

2007 Planning Associates Program Critical Think Piece



Planning: Bridging the Gap



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Executive Summary - Planning: Bridging the Gap

The Corps of Engineers is evolving into a watershed/systems approach to address the nation's water resource challenges, yet our planning process focus is still on individual projects. Full watershed impacts are generally not considered when developing local projects. Corps Planners must now guide stakeholders through a holistic, collaborative planning process, while still focusing on the local needs and expectations of non-Federal cost-sharing sponsor(s). An expanded skill set is needed to be effective planners and to contribute to the meeting these challenges.

Often, the persons on interagency teams must become familiar with and conform to the Corps authorities, missions, and planning process. The Corps is not an easy organization to understand and other agencies and non-federal sponsors do all of the work to learn the Corps' processes. We rarely do a parallel amount of learning of the other agencies' authorities, missions, and valid planning processes. This unidirectional relationship is not conducive for collaboration. The Corps must strive to learn and listen to others in order to level the field and equalize the working relationships.

The four major themes of the Corps' 12 Actions for Change are: 1) effectively implementing a comprehensive systems approach; 2) risk based decision making; 3) risk communication; and 4) *professionalism and technical expertise*. To increase our level of professionalism and planning expertise, three recommendations for "bridging the planning gap" between the Corps, other federal agencies, states, and local communities' planning processes have been identified:

1. The first is a certification program for Corps planners. Components or the entire program would be available to non-Corps individuals as well.
2. The second is a handbook of authorities, missions, and planning processes of the non-Corps agencies most likely to be collaborating with the Corps.
3. The third recommendation is to revise the education and training program for Corps planners to incorporate familiarization with other agencies' processes.

In addition, water resources planners with expanded knowledge of the broader planning field will also be better able to contribute to other Corps missions, such as Military, HTRW, and Emergency Management.

Introduction

Federal responsibility for water resource planning, development, and regulation is fragmented across 34 different agencies. It is difficult at best for any one person to have an understanding and working knowledge of the various missions, authorities, and planning processes of these agencies.

Additionally, states and local agencies' focus and planning processes can greatly differ from that of the Corps and other federal agencies. The term "water resources" has a somewhat different meaning in the eyes of non-federal agencies, as this term typically refers to sources of water that are useful or potentially useful to humans and include agricultural, industrial, household, recreational and environmental activities.

The U.S. Army of Engineers (USACE) and other federal water resource agencies are now embarking on a systems or watershed based approach to planning, consistent with the USACE Strategic Plan and the 12 Actions for Change. In order to effectively apply a collaborative watershed or systems approach, planners must begin to understand the values, goals, objectives, and planning processes of other federal agencies, state and local agencies, and the professional planning community.

To properly communicate the impacts on the nation's water resources, the Corps must evaluate individual projects from a watershed, regional, or systems perspective. The challenge now lies in the hands of Corps Planners to guide teams through a holistic, collaborative planning process, while still meeting the needs and expectations of non-Federal cost-sharing sponsor(s). This means planning in terms of relationships, connectedness, and context. The purpose of this paper is to identify for analysis, discussion, evaluation, formulation, and respective

implementation of measures to improve the professionalism and technical expertise of water resource planners.

The Role of a Planner

The role of a Civil Works Planners can vary greatly, as do their professional backgrounds and levels of training. A sampling of perspectives on the role of a planner is provided below:

- “Planners are Pentathletes.”, *LTG Carl Strock, Chief of Engineers*
- “Planning is a contact sport.”, *MG Don Riley, Director of Civil Works*
- “A planner’s role is to properly frame the question and offer solutions.”, Mr. *Harry Kitch, Planning Community of Practice.*
- ”Planners must understand the municipal perspective”, *Hon. Marty Pagliughi, Mayor – Avalon, NJ*

A planner’s role is diverse depending on whether or not the Corps is the lead agency or participating agency. The primary role is evolving from being that of a study manager to that of a facilitator, convener, integrator, participant, and contributor. Perhaps the most important role is to be an active listener and actually hear what other agencies and stakeholders are telling us.

The Planning Nexus

A planning nexus exists between the missions and planning processes of the Corps, other federal agencies, and non-federal sponsors. Yet gaps also exist within this nexus. The question then becomes...*How do we bridge these gaps to align ourselves for success?* Mechanisms are also needed to leverage the strengths of each agencies planning process, with the objective of effective collaboration.

The Corps focus for many years has centered on individual projects, driven by specific outputs or monetary benefits. This is not always the case for many other federal agencies and sponsors.

Corps Planning Focus

The Principles and Guidelines (P&G), published by the Water Resources Council in 1983, established the federal objective of the planning process as contributing to national economic development while protecting the environment. This overarching goal was established to guide the study processes of federal water resources development agencies, and the foundation of the Corps planning process lies within these guidelines. Corps planners are trained to follow the six-step planning process which is focused on recommending the most economically beneficial and environmentally sound alternative for a recommended project. The Corps process is essentially about the plan and not necessarily the planning. Meshing the Corps planning processes and priorities with local communities and other federal agencies is challenging and often confusing. First impressions about our process are the key when building a trusting relationship with local sponsors and other potential federal partners.

The Corps planning focus is now changing. For instance, the Energy and Water Development Act of Fiscal Year 2006 (P.L. 109-103) directed the Corps to perform a “...comprehensive analyses that examine multi-jurisdictional use and management of water resources on a watershed or regional scale.” This watershed approach is the future of planning in the Corps, thus a greater understanding how local communities and other federal agencies plan will help to bridge the planning gap and lead to more efficient, knowledgeable and effective water resource planners.

Other Federal Agencies Focus

Throughout the Planning Associates Program, course instructors included representatives from other federal agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). All of these agencies have unique planning approaches. A closer examination of EPA and NRCS planning processes follows.

The EPA has set national water program goals to restore more than 2,000 polluted water bodies. Their water quality planning process is centered on single objective standards or targets to be met under the Section 319 Nonpoint Source Management Program of the Clean Water Act. This allows EPA to achieve restoration of impaired waters through development and implementation of watershed based plans. Watershed planning for EPA follows the basic guidelines of Assess, Plan, Implement, and Monitor. This is essentially a bottom up approach, starting at the local level.

Since NRCS also follows the P&G Guidelines, they employ a nine-step planning process which closely mirrors the Corps' six-step process. Their authority is derived from the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (P. L. 83-566). Mr. Keith Admire, Director, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service office in Little Rock, Arkansas, spent two years as the NRCS Liaison to the Corps. Mr. Admire indicated that the primary difference between the two agencies is that NRCS plans are locally led. In addition, NRCS does not perform economic analyses for plan comparison or establishment of a benefit-to-cost ratio. The NRCS National Planning Procedures Handbook states, "The planning process used by NRCS is based on the premise that clients will make and implement sound decisions if they understand their resources, natural resource problems and opportunities, and the effects of their decisions." NRCS can be

the lead planning agency or can simply be a provider of information and resources to the local entity. Regardless, once the plan is complete, NRCS turns it over to the locals for implementation.

The NRCS/Corps National Partnership Draft Action Plan also recognizes a gap in NRCS employees' capabilities to provide watershed planning assistance and gaps also exist in training. The plan recommends that NRCS and the Corps work together to bridge these gaps and identify the current state-of-the-practice and structure new training methods and procedures.

Local Planning Focus

Whether by a state, region, city or neighborhood, local planning is community driven. Local plans are developed to provide a strategic long-term vision and basic goals, objectives, policies, and recommendations to help guide the community's future growth and development. The plan makes recommendations in the areas of land use, transportation, economic development, parks and open space, historical and cultural resources, housing, community facilities, agricultural and natural resources, utilities, and intergovernmental cooperation. Once adopted, comprehensive plans are primary tools used by agencies and other policy makers to make decisions about the location of land uses and community facilities, priorities for public investment and the extension of public services (e.g., water, wastewater, transportation), and business development.

Many states already do watershed planning to evaluate water needs. Mr. Ken Grotewiel is the Assistant Director of the Kansas Water Office, the water planning, policy and coordination agency for the State of Kansas. This office looks for opportunities for collaboration and considers the Corps' Planning Assistance to States Program one of its most useful tools. They have identified several areas where the Corps could be particularly helpful. The first is interstate

watershed planning. The second is the Corps needs to recognize States' planning roles and goals, and that non-federal partners are more than simply advisors. Mr. Grotewiel added that the State also needs assurance that the Corps watershed planning dovetails with State and local planning efforts. Finally he stated that the Corps needed to include partners in steering committees acting as decision makers.

The Art of Planning - Professional Planning Viewpoint

Another method of bridging the planning gap is professional recognition and accreditation. The Corps is an engineering organization and most of its planners are engineers, biologists, geologists, social scientists, landscape architects, ecologist, etc. All of these disciplines bring considerable technical expertise to the table; however, effective planning also requires a certain amount of education and training. This is key to enable Corps planners to make the leap from effective technical practitioners to professional planning status.

The American Planning Association (APA) brings together planners working at every level of government, academia, and consulting. The American Institute for Certified Planners (AICP) is APA's professional institute, providing recognized leadership nationwide in the certification of professional planners, ethics, professional development, planning education, and the standards of planning practice. Certified planners use their skills to find solutions to community problems in ways that will carry the community toward its desired long-term goals. AICP certification requires professional planning experience, whether acquired through practice, teaching or research, and must address all four of the following criteria:

1. ***Influencing public decision making in the public interest.***
Recommending specific actions or choices to elected/appointed officials, private sector representatives, or others regarding public decisions concerned with social, economic, or physical change in the public interest.
2. ***Employing an appropriately comprehensive point of view.***
Appropriate comprehensiveness requires: (1) looking at the consequences (e.g.,

physical/environmental, social, economic/financial, governmental) of making a proposed decision; (2) conforming a proposed decision to the larger context in which it will occur; and (3) treating multiple policies, actions, or systems simultaneously when interlinkages are too great to treat separately. It does not require looking at everything at once if the above three criteria are met with a proposal, plan, or program of narrower scope.

3. ***Applying a planning process appropriate to the situation.***

This means a process which is appropriate to its place and situation in: (1) the number and order of its steps (*e.g., problem/opportunity definition, goal setting, generating alternate strategies, strategy choice, implementation, evaluation*), (2) its orientation to the future, to value change, and to resource constraints; (3) its quality of research and analysis; and (4) its format of policy, program, or plan proposal.

4. ***Involving a professional level of responsibility and resourcefulness.***

This means initiative, judgment, substantial involvement, and personal accountability for defining and preparing significant substantive elements of planning activities.

Additionally, AICP certification also includes a description of work that is not generally considered professional planning experience. This includes experience in related professions such as law, architecture, engineering, landscape architect and physical and social science research normally performed by other professionals or academic disciplines.

For the most part, Corps planners would not necessarily qualify for AICP certification. Since Corps planners primarily deal with water resource issues, AICP accreditation may not be the proper vehicle. In order to be recognized as professional planners, the Corps needs to establish some form of professional affiliation and accreditation.

Another professional organization that focuses on water resource issues is the American Water Resources Association (AWRA). According to AWRA, it is a non-profit professional association dedicated to the advancement of men and women in water resources management, research, and education. AWRA's membership is multidisciplinary and its diversity is its hallmark. It is the professional home of a wide variety of water resources experts including engineers, educators, foresters, biologists, ecologists, geographers, managers, regulators, hydrologists, and attorneys. Their objectives focus on water resources and issues:

- The advancement of water resources research, planning, development, management and education.
- The establishment of a common meeting ground for physical, biological, and social scientists, engineers, and other persons concerned with water resources.
- The collection, organization, and dissemination of ideas and information in the field of water resources science and technology

Developing a partnership with this organization to develop an accreditation for water resource planners would be beneficial to the Corps, state water planners, and local communities who are in the field working to accomplish effective plans for water resource issues.

Bridging the Gap

Three recommendations have been developed that will “*increase the professionalism and technical expertise*” of Corps planners...one of the four themes distilled from the 12 Actions for Change developed after Hurricane Katrina. These recommendations involve increasing the knowledge of planning as done by other federal and non-federal agencies versus the traditional approach of requiring everyone on a study team (federal and non-federal) to conform to the “Corps Way” of planning.

Recommendation #1: Planning Certification

The first recommendation is to establish a certification program for water resource planners. This may take the form of a new certification or adaptation / adoption of an existing certification programs such as AICP or the Certified Floodplain Manager (CFM) developed by the Association of State Floodplain Managers. The certification would signify to the planning community of the nation that the holder possesses a certain breadth and depth of knowledge and techniques of planning. Engineering, geology, and landscape architecture are examples of three

disciplines that have certification or state registration programs to demonstrate the attainment of special expertise.

Recommendation #2: Handbook – Planners Role and Toolbox

The second recommendation is to develop handbooks or reference documents for Corps planners that concisely describe the missions, authorities, and planning procedures used by the other agencies most likely to be involved in Corps studies. The handbook would help educate not only planners but all Corps staff. Most, if not all, agencies have already prepared such documents for their internal use. The documents would need to be collected from their widespread locations and combined/edited for use by Corps planners. The handbooks would contain the “executive summary” level of detail of the agencies’ information, rather than the full text of their policies and procedures.

Recommendation #3: Training

The third recommendation is to supplement the training provided to Corps planners by educating them in the missions, authorities, and planning procedures used by other agencies most likely to be involved in Corps studies. It is not the goal of this training to make Corps planners so skilled as to be able to do the jobs of the other agency personnel. Rather, it is to achieve familiarity and sufficient understanding of the other agency so that the Corps can better identify, include and incorporate the potential contributions of the other agencies. This will better enable the Corps to ask the right question of the other agency and draw-out their help.

This training could be delivered via several methods. It could be added to any or all of the following existing training opportunities: Planning Community of Practice meetings; Planning Core Curriculum courses; PROSPECT Courses; Planning Associates Program modules; and the Masters Program for Water Resources Management. Planning methods used

by non-federal parties could be obtained from sources such as universities, the American Planning Association (APA), or contracted from consultants.

Benefits

The recommendations provide a number of benefits to Corps planning and will enable planners from the Corps and the planners and team members from other collaborating agencies and interests to use a common language of planning. This will improve understanding and efficiency of the planning teams.

Certification and knowledge / familiarity with the broader planning field will improve credibility of the Corps planner to other professionally trained planners from other parties. The certification will be a strong indicator of a baseline set of skills.

Communications and joint knowledge of other agencies' will aid collaboration (from the joint or full team perspective) and leveraging (from the Corps perspective) of other agencies' contributions. This improved communication may potentially shorten the time from start to completion of studies.

Often, the persons of interagency teams must become familiar with and conform to the Corps authorities, missions, and planning process. They do all of the work to learn the new processes. We rarely do a parallel amount of learning of the other agencies' authorities, missions, and valid planning processes. This unidirectional relationship is not conducive for collaboration. The learning by the Corps will level the field and equalize the working relationships.

Water resources planners with expanded knowledge of the broader planning field will be better able to contribute to other Corps missions, such as Military, HTRW, and Emergency Management.

Summary

We began with asking Corps leaders and Planning Associates instructors about the role of planners and discovered that there are many definitions and descriptions of missions, processes, and roles. We then reviewed several Corps and non-Corps reports and also encountered similarities and differences. Significant differences (gaps) between the Corps planning process and the processes used by other federal and non-federal agencies were identified. Three recommendations are provided to “bridge the gap”. The first is a certification program for Corps planners. Components or the entire program would also be available to outside agencies and non-federal sponsors as well. The second is a handbook of authorities, missions, and planning processes of the non-Corps agencies most likely to be collaborating with the Corps. The third recommendation is to revise the education and training program for Corps planners to incorporate familiarization with other agencies’ processes.