

Sector Connector

Us and them

When I started writing about local government, the hot topic in Victorian circles was community planning.

I was quite involved hands on and soon realised that there were differing views about what community planning is or what it's for.

The reasons were varied, but I decided on three likely ones – the language of community engagement, municipal geography, and corporate culture. Things may have changed, but I'm assuming most of these lessons still apply.

The lingo

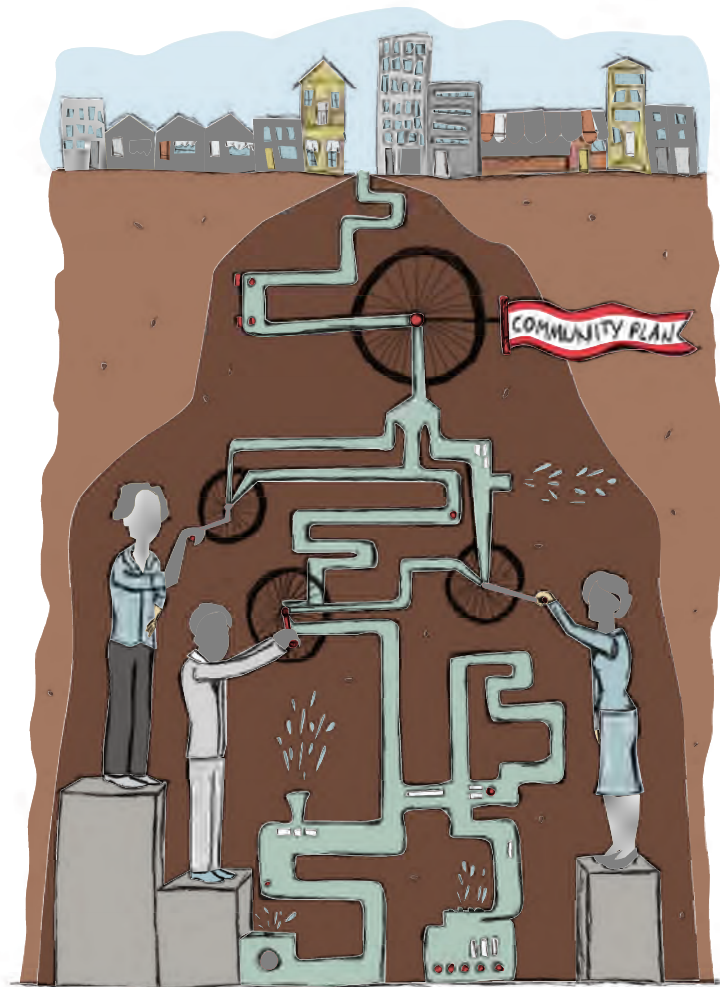
For some, community planning is what social planners and community developers do, largely in the professional realm with consultation to back up principles.

To others, it is the means by which communities are strengthened to do more of this themselves, deciding, resourcing and implementing their own futures.

These aren't mutually exclusive, but you don't often find the same mindset, motivation and capacity in a single person or role. The position description and reporting structure would be a nightmare to formulate.

Either way, any sort of community planning ought to start with community engagement, but here the language falls apart. On the matter of what purpose community engagement, the views of governance, community development, marketing, urban planning or even organisation development professionals differ.

Stripped down, there are two attitudes in the mix. One serves itself, the other serves its others. One seeks to pre-empt, control and regulate, and the other wants to build, encourage and facilitate.



Geography

In the metropolis, community planning is a high level exercise.

Through workshops and focus groups, local aspirations and visions are aggregated into themes and published as the Community Plan, or by a

catcher title. In theory this "guides" the Council, and is used as reference for the Council Plan and its strategies. Shires have a different dynamic going on.

The Council is better at connecting on the ground, and despite small



Verne Ivars Krastins
BSc (Hons), Fellow LGPro

workforces, low population densities and distance, people seem more in tune with each other and local needs. There are examples of community plans articulated down to project plan level, truly "by and for" the people, with community committees, leaders and activists running the show, Council as partner.

Cultures within

Lack of a common professional lingo or of community connectedness aren't insurmountable alone, but corporate culture might be.

For a start, without the will there is no way. And if the will is there, you still need a mechanism.

Councillors operate in an atmosphere of power and influence, so circumstances are a factor. Anything that promotes community wellbeing is on of course, but how well does watching others get things done sit with the politics? Could go either way.

For management, adding to complexity is a potential problem. We rely on consistency, controls, and accountabilities to keep it together, and hope councillors do the filtering well.

The troops below are organised in separate teams and can't take a whole-of-community approach anyway, not without the two cultures above enabling it.

I suppose all I've described is human nature.

But it's a worthy aspiration to think that grass roots community planning can balance the "us and them" of institutional and community interests, oiling the wheels of collaboration day in, day out. ■