



The local planning-economic development nexus in transitioning resource-industry towns: Reflections (mainly) from British Columbia

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ABSTRACT

Local economic restructuring in a once dominant economic base, resource remapping imperatives that are privileging long neglected environmental values and aboriginal rights, and local empowerment are three intersecting themes that contextualize the idea of transitioning resource towns. Drawing especially from BC experience, this paper seeks to better understand transitioning resource towns from the perspective of the local planning-economic development nexus. While literature on resource town rejuvenation has emphasized local initiative and empowerment the role of local planning has been largely neglected. Yet local ('municipal') planning is a quintessentially local activity that profoundly shapes the routines of daily life through legally mandated 'official' plans that are required to draw upon community participation to meet collective community goals. However, the relationships between local planning and local development are problematical as they co-evolve in path dependent ways, sometimes in harmony with each other and sometimes not. Indeed, the onset of transitioning among resource towns implies important changes in the planning-development nexus. Initially, as resource towns boomed local planning played a subservient role in support of 'given' export-drive development. With the onset of transitioning, local planning is challenged to become part of more pro-active local efforts to promote development. In practice, transitioning can be a durable status as restructuring and remapping imperatives reframe local governance and impose significant, inter-locking uncertainties on the planning-development planning nexus, often in association with increased regional networking. Even though transitioning suggests a search for new identities, the geographic realities of resource towns often implies mega-project proposals are enticing. Yet, these proposals are speculative, often opposed by remapping agents, and not easy to plan. Thinking about future development is also constrained by the inheritance of past plans that for many transitioning towns feature obsolescing downtown cores that comprise deteriorating commercial activities, housing stocks, infrastructure, and environmental clean-up issues. While these problems are varied, deep-seated and difficult to address, their rejuvenation illustrates the proactivity of local planning in leading development that can potentially benefit communities in relation to job creation, housing needs, commercial vitality, image and identity. Cooperative approaches among regionally connected transitioning towns and adjacent communities is suggested as a possible way of approaching the conundrums posed by obsolescing cores in transitioning towns.

1. Introduction

The transformation of global economy and society over recent decades, often summarily labelled as a shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, the ICT or simply as globalization, has stimulated escalating interest in its distinctive implications for rural peripheries (Halseth, 2017; Wood, 2004). For many mature resource-industry based towns this transformation has been sparked by significant job losses in the activities that provided the rationale for their existence, in turn encouraging a search to transition to new forms of employment. In many

remote areas this transition is daunting, iterative and often further challenged by 'paradigmatic' changes in socio-political valuations of resources, and consequently in the relationships between resources and local development (Hayter and Patchell, 2015). Thus the contemporary "remapping" of forest peripheries in Canada and elsewhere (Affolderbach, 2011; Hayter and Barnes, 2012) and Australia's "emerging geographies" (Moorcroft and Adams, 2014) are driven by deepened appreciation for environmental imperatives and aboriginal rights and traditions, both hitherto largely ignored by the priority of industrial commodification. Further, the "re-imagining" (Gill and Reed, 1997) of

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transitional resource communities is increasingly driven by locally motivated (endogenous) “place-based development” that is modifying if not replacing reliance on (exogenous) “space-based development” (Markey et al., 2012). The intersection of local economic restructuring in a once dominant economic base, resource re-evaluations, and local empowerment underlies the idea of transitioning resource-industry towns and sets the context for contemplating their development and planning challenges to more sustainable futures.

Geographic remoteness and lock-ins to resource dependency - the staple trap in Canadian terms (Watkins, 1963) - pose formidable problems to resource-town transitioning, that for many observers are reinforced by neoliberal-inspired cost-cutting policies (Halseth, 2017). In response, if the development of resource towns were once orchestrated ‘top down’ by senior levels of government and large corporations, local actors are now seen as vital for creating desired community futures. In this regard, local empowerment has been recently analyzed from several overlapping perspectives, variously emphasizing: institutional capacity and asset building (Fischer and McKee, 2017), expert advice (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004), knowledge creation (Pelkonen and Nieminen, 2015); regional participation (Zirul et al., 2015), governance (Argent, 2011; Dumarcher and Fournis, 2017), the role of women (Gill, 1990; Reed, 2003; McLeod and Hovorka, 2008), forms of community leadership and entrepreneurship (McIlveen and Bradshaw, 2009; Reed and Gill, 1997; Stern and Hall, 2010), and community resilience (Deacon and Lamanes, 2015). Moreover, notwithstanding histories of booming and busting, and associated in- and out-migration, transitioning resource towns comprise established populations who wish to remain in place (Asscher et al., 2016).

Yet, as Douglas (2005, p231) insightfully observes: “local government can be an almost invisible backdrop in the rural development discourse”, even though it is “a sine qua non for rural development”. This neglect of local government particularly extends to its key function of local or municipal planning. Yet community or municipal planning is a quintessential local activity that is legally required, quasi-autonomous and intimately connected with local development, forming a local planning-economic development nexus. As two sides of the same coin, local planning and development are often conventionally distinguished in terms of a public-private interest dichotomy. In practice, local planning and economic development agendas dynamically interact. Development proposals, whether originating in the public or private sectors, typically claim a public purpose and are required to engage local planning, and planning is often elaborated in terms of social, political, environmental and economic development (Thomas, 2016; Hodge et al., 2017).

This paper's overall objective is to better understand transitioning resource towns from the perspective of the local planning-economic development nexus. We particularly seek to connect hitherto ignored local planning perspectives to studies of local economic development with its associated themes of diversification, restructuring, rejuvenation, and more recently resilience. Such connections can add insights into transitioning resource towns for several, related reasons. First, local planning and development are symbiotically and problematically related, co-evolving in path-dependent ways that are both complementary and conflicted, sometimes in harmony with each other, sometimes not. As the Canadian case illustrates, legally required official community (municipal) plans (OCPs), based on obligations to properly consult with local residents to shape land use and activity patterns, formally underpin these relationships (Cullingworth, 2015; Hodge and Gordon, 2014). OCPs are major policy statements, rooted in previous investments in the built landscape and associated value systems and periodically revised to harmonize the emerging multiple goals and needs of local residents.

Second, in broad terms the evolution of the planning-development nexus provides a key marker in the emergence of resource town transitioning. During Fordism resource-based economic development was exogenously driven with local planning subservient to the needs of the

‘given’ economic base. In Cullingworth's (2015) terms, traditionally local planning involved local administration and service provision, not policy and economic development. In contrast, the onset of transitioning means that development is no longer hierarchically orchestrated and structured. Rather, development is highly uncertain, in Sjöholt's (1987) metaphor “unruly” in process and outcome, increasingly dependent upon locally pro-active behaviour including by local governments. Whether or not local planners themselves shape transitioning debates, they are tasked with anticipating and/or responding to proposed developments that may or may not happen, and may or may not conform to existing OCPs. Indeed, in transitioning towns, speculation over mega-projects has become especially controversial, caught up in debates over cultural and environmental imperatives of remapping, while raising important dilemmas for local planning.

Third, the evolutionary trajectories of resource industries, their maturation and decline, has typically co-evolved with aging urban infrastructures, most evidently expressed in dilapidated downtown cores, encompassing both commercial activities and housing. While possibilities for downtown renewal in rejuvenating transitioning resource towns are recognized (Barnes and Hayter, 1992; Lambe, 2008), the co-evolution of obsolescing industrial and urban structures has not received systematic attention. In practice, the planned dispersal of commercial and residential activities to outlying areas has contributed to the problems of downtown cores. Yet the latter remain important in policy statements (OCPs) and, if obsolescing cores are janus-face inheritances that are hard to address, their rejuvenation can help stimulate local development.

Fourth, attention to the local planning-development nexus of transitioning resource towns reveals both the potentials and limits of local empowerment. Thus municipal planning is a key local institution, rooted in local understanding and participation while shaping the routines of daily life. However, as Cullingworth (2015) explicates in the Canadian case, local planning is at the bottom of a superstructure of plans organized and mandated by more powerful senior levels of government that are territorial, sectoral and site-specific. Moreover, the global shift occurring at all societal levels towards more open-ended, pluralistic, laterally networked governance models of decision making, away from structured hierarchical models (Bevir, 2012), has engulfed transitioning resource towns, including by the engagement of environmental non-government organizations and aboriginal peoples with their distinctive views on resource values. Evolving governance is also associated with the blurring of local boundaries as transitioning towns become more involved in regional networking, moving away from their traditional characterization as hierarchically controlled enclaves (Zirul et al., 2015). Indeed, transitioning towns have become more global as well as local (and regional) as they search for new markets (Bowles and Wilson, 2015) and are influenced by the ‘power geometries’ of remapping agents (Hayter, 2003).

In approach, the paper is heuristic and reflective in nature, seeking to encourage greater consideration of the planning-development nexus in studies of resource town evolution. The discussion is especially shaped by the trajectories of resource cycles and towns in British Columbia (BC) since the early 1980s (Edenhoffer and Hayter, 2013; Markey et al., 2012). In general, the Fordist resource booms that diffused growth throughout BC after World War 2 were arrested by the recessionary crisis of the early 1980s and the connected proliferation of resource conflicts led by powerful forces of remapping. For many resource towns this crisis has marked a ‘turning point’ in their resource-dependent evolution, featuring both industrial and urban obsolescence. If processes and outcomes are varied, this paper emphasizes resource town transitioning as an important durable phenomena, marked by key changes in the planning-development nexus. Hopefully this analysis resonates among resource town Canada and to other peripheries, such as in Australia and New Zealand, helping to facilitate comparative work (Argent and Measham, 2014; Connelly and Nel, 2017; Halseth, 2017). The remaining discussion proceeds by providing a life cycle overview of

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