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# THE PLANNING POLITICAL INTERFACE: A LESSON IN PLAN ADOPTION

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**ABSTRACT**

A very critical part of the planning process is plan adoption. In this phase, plans become enacted by the political group. Planning schools provide students with ample theory; however, plan adoption is largely a practical lesson, and must be learned by experience. To illustrate this phase and some differences between planning and political objectives, a technical flood prevention study within a small town is described and methods of presentation before a town council are discussed. Although the study was directed with the prime emphasis on communication of the best (cost effective and most alleviative) flood prevention method, the alternative implemented was not the most sound and will create recurring expense for the town's inhabitants. Upon further investigation it was determined that the objective of the political group was re-election, and the alternative undertaken was structured to achieve this goal.

## Introduction

Planning schools provide students with ample theory on the various aspects of the planning process, but, unfortunately, many of the lessons of practical planning are left to be learned in the field. Levin suggested that this is due not only to the absence in many college curricula of internship programs where practical experience may be obtained, but also to the lack of practical planning experience on the behalf of many faculty members [1]. The latter is a more valid explanation than the former, since many internships are spent

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doing menial in-house tasks in which the intern does not deal with the breadth of the planning process.

A practical planning lesson, which is basic but nevertheless extremely vital, is that of dealing with the local political situation to translate recommendations into action as implementations. At no phase in the planning process are the differences between planning and politics more clear than in plan adoption (i.e., the reasoned goals of planning often clash with the intuitive goals of politics), and at no point is there a greater need of training, because it is here that planning recommendations hopefully become enacted.

This interface has had and will continue to have a direct bearing on planning efforts, since without adoption a well-formulated, rational plan is fated to end up on a shelf collecting dust, and the creative, well-intentioned courses of action are reduced to meaningless phrases on paper.

The objective of this paper is to outline several of the problems inherent to the adoption phase, and thereby develop an understanding of differences between planning and politics. A case study will be employed as an illustration.

## The Planning Process

Malone schematically modeled the planning process [2]. The author has briefly listed his seven-phase interpretation below:

*Phase I – Goals:* Determination of clear-cut goals by the planner working with the local planning advisory group.

*Phase II – Study:* Gathering of pertinent data and the writing of a description of the planning area problems to develop an understanding of the various needs.

*Phase III – Analysis and Synthesis:* Working in consultation with the local planning commission or advisory group, the planner defines the needs of the locality and forms the basis for his recommendations.

*Phase IV – Recommendations:* The arguments and needs having been developed are now placed in the form of recommendations for future courses of action.

*Phase V – Adoption:* The recommendations are presented to the political body for acceptance and implementation.

*Phase VI – Implementation:* The political body resolves that a certain course of action be enacted to implement the recommendations.

*Phase VII – Update:* A planning area is not a static entity but varies with time, and plans must be updated periodically to reflect the changing nature of future needs.

## Case Study: Beaverdam Creek Flood Prevention

Although the case study is a brief technical report and not as elaborate as a formal plan, it was selected due to its simplicity and its ability to lend itself to the planning process outlined above.

Damascus, Virginia, is a pleasant little village with a population of about 1,200. The community is nestled in a narrow, mountainous river valley surrounded by steep knobs and mountain ranges. Long ago, farmers cultivated the rich flood plain, modifying its surface structure. When a railroad spur was extended to the town, growth was stimulated. Since there was little vacant land left for development, many former agricultural areas were occupied by housing, and the capability of floods to cause damage increased.

### PHASE I – GOAL: THE PREVENTION OF FLOODING

A few years ago the author was requested by the town council to do a study of flood problems along Beaverdam Creek, and to make flood prevention recommendations.

### PHASE II – STUDY

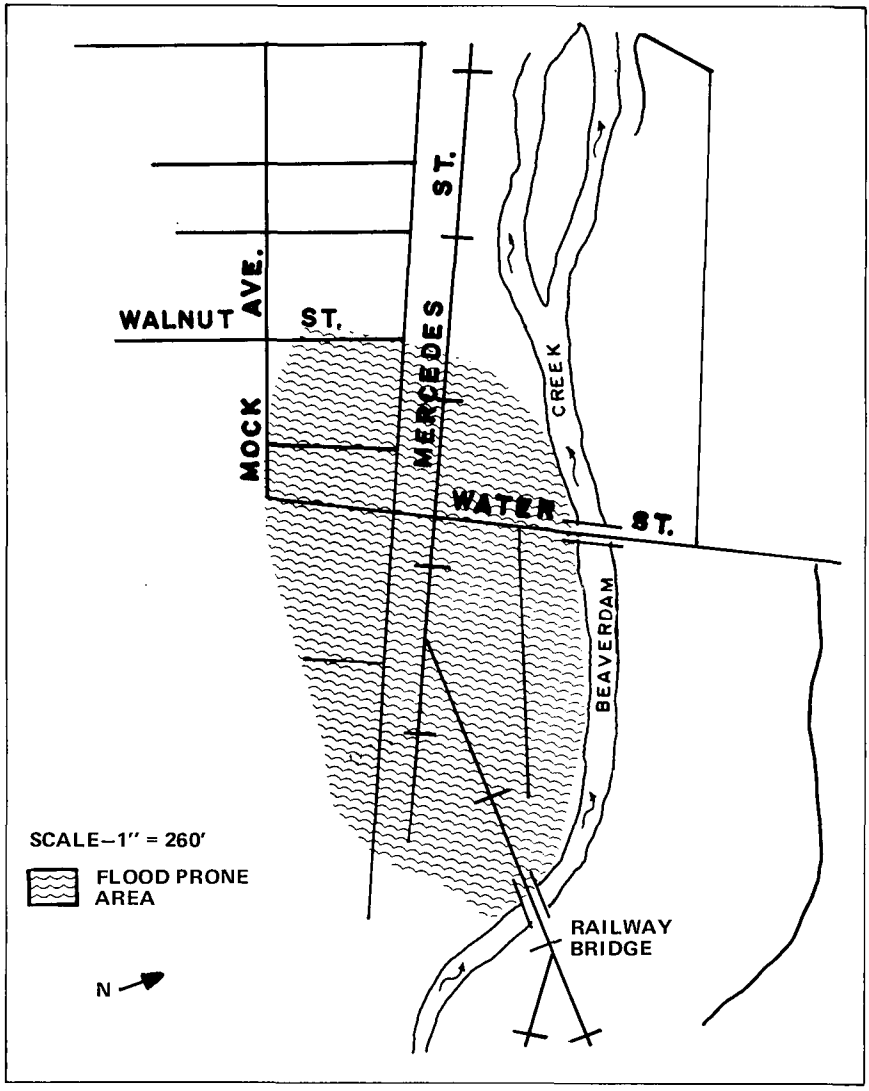
Approximately twenty structures are contained in the flood-prone area. The most severely affected sections–the land along Mercedes Street, Mock Avenue, and Water Street–are depicted in Figure 1. Significant damage was experienced in the floods of 1901, 1940, 1955, and 1957 [3]. However, minor floods occur much more often, affecting parts of the total area and initiating the request for this study.

### PHASE III – ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

The analysis was based on studies done by Wolman [4], the author [5], and on discussions by Maddock [6]. Several residents of the flood-prone area stated that the flood waters always followed a certain path; flooding began at the lowest point next to the dike and the railway bridge.

Upon further investigation, it was observed that the surface of the flood plain along the creek has been reconstructed by man. Figure 2 reveals that on the western side of the creek a dike reduces the cross-sectional area of the stream. The eastern side of the creek has a higher (less modified) flood plain. Having a smaller flood plain to buffer storm flows, the stream's ability to handle overbank flows is seriously reduced at this point.

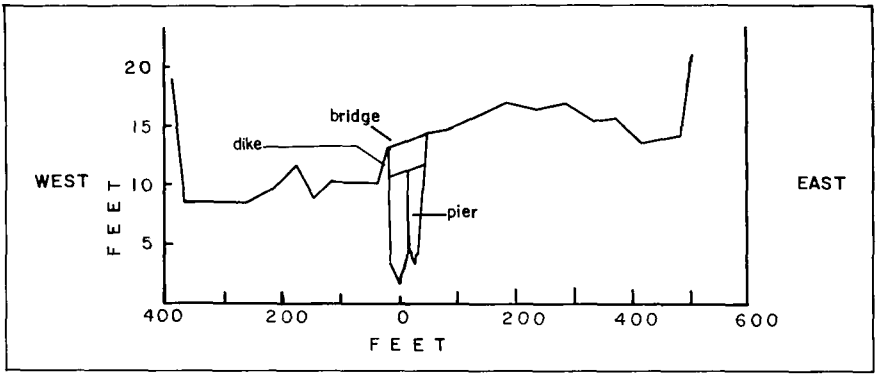
In addition, it was found that within the stream channel flooding conditions are further aggravated by man-made constrictions; a railway bridge




*(Adapted from 3)*

Figure 1. Flood-prone area.

(Figure 3), a stone masonry wall on the eastern bank (Figure 4), and a shoring made of boulders on the western bank (Figure 5). The bridge piling is an obstacle to storm water flow (Figure 3). As illustrated, debris is held suspended by the piling. Also, the bridge does not provide sufficient clearance to high flood waters, since it is only eight feet above the streambed. When




*(Source: Adapted from 3)*

Figure 2. Beaverdam Creek stream cross-section at Railway Bridge. If the dike were not present, the stream could overflow onto the flood plain area which lies about 100 feet to the west of the dike before encountering a natural obstacle. However, housing has encroached upon this area, and when the creek overflows, damage results.

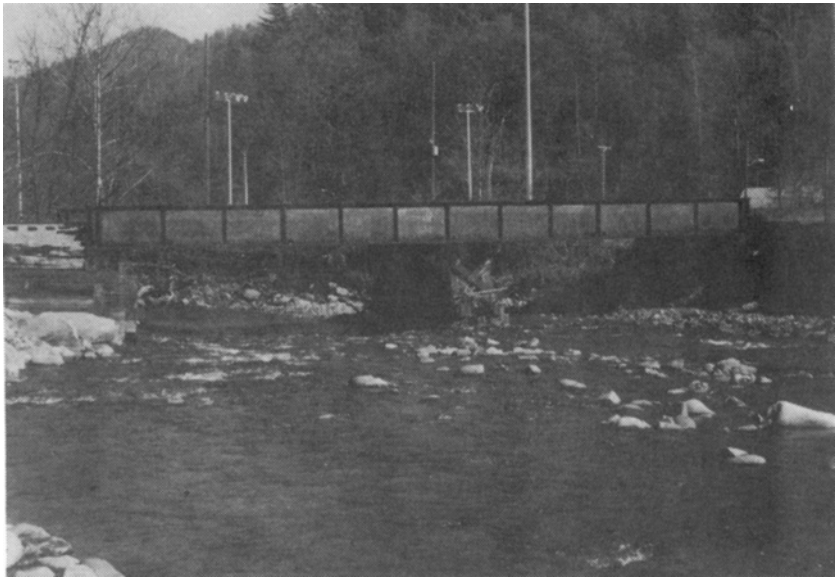


Figure 3. Railway Bridge

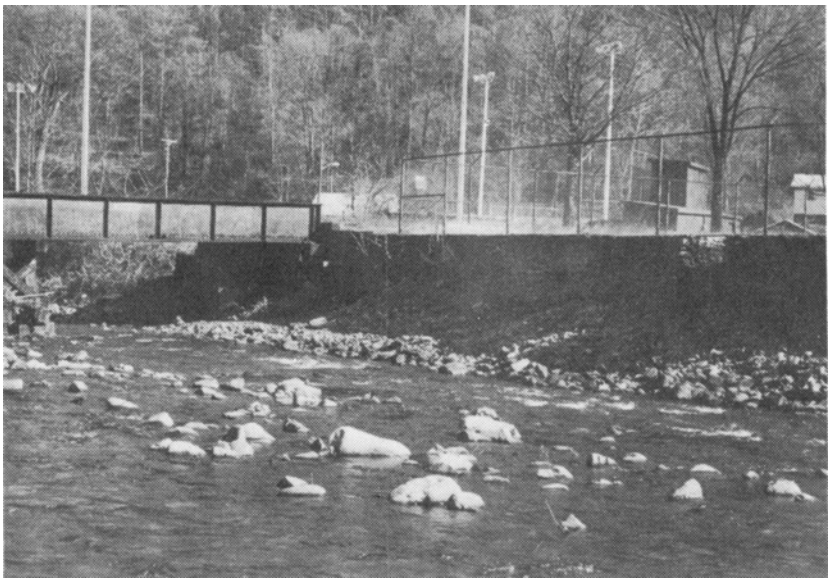


Figure 4. A constriction to storm waters is formed by the stone masonry wall constructed on the eastern stream bank.

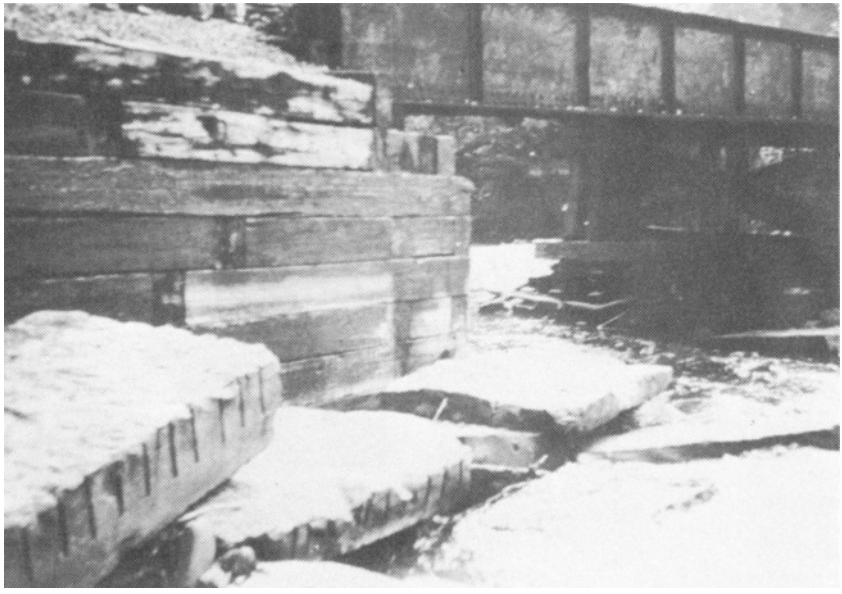


Figure 5. On the western bank, these boulders further diminish the stream channel cross-section.

storm waters rise above this height, the bridge acts as a partial dam, increasing the impoundment of water and augmenting the volume of water spilling over the dike.

Moreover, once the water is impounded, stream velocity decreases and sedimentation follows. Evidence of this is shown by the massive sand bar upstream of the bridge (Figure 6). The sand bar also serves to reduce the cross-sectional area of the stream, which increases the flood potential in successive high water conditions. Thus, the flood damage capability becomes progressively more serious. In a natural stream, it has been estimated that bankfull flow occurs once every 1.5 years [7]. Within this reach, the frequency has been considerably increased. Since the stream's western flood plain has been encroached upon by residences, when an overbank flow is produced damage results.

Figure 6. About 50 feet upstream of the railway bridge lies this large pile of gravel and cobbles left by past storm water discharges. The debris causes the stream channel volume to continuously decrease after each high water flow, thereby increasing the flood damage potential of successive high flows.

## PHASE IV – RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been suggested by Debo that many local political groups do not have the expertise to properly interpret technical studies [8]. Since this was a

rather technical report, and would be presented to a lay group (the town council), the utmost care had to be taken to communicate an accurate understanding of the flood preventative measures. The author has reported the logic of communication in more detail elsewhere [9].

Presentation of the recommendations before the Damascus council meeting followed procedures similar to those proposed by Estrin and Monahan [10]. Visual aids were employed, in this case 35mm slides.

A brief report showing cross-sections of the creek, listing all the recommendations and explaining the causes of flooding, was given to each council member. Slides of Beaverdam Creek a mile upstream of the railway bridge in a forest setting were shown first. Their purpose was to illustrate an unmodified natural stream (i.e., a stream in equilibrium, or in balance with its environment). Then contrasting slides of the stream in the immediate area of the railway bridge were shown to demonstrate a stream in disequilibrium (i.e., distorted by man-induced land surface changes). Each recommendation was presented with the aid of slides and explicitly described to the council members.

The following recommendations with explanations were proposed in order of priority:

*Removal of the railway bridge* – Since the bridge has not been used in several years (the spur terminates a few hundred feet past the bridge), it was recommended that it be removed and the accumulated sediment cleared. In this manner, the cross-sectional area would more closely approximate the larger, natural one, and the chances of flooding would be greatly reduced. (Estimated cost to the town: $2,500.)

*Tunneling through the western bank and sediment removal* – A tunnel under the railway track on the western bank attended by sediment clearance would increase the volume of the streambed and alleviate flooding at this point. In order for this alternative to remain effective, sediment removal would have to be periodically conducted, which would represent a recurring expense to the town.
(Estimated cost to the town: greater than $2,500.)

*Channelization* – Channelization involves a more extensive and costly restructuring of the stream to widen and deepen the channel. A preliminary examination indicated that channelization may be prohibitively expensive because of the proximity of residential structures to the stream and the fact that the streambed appears to be bedrock.
(Estimated cost to town: less than $50,000.)

*Purchase and conversion of the flood-prone area to other uses* – It must be recognized that the existing topography, i.e., the low western flood plain blocked by the relatively high dike, will continue to make the Mercedes Street area of Damascus susceptible to flooding. This suggests that there is no "cure" for flooding problems in this area. All of the recommendations are alleviative measures that will considerably reduce the probability of flooding, but will not bring about its complete elimination. Therefore, in the long run, the adoption of any one or all of the above recommendations may prove to be more expensive and less effective than for the town to purchase the encroached flood plain areas, remove the structures, and convert the land to other, less damage-prone uses.
(Estimated cost to town: less than $50,000.)

### PHASE V – ADOPTION

The town council did not choose to implement any of the recommendations. Approximately a month later, they engaged a local contractor to use a bulldozer to clear the streambed of loose stones and smaller sediment [11]. Figures 3 and 4 show a cleared stream channel.

The author at first could not understand why this action was undertaken, since it represented a temporary, symptomatic cure. After a few high water flows, the stream would again become flood prone and require further corrective maintenance.

Upon further investigation, the author determined that the primary cause for the action undertaken was as follows. Voters from the flood-prone area believed that by clearing the stream of debris, flooding would cease. Since this was September of a local election year, the town council was sensitively tuned to voter desires. Proposal [1], removal of the railway bridge, would require more time to accomplish, even though it would have most likely cost the same as the action taken. In the pursuit of re-election, the bridge was left standing and a symptomatic approach undertaken.

## Discussion

Discussion of the adopted political solution above will elucidate some underlying differences between planning and political goals.

*The Political Decision Process and the Planning Recommendation Process:* Catanese used the rudiments of a cybernetics model to try to define the political decision-making process [12]. Essentially, the process consists of an intuitive judgement of the inputs which are demands and supports. The politicians' knowledge of his constituency and how it will react to his decisions are primary factors in the final course of action taken.

Planning recommendations, on the other hand, are largely objective. The planner's experience and training in his field of expertise allow him to make judgements on a scientifically-based course of action.

In the case study, the planner made recommendations which considered the results of other flood studies and proposed rational methods to achieve flood prevention. On the other hand, weighing the possibility of re-election failure, the politician chose to satisfy his constituency. The political solution adopted exemplifies the difference between planning and political goals. Briefly, the planning goal was objectively based, i.e., to prevent flooding, while the political goal was intuitively based, and structured to achieve re-election.

## Credibility

It is a precept in planning that ultimately the results of all planning studies are brought before laymen for effectuation. The establishment of trust and credibility between the planner and the political group can greatly facilitate political acceptance of the planning recommendations, and therefore the role of credibility in expediting plan adoption should not be underestimated. Credibility is established through development of a strong rapport between the planner and community leadership. Community leaders must be firmly convinced that the planner is working in their behalf, and is thoroughly competent.

In the case study, due to the lack of sufficient time, credibility was not properly developed. Undoubtedly, the recommendations would have had a greater impact had credibility been firmly established.

## Political and Planning Time Frames

Political and planning time frames are not necessarily concurrent. Political processes (simplistically stated) involve the optimalization of policies which will enhance the possibility of re-election, as the case study demonstrates. The planning process is usually longer term and may concern several generations of politicians. Therefore, the planner must try to optimize his efforts with different elected officials in an attempt to achieve his goals.

## Conclusions

This paper outlined one planner's experience in attempting to get certain recommendations adopted by a political body. It illustrates the pervasiveness of the planning-political interface, which is successfully crossed only with effort and with careful attention to the factors involved. However, this boundary is the culmination of the planning process, and therefore necessitates careful consideration by experienced planners.

At present, most of the material presented in this paper can only be learned by experience, and not in planning schools. Graduate planning schools should strive to initiate internship programs designed to address these problems.

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