

Evaluation of collaborative urban forest planning in Helsinki, Finland

Maija Sipilä, Liisa Tyrväinen*

Department of Forest Ecology, University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 27, FIN-00014 Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

In Helsinki, Finland, a participatory approach has been used in strategic planning of municipally owned urban forests since 1995. This paper presents the main results of a survey carried out among the residents and authorities participating in collaborative planning groups between 1995 and 2002. The aim of the study was to evaluate the experiences of residents and authorities related to the planning process. The study provided information for the upcoming reform of the participatory planning system at the Green Area Division of Helsinki.

The participants felt that the participatory approach prevented conflicts in planning and increased residents' awareness of matters concerning green areas. Most respondents were satisfied with this system. The green area planning authorities found a participatory approach in urban forest planning to be useful, although they believed themselves to be capable of making effective plans even without involving local residents. They did, however, believe that the process had been too demanding and time-consuming for group members. Moreover, the majority of respondents felt that participants had been given an over-optimistic idea of how much they could influence the plans.

Setting goals for the green areas, particularly, at the local level, was considered to be the most important stage for involving residents in the planning process, while their participation in choosing actual management methods was thought to be less valuable. The residents placed a greater importance on early involvement of residents than did the planning authorities, who more often felt that allowing residents to comment on a draft of the plan was sufficient.

In urban forest planning, cost-effective participation systems need to be developed. Conventional participation methods, such as public meetings, field trips and surveys, are important and should not be replaced by methods based on modern technology. In the future, several different participation methods should be used during a single planning process to encourage all stakeholders, including children, youth and other special groups, to take part in the planning.

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Introduction

The participatory planning approach is a relatively well-established method for integrating residents' views into forest management (e.g., ILO, 2000). It offers local residents an opportunity to affect how urban forests in their immediate surroundings are managed. Today, a

growing number of people are interested in influencing the decision-making processes and forestry practices (Buchy and Hoverman, 2000). Urban forest professionals are therefore expected to have a wide array of skills and effective tools to communicate with these individuals. They should have information on peoples' needs, feel empathy for their wishes, and solve conflicts instead of creating them (Rydberg and Aronsson, 2004).

Buchy and Hoverman (2000) presented four key principles that define good participatory planning

*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: liisa.tyrvaainen@helsinki.fi (L. Tyrväinen).

practices. The first deals with commitment and clarity. The planning organization must be clear in its objectives. It must decide whether its aim is to inform people, seek opinions or share control of the project. Second, sufficient time should be devoted to group dynamics. A long-lasting process is needed because the benefits of interaction can only be seen after several group meetings (Mäntysalo and Nyman, 2002). The third principle entails representativeness of the people involved (see also Wallenius, 2001; Arola, 2002; Van Herzele et al., 2005). The fourth principle concerns sharing of skills. The knowledge and skills of lay people, as well as the expertise of professionals, should be benefited from in the planning process.

Although support for the participatory approach has increased, some drawbacks remain. Participatory planning demands more time and resources than conventional planning by professionals alone (Wallenius, 2001). In addition, it is often unclear how well the group involved represents all users. The planning process tends to attract certain types of people, but the total number of participants is often low (Tyrväinen et al., 2003). Furthermore, some active members may dominate the planning discussions at the meetings.

While participation can be used to prevent conflicts (Wallenius, 2001), it may also lead to increased conflicts by providing a channel for opposition to develop (Tyrväinen et al., 2003). Moreover, participation may raise exaggerated expectations if the essence of the planning is not understood or if the principles of decision-making are unclear. In practice, participatory planning often leads to a compromise in which individual expectations are not completely fulfilled (Tyrväinen et al., 2003). The aim should not be to achieve unanimity but instead to find a balanced solution that is at least acceptable to all parties concerned (Appelstrand, 2002).

In Finland, as in Sweden and Norway, cities have typically been built “into” the surrounding forest. This means that the majority of green areas are established by preserving existing forest vegetation. Helsinki belongs to the hemiboreal forest vegetation zone. Urban forests in the city consist mainly of natural or transformed forest vegetation, and typically, with these areas generally ranging from half a hectare to tens of hectares in a residential area, but larger recreation areas have also been preserved. The total area of woodlands within city limits is around 3600 ha, which is two-thirds of the total green area. The population of Helsinki is approximately 0.6 million inhabitants. The archipelago in the Baltic Sea is an important recreation zone for residents.

According to the Finnish Land Use and Building Act (1999), a participatory approach is obligatory in prominent projects, such as city planning, but not in smaller projects, such as planning of urban forests. Nevertheless, the Green Area Division of Helsinki and

its predecessor have, at their own initiative, applied participatory methods in strategic planning of urban forests since 1995. This collaborative planning approach put widely into practice is one of only a few such examples in Europe (Konijnendijk, 1999). The main rationales underlying this approach are to improve residents’ possibilities of influencing forest management, to guide the inflow of feedback related to use and management of forests and to increase the quality and acceptability of plans. As regards green area planning, the municipal region is divided into 50 subunits. Strategic green area plans contain objectives and management strategies for forests and other green areas over a 10-year period. The plans are drawn up for a small number of subunits at a time.

Participation methods can be broken down into three categories: open meetings, group methods and individual methods (Loikkanen et al., 1997). Open meetings are efficient in disseminating information widely to the public. Conditions for profound discussion and understanding are, however, better in group methods. According to Van Herzele et al. (2005), group discussions are one of the most remarkable innovations in learning theory of the 20th century. In urban forest planning, organized walks out in the forest are of great importance. Direct experiences of the woodland areas can make people more interested in forests, often at a low cost (ILO, 2003). Individual methods, such as surveys, interviews and participation based on modern technology, are typically cost-effective tools in data collection (Loikkanen et al., 1997). Their strength lies in the relatively strong representativeness of the information collected. Possibilities for feedback are, however, limited, and interaction between stakeholders seldom occurs (Loikkanen et al., 1997).

All three methods have been in use in urban forest planning in Helsinki (Fig. 1). Between 1995 and 2002, each

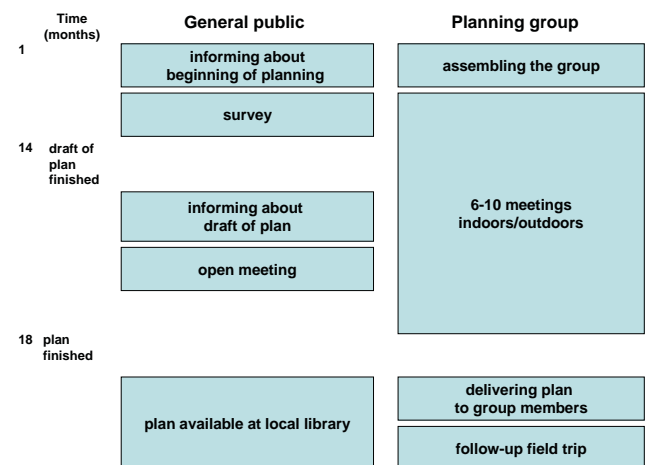


Fig. 1. Information and participation activities in an urban forest planning process, Helsinki, Finland.

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