Evaluating the Quality of Official Community Plans in Southern British Columbia: Are Municipalities Prepared to Promote Sustainable Development Patterns

Centre for Human Settlements ·School of Community and Regional Planning
College for Interdisciplinary Studies – University of British Columbia

Summary:

Will new development to accommodate population growth in BC over the next 25 years be guided by high quality land use plans that can help promote sustainable development patterns? To address this question, the proposed project will develop and utilize a written protocol to evaluate the quality of the respective official community plan (OCP) for each of the 40 municipalities located in the three largest regional districts in BC (i.e. the Metro Vancouver, Fraser Valley, and Capital regional districts). OCPs are policy documents that provide the rationale for municipal land use management programs (Berke et al. 2006). Prior research has found that high quality plans can promote a wide range of sustainable development goals, including environmental justice, economic opportunity, disaster resilience, transportation efficiency, reduced infrastructure costs, and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (Berke & Godschalk 2009; Tang et al. 2010).

While previous studies have evaluated the quality of plans in the United States and elsewhere, no systematic assessments of OCPs in BC have been conducted to date. As a result, researchers know very little about the content and quality of the plans that will shape future growth and development in the province. This project will address gaps in our understanding of the quality of existing OCPs and provide municipalities with guidance regarding how best to construct their OCPs in such a way that they can promote future growth and development patterns that are consistent with sustainable development principles and with provincial goals, such as BC's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions (BC Climate Action Charter).

This project will follow a three-stage methodology to evaluate the quality of OCPs in BC. The first stage will consist of developing a plan quality evaluation protocol and using it to evaluate the 40 OCPs under study. A draft protocol will first be developed based on those used in previous studies, which have evaluated plans according to their internal quality (e.g. goals, fact base, policies, etc.) and external quality (e.g. interorganizational coordination, mechanisms for ensuring compliance, etc.) (Berke & Godschalk 2009). Multiple items will be included in the draft protocol to evaluate various aspects of internal and external plan quality. The draft protocol will be pre-tested using two OCPs from a separate regional district. The research team will meet throughout the pre-testing process to compare coding responses, discuss and resolve disagreements, and clarify how items that produced disagreements will be coded thenceforth. The draft protocol will be revised as needed based on these meetings. Once the team is satisfied that individual applications of the protocol are sufficiently consistent and final revisions to the protocol have been made, graduate research assistants will use the protocol to independently evaluate each of the 40 OCPs. Each plan will be evaluated twice, by a different research assistant each time. Once this evaluation process has begun, the team will meet weekly to discuss challenges, resolve disagreements, and so on until the evaluation process is complete.

The second stage will consist of collecting additional data to be used in Stage 3. Research assistants will contact the city planning agency for each of the municipalities under study to administer a short survey regarding features of the respective agency.

The third stage will consist of a set of four separate quantitative analyses, including: (1) descriptive statistics to calculate plan quality scores for OCPs; (2) mean score comparisons and independent samples t-tests to construct a descriptive portrait of municipalities with relatively high quality OCPs and municipalities with relatively low quality OCPs; (3) correlation analysis to determine the magnitude and direction of bivariate relationships between plan quality scores and each of the variables constructed from the data collected in Stage 2; and (4) multiple regression analysis to explain variation in plan quality scores across municipalities and to identify factors that help to determine plan quality scores.