicians were, by a strong commitment to do some substantive goal. They were generally content to let decision-makers set the goals as long as they considered the broad and long-range implications of their actions. On the other hand, however, four of the five gave examples of the problem of the right versus the best, which suggests that they are not always pleased with the outcomes.

In between these two extremes were many variations. Eight people were quite similar overall to the political planners but differed on some particular characteristic. Three had similar motivation and style but their experience had led them to become cynics about the interest groups and decision-makers they worked with. Similarly, four planners who I have called "balancers" were also in this group. All of them were quite political but rather than stressing advocacy for some substantive goal, they seemed more motivated by a need to balance various substantive goals such as environmental protection and development. Seven others, though classified as hybrids, were less political by nature so that their actual style of operation was more like that of the technicians. Like the other technicians, six of the seven raised problems of the right versus the best.

Thus, for the 63.6 percent of the planners who used the collective idea of the public interest, this was not a vague generality, but a quite specific image of some end to be achieved. And of this group for whom the collective public interest meant something specific, at least half were politically skilled and actively dedicated to seeing it adopted in the decision-making process. Moreover, this idea of the public interest seemed to be more
satisfying to the planners than the idea of the public interest at the aggregate of the interests of various groups. This is hardly surprising, since the collective issues that they cared about are at a disadvantage in such a process.

Using the three descriptive concepts of the public interest, we have accounted for 35 of our 44 planners. What about the other nine? Three of these people will be discussed under the normative idea of the public interest, but six had ideas of the public interest that were sufficiently broad or vague that they could not really be classified. The common thread is vagueness; and it is interesting that all of these planners scored as moderate hybrids meaning that none were particularly political in their behavior, nor did they especially stress the importance of technical analysis in their work.

Four of these planners were vague because they had great difficulty articulating their ideas about planning. For several, the idea of the public interest seemed to be important, but they were unable to define it very explicitly. It is interesting that two of these planners worked in regional planning. By the nature of their agencies, these planners represented a broad regional viewpoint. However, their lack of strong powers and of a well-defined constituency both seemed to allow and, in effect, to force them to have this kind of amorphous idea of the broad public interest.

For the other two, the idea of the broad, long-range public interest served more as a rhetorical device, a way of projecting an image of themselves as planners which was not reflected in the rest of their interview. There may, of course, have been other such planners in the sample, but one hesitates to reject what people say about the role such a concept plays in their work as long as the rest of the interview seems to support it.
Except for this small group whose views were so vague, all the planners who used the idea of the public interest used some descriptive idea of it. That means that they could say that empirically they thought that the public interest was (1) law and policy laid out by decision-makers, (2) the result of the pluralist political process or (3) the collective good which was not adequately represented in the market or political process.

But most planners were not content with a purely descriptive idea. Most saw the public interest as a normative concept; one which deals with what ought to be done. This hardly comes as a surprise. Planners are hired expressly for the purpose of making recommendations that serve the public interest. Not only do they make normative recommendations, but they must justify them just as Held and Flathman suggest. To do this, they gather and analyze data, explore alternative courses of action and their effects, calculate costs and benefits or advantages and disadvantages, or judge some proposal against a given standard such as a set of criteria or a law. Even so, when a planner makes a judgment that some action would be in the public interest, that judgment is simply his private opinion and has no real claim to represent the public interest until he makes a public case for it. And though they don't talk about it explicitly when asked about the public interest, like Molière's Tartuffe, they find that what they have actually been doing all these years is justification.

Moreover, it is not simply logic that suggests that planners use the moral concept of the public interest more than any other. Fully 84 percent of the planners discussed it explicitly as an aspect of their professional ethics. The largest group (38.6 percent) cited it as an ethical principle and used it in discussing ethical dilemmas they had dealt with. For twelve of these planners, the importance of the public interest was made clear because it came into conflict in some actual situation with some other
obligation, such as loyalty to a decision-maker or remaining a neutral adviser, or with their own self-interest in survival. Another eight planners talked about the public interest in relation to specific ethical cases, for much the same reasons, but did not also mention it when they talked more abstractly about their principles. In opposite fashion, nine talked about it as a principle but did not give examples, largely because, with one notable exception, they only talked about rather narrow ethical issues such as bribery or procedural fairness. Their mean score on the measure of the breadth of ethical issues was 1.67 compared with 2.12 for the rest of the sample. The notable exception was a planner who talked both about a broad view of the public interest and about the need for good urban design which went hand in hand with it. He was joined by two others for whom the public interest in general and some particular substantive principle were inseparable. An additional three people used substantive principles as broad guidelines in exactly the same manner as others used what they called the public interest. For all of these six planners, their substantive principle was a guide both in the abstract and in particular ethical dilemmas which they discussed.

How did these planners seem to use this normative concept? In the examples of ethical dilemmas, usually some substantive technical judgment such as the need for low income housing, downtown revitalization, an accessible bus terminal, or a project that met adequate site planning or design criteria was judged to be in the public interest. The planners then made substantive arguments as to why their normative recommendations should be accepted as being in the public interest.

It is particularly interesting to see that in such situations of justification the other concepts of the public interest can all be used as excellent justifications. Thus one could argue that some policy is in the public interest because it met the requirements of the law or plan, or because most of the
public wanted it or it had been worked out through a process of political negotiation, or because it was a needed collective public good. However, in exactly the same way, it would be equally appropriate to justify a recommendation on the grounds that it is equitable, or beautiful or efficient or in the long-run interest of the community.

In practice, there was a lot of variation in how airtight a justification could be. Sometimes a recommendation could be fairly cut and dried. Maryland, for example, has a law that a zoning change can only be made if it can be proved that the original zoning was either a mistake or that conditions in the area have changed; a provision which reduces discretion somewhat but still requires information. On the other hand, justifying a design recommendation, even under a design ordinance with standards, is bound to appear to many to be a pretty subjective business. In a state like California, the environmental review process imposed an elaborate analytical framework; and in other states, the Federal EIS process sometimes played the same role. Finally, in one particularly dramatic case, the planner's justification for a project which even he said was rather mediocre, succeeded in withstanding a court challenge because the process he had used to arrive at the recommendation justification really was objective and fair.

In order for a planner to play an effective role in the process of justification, three things seem to be required. They are: honesty, objectivity or disinterestedness, and professional independence.

In such a process honesty is a basic prerequisite. While 25 percent of the planners did say that they would tend to put the best face they could on their preferred alternative, 52 percent mentioned honesty as an ethical principle and only one person said they would be willing to lie to support a proposal. Many pointed out that credibility was a critical resource for them, and that besides being wrong, lying simply wasn't useful. On much the
same grounds, many people indicated that a planner should frame his "best" recommendation regardless of the expected response by decision-makers. Only one said explicitly that in making a recommendation he would take into account what the decision-maker would consider politically practical, though this may well be done more in practice than the interviews suggested. It is interesting that the case for honesty was especially explicit among planners from Tennessee, where in many places an "old boy" style of politics led to pressures for favoritism which many planners saw as potentially undermining their basic professional role.

Objectivity or disinterestedness are very closely related to honesty and to Flathman's requirements that participants consider impacts on others and make generalizable arguments. Disinterestedness is the more basic requirement of the two. It is a basic ethical principle accepted by virtually everyone we interviewed that planners should be disinterested; that they should not benefit privately from any decisions they are involved in. Planners are hired to be "other-regarding" in Flathman's terms (1966).

Beyond this basic level of disinterestedness, "objectivity" as most planners think of it is a more confusing issue. In some situations a planner may choose not to make any recommendation, but only to provide information to decision-makers. In this situation he makes no judgment that some option would serve the public good, and thus he need not make any justification. But once he chooses to make a recommendation, the process is, by its nature a normative one, and the planner becomes an advocate. However, the idea of objectivity still has relevance. When a planner says that he has been objective in making a recommendation, it does not mean that he has been value free, it means fundamentally that he has made a technically informed, honest, fair justification for his recommendation.
Some planners may go further to argue that they try to keep their personal preferences out of their decisions, and this may be appropriate in many situations, in line with bureaucratic requirements for universalistic decision criteria. One planner cited a recommendation on the location of electronic game arcades where he resisted his own and many in the community's evident distaste in the interest of an objective and fair recommendation based on the zoning ordinance. But looking at it from the point of view of the requirements for justification, he was guided by the principle of generalizability, treating game arcades "just like any other commercial use". In fact, his own preferences would have made a weak justification from a planning point of view, and so were largely irrelevant. On the other hand he could have made the argument that a majority of the residents did not want game arcades, but this is less a planning argument than a political one.

In fact, in many kinds of planning jobs, especially in local zoning and subdivision regulation, this kind of neutrality is particularly appropriate; and it is no accident that such planners talked frequently of "fairness" and "consistency". But the illogic of a planner making a recommendation which he believes as a professional to be contrary to the public interest, simply because he personally prefers the better alternative, would be obvious to everyone. He is only required to "keep his values out of it" if they conflict with what his other-regarding, professional judgment tells him is in the public interest.

So what about the 17 planners in the sample who held strong substantive "personal" values which they equated with the broad public interest? Obviously this means they were not neutral, but does it prevent them from being objective in the sense of making technically informed, honest and fair justifications? Not necessarily. They tend to find their way into specialized agencies or sections where their skills and commitment can make them
effective advocates for these definitions of the public interest.

In a rather similar vein, a number of planners made a distinction between neutral and advocacy situations. In doing staff studies and developing initial agency recommendations for planning officials, this requirement for objective analysis and justification would be especially strict. Once an official planning policy had been determined by appropriate decision-makers, if the issue still remained to be settled in some broader political arena, the emphasis would shift to advocacy, where the requirements for fairness and objectivity would be somewhat reduced. Even so, many political decisions are made not on the basis of twisted arms or traded votes, but on substantive arguments, arguments which must be both convincing and credible.

The other side of honesty and disinterestedness by the planner is professional independence. For a planner to play an effective role in the process of validating normative public interest claims, he must be free to explore the implications of action and to develop and defend recommendations. If the conclusion is dictated to the planner, or to any other participant, before the process begins, the result is meaningless in terms of any moral or legitimate idea of the public interest. This is why bribery is considered the most heinous professional violation among planners, why civil service systems exist and why we tend to look with more favor on decisions made "on the merits" than on those which emerge from a process of pressure politics.

Most planners work in communities where their professional independence is taken for granted; but the possibility of such pressure is still something they think about. In fact, 65.9 percent of the sample talked about it in one way or another. A few (5 people) who worked in communities where the politics were very clean and professionalized, talked about this as a problem in the
abstract, but said they had never had to deal with it in actual practice. Four others posed it as a conflict between two equal ethical principles—the public interest versus loyalty to decision-makers. Again, these were planners who felt that their officials were concerned about the public interest, so that losing on a few issues was a normal part of the decision-making process. However, 17 people (38.6 percent) talked about real political pressures. These ranged from direct orders to change the conclusion of some technical analysis and the justification for it, through more indirect pressures which could be more easily resisted at some small risk, to pressures that someone less sensitive might see as simply the give and take of the normal political process. Such real pressure was much more common in Tennessee, where 52.6 percent of the planners talked about it as a problem, compared with 31.6 percent of the Maryland planners and only 10 percent of the California ones. This is probably a good measure of the degree to which an independent and professionalized planning function is accepted, and it may also be a measure of the likely success of the idea of the public interest as a process of moral justification.

Indeed, the whole idea of the prerequisites for an effective role in the normative process of defining the public interest raises the central problem of the idealism of this concept of the public interest. Just like the rational planning model, this concept of the public interest is an easy target for the criticism that it may be a good description of how the system ought to work ideally, but it does not reflect the reality of how it does work. If decision-makers are not considered legitimate precisely because they do not use a public regarding or moral point of view, then one of the basic premises of the system collapses. The same would, of course, hold true if planners do not do competent, objective analysis. In much the same vein, this process could easily be criticized as having the same biases
against unorganized or unarticulated interests as the pluralist system. Flathman argues (1966) in this case that it is a duty of decision-makers under a moral system to be sure that such interests are considered; but again, if in actual fact they do not, then much of the validity of the process is lost.

To the extent that the normative process of defining the public interest has these imperfections, it becomes like the pluralist process for the same end. The difference is that the pluralist concept, as a descriptive theory, must accept what results from the pluralist process as "the public interest". The moral concept, precisely because it is normative, points to what the process should be like in order to produce an outcome that would be in the public interest, taken as a normative concept. It may be that a pluralist process without imperfections would be able to include collective as well as individual interests, and the descriptive and normative ideas of the public interest would then become one.

In any case, it is not surprising to find that the normative idea of the public interest makes sense to most planners, since their institutional role is largely to reduce some of the systematic biases of the pluralist system. Moreover, despite the trend in recent years to try to develop descriptive theories of the public interest, normative ideas of the public interest are deeply rooted in the traditions of the profession and, indeed, of our political system. At the same time that the utilitarian idea of the public interest was being forged, one of the founding fathers of the fledgling United States argued

There must be a positive passion for the public good, the public interest, honor, power and glory established in the minds of the people, or there can be no republican government, nor any real liberty; and this public passion must be superior to all private passions. (letter from John Adams to Mercy Warren, April 16, 1776 quoted in Smith, 1962:234)
His biographer adds

It is worth pointing out here that Adams was converting into secular political terms the Puritan concept of sin. Self-interest is the political or secular equivalent of original sin. Public spirit is sanctification. (Smith, 1962:234)

The progressive movement which produced the planning profession was a direct continuation of this moral tradition.

While few planners would probably talk about this tradition if asked about the public interest, its reality lives on in the conflict, which they do talk about, between the "right" and the "best". The word "right" is a normative term of moral commendation. Everyone understands that issues of ethics are issues of right and wrong. It has a moral meaning that the idea of "the best", however good, lacks.

Conclusions

Alan Altshuler and Michael Vasu challenged planners to develop a normative theory of planning. Altshuler, in particular says that

One would expect the architect of a professional code for city planners to suggest ways of answering at least such general questions as the following: (1) What are the most important ends for planners to serve? (2) How much and what kinds of information should be required to support a professional recommendation for action? (3) Under what conditions and to what extent should planners dilute the ethic of intellectual honesty to engage in political maneuvers? What sorts of compromise are justifiable? Under what conditions? (4) What characteristics of good planning are so essential that individual planners have no right under any circumstances to compromise them? (Altshuler, 1965: 403)

The data presented here suggest that planners do have a coherent normative theory, and that it does speak to Altshuler's points. The ends that planners serve are laid out in the various descriptive theories of the public interest. There is no single end that every planner subscribes to, but a range from ends set by decision-makers in the formal model, through ends set by the political process to collective ends. However, just as Meyerson and Banfield, Altshuler and Vasu might expect, collective ends are by far the most commonly
cited because these are the ends that planning is institutionally designed to serve.

The normative idea of the public interest describes the process of justification of claims that planners are involved in. While it does not specify how much and what kind of information is required to support a recommendation, it does require that any argument be generalizable, that it be objective in the sense discussed earlier, and that it be convincing. Planners who do not meet these standards will, as a practical matter, not be viewed as credible and they may, in addition, be considered unethical.

Altshuler's third and fourth points suggest that there is a tradeoff between intellectual honesty and political effectiveness. Some of the planners accepted the idea of such a tradeoff explicitly, and others, especially the technicians, might well have agreed. However, a number of the more political planners disagreed that such a tradeoff was inevitable, arguing instead that a politically effective planner would be an ethical one too. Whether such a tradeoff exists or not may well depend on the honesty and openness of any particular political system, but there is no more reason to assume that a tradeoff is inescapable than to assume that it never occurs. It does seem evident from these interviews that honesty, disinterestedness and objectivity seem to be widely accepted as fundamental principles which planners should not violate.

It is certainly true that since Altshuler's time planning has moved more to the center of the political stage in many of the places where we interviewed. This means that, as Altshuler suggested, there are more opportunities for planners to compromise their values and ends, especially if those values and ends are not clearly defined. Certainly there were a number of planners in the sample who I thought probably had been coopted. But there were many more who had not. This was the case, for example, for the planners who talked
about the right versus the best, but they were not the only ones whose concept of the public interest guided them through the shoals of the political process.

The fact that this combined normative-descriptive idea of the public interest is used implicitly by these planners does not make it less real. The fact that I don't know that I am speaking prose does not change my use of it. Such a concept of the public interest is not made explicit anywhere that I know of, though Klosterman (1978; 1980) discusses several elements separately. Among practicing planners it is not a product of any formal training, though training may shape somewhat the way planners see their roles. It seems primarily to evolve out of the pressures of the work—out of their institutional roles, their personal values and their relationships to decision-makers and the public.
FOOTNOTES

* I would like to thank Jerry Kaufman, my colleague, who was a full collaborator in the design of and interviewing for this study. Also I would like to thank my husband, Mac Passano, who helped us with the interviewing and arranged a summer of work at the University of Washington's Marine Laboratories in Friday Harbor Washington, where this piece was written.

1 The sample of planners for this study was chosen in this manner: First we used out previous survey data to see if planners' responses to questions about ethics differed significantly by region of the country. Using five regions, it seemed that the effects were not very strong, though there were clearly differences in response patterns between "snowbelt" and "sunbelt" states. We decided not to stratify the sample by region, but instead to choose five states randomly. In order to arrive at a sample of 100 planners, 20 from each state, we estimated that we would have to draw a pool of 36 from each state because of likely refusals, scheduling problems and people who would turn out to be ineligible because they did not work for public planning agencies. Since some states do not have 36 planners, states were grouped into contiguous units of at least 36. California was divided into two "states" because of its large number of planners and the need to economize on travel costs. Thus we had 35 units to choose from. From these, five were randomly chosen from the 1981 AICP Roster, using a serial selection process. The states were: Maryland/Delaware, Northern California, Texas, New York and Tennessee, so they did include both snowbelt and sunbelt states.

The 36 planners from each state were randomly chosen in the same manner, after eliminating planners who clearly did not work for public planning agencies. We then contacted them by letter and then by telephone to set up interviews. By definition, the "acceptance rate" was 56 percent because we simply kept calling until we reached 20 planners to be interviewed. Logistically, we tried hard to get to all parts of every state, but a few people were eliminated because of the high cost of getting to them.

The greatest weakness of this sample is the weakness of the AICP list from which it is drawn. AICP membership significantly underrepresents planners at junior levels in their departments. However, AICP was used because it was the group most comparable in membership to the old AIP which we had used in drawing our survey sample in 1978.

2 Any study with interviews as open-ended as these were will inevitably be shaped considerably by the interests of the interviewers. We had a one-page list of questions which could be taken up in whatever order seemed natural. How much each issue was probed was left up to each interviewer. The interviews were done by three people: Beth Howe (48 interviews), Jerry Kaufman (42) and Beth's husband, Mac Passano (10). Each one of us had somewhat different style. Jerry and Mac stuck more closely to the order of the items on the interview protocol than Beth did; and for the purposes of this paper it is important to note that Beth had the greatest interest in the idea of the public interest. All of us had a strong interest in planner roles and particularly in political roles, and this was evident both in the protocol and in the actual inter-
views. However, given these "biases," we still tried to encourage the
respondents to talk about what was relevant to them about ethics, with
the minimum amount of guidance from us.

I think we were also generally optimistic and accepting, rather than
sceptical about what our planners presented. This makes the interviews
easier and more spontaneous, but may also allow respondents more room
to manage the image they present of themselves. In dealing with a
topic such as ethics, a tendency toward image management may be inevitable.
We tried to counter this possibility by asking them about behavior as
much as possible. On the issue of the public interest this could not be
done in all cases.

3 The people who did not mention the public were not necessarily
negative. Their oversight may be a function of this kind of open-ended
interviewing. If they had other issues uppermost in their minds, their
attitudes about citizens, either positive or negative, may simply not
have come out.

4 Although these "steps" might have been drawn from a textbook on
the planning process or from a work on planning method, they were ac-
tually derived by tabulating the methods of justification that the planners
themselves actually mentioned.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


