Talking about density: An empirical investigation of framing

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Scholars of cities have presented evidence that increasing the density of urban areas in western countries is key to accomplishing greater sustainability in the built environment. Technical knowledge of sprawl's negative impacts may well convince local planners of the benefits of denser development, but planners likely face challenges in communicating the benefits of densification to their constituents. When planners cite certain benefits over others, they effectively frame densification in ways that may or may not resonate with the values of their constituents. This paper evaluates the efficacy of seven commonly elicited frames for densification. We evaluate factors impacting constituent reception of densification as presented through each frame including: (1) constituent familiarity with each frame, (2) a variety of demographic and political factors, and (3) neighborhood land use and density in the area where increased density is proposed. We find that planners prompt each of the frames with different associated rates of success or failure across communities of different demographics, and that residential neighborhoods of eight (8) or fewer dwelling units per acre (3.24 or fewer units per hectare) are especially less likely to support densification regardless of the elicited frame. We also find that constituent familiarity with a given frame is always associated with increased support for densification, but occasionally with widespread doubt in planners' arguments as well.

1. Introduction

Scholars of cities have presented evidence that greater density in urban areas in western countries is associated with a variety of desirable outcomes, including greater environmental sustainability (Bengston et al., 2004), greater financial stability for local governments (Burchell et al., 2006), more walkable and healthy living environments (Frumkin, 2002), economic development (Glaeser and Gottlieb, 2006), housing diversity and affordability (Aurand, 2010), enhanced community character (Kendig and Keast, 2010), and cultural vitality (Montgomery, 1998). The planning academy has thus been generally positive about density and densification for some time, with the wider, practitioner-dominated Smart Growth movement complementing the push for densification in practice for the past two decades (Goetz, 2004). Technical knowledge of sprawl's negative impacts may well convince planners of the necessity of denser development, but in practice, where value conflict abounds (Schön, 1983), planners may face challenges in advocating greater density.

As a result, planners may turn to more "artful" methods (Schön, 1983, 19) in their communication with the public over this divisive issue. Specifically, planners can employ "rhetorical frames" to weave a compelling justification for change (Schön and Rein, 1994, 32) among publics of diverse social, political, and economic characteristics.

Rhetorical frames emerge when planners cite certain benefits of greater density, thus making salient a particular aspect of densification that they believe will resonate with the communities they engage. These benefits may or may not represent their own, personal views. Our previous research (Whittemore and BenDor, 2017) demonstrated that while US planners are enthusiastic about a variety of benefits related to increased density, their departments are more selective in choosing which benefits to air publicly, likely being wary of how different sets of constituents will react.

Many planning scholars have theorized the importance of framing in planning practice, but empirical investigations of framing in the field of city planning have been limited to a few case studies (Schön and Rein, 1994; Gardner and Burgess, 2003; Van Herzele, 2004) and surveys (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Goetz, 2008; Doberstein et al., 2016). In this paper, we use a 2016 survey of US planners to evaluate the efficacy of seven different positive rhetorical frames that planners elicit when they cite specific benefits of greater density. We address three questions: How do communities of different social, political, and economic characteristics react to different frames for densification? How does the character of the neighborhood targeted for densification affect its acceptability within different frames? Do communities' familiarity with certain frames lead to a more positive or negative reception? Our findings show that some frames often increase support for

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greater density, but they also show that planners' constituents often doubt the benefits cited by planners, leading us to mixed conclusions as to whether planners are selecting the best means of communicating the benefits of greater urban density to their constituents. It is likely that in some contexts, the beneficial impacts of positive framing statements may be limited regardless of their substance. With our findings, we hope to improve communication between local planners and their constituents, as well as underscore the value of rhetorical framing, focusing on one common area of dispute.

2. Background

2.1. Framing is key to urban planning

Planning scholars have emphasized the densification of many developed urban areas in western countries for a variety of reasons: to take growth pressure off agricultural or environmentally sensitive land, to create more equitable cities, or to promote more efficient use of existing infrastructure and services (Williamset al., 2000; Farr, 2008). These goals and others have driven the now decades-old Smart Growth movement (National Association of Home Builders, 2002; Litman, 2003; Lee and Leigh, 2005). One issue that arises with densification, however, is acceptability (Jenks, 2000): resistance to change is a well-known force in land use politics (Babcock, 1966). Especially because densification tampers with people's attachment to the existing character of their neighborhood (Vallance et al., 2005), and triggers concerns over a variety of off-site impacts (Pendall, 1999), we suspect it is difficult for many planners in western societies to convey densification in a way that does not alienate audiences.

Resistance to change may be less severe if the public understands densification to deliver benefits they value. When it comes to planning and development, members of the public are variably concerned with issues of economic growth, quality of life, the natural environment, or equity (Gardner and Burgess, 2003). Thus, when planners frame densification as a matter of benefiting local businesses or as a matter of protecting the environment, they may or may not align it with an issue their constituents see as significant. As Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) argue, framing interventions in specific ways can variably invest them with significance across diverse audiences.

Planners may well prefer to present densification's benefits in the same way they understand them. But Schön (1983) discussed how value conflict muddled the supposed rationality of professional practice, and that city planning was among those professions that typically encounters this challenge. At any "time in the life of a profession, certain ways of framing problems … come into good currency" that establish how a given issue is addressed (Schön, 1983, 309), but dominant professional interpretations may not resonate with the wider public. Schön (1983) theorized that the reflective practitioner would recognize many ways of framing problems, so as to make any problem significant to different audiences.

2.2. Theories of framing effects

Planners may thus desire to strategically frame densification in one way or another because, like other professionals who communicate with the public frequently, they face audiences biased by their interactions with peers and personal experiences (Scheufele, 1999). Priorities in regards to development vary greatly from community to community and within communities, with some audiences perhaps being more open to densification through a conversation focusing on environmental issues, while other audiences may become more open through a conversation about economic impacts. We believe that planners commonly behave as reflective practitioners, as Schön advocated, because they are aware of working in a pluralistic environment, such as that described by Gardner and Burgess (2003). Our previous research (Whittemore and BenDor, 2017) has demonstrated

that planners are personally enthusiastic about a variety of benefits related to higher density, but that they do not publicly air many benefits of higher density nearly as often as they believe them to exist. This suggests that they commonly engage in strategic framing around this divisive issue.

We suspect that planners at least implicitly understand what many framing researchers have argued: that individuals will accept new information that supports their existing interpretations (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2000), and selectively discredit information that threatens their pre-existing biases (Lord et al., 1979). Different sets of facts thus matter for different interpretations of the same situation (Schön and Rein, 1994); consequently, planners and other professionals cannot rely on the same frames for their interventions among all audiences. Other research has shown that a group understanding new information through a familiar frame will more likely perceive the importance of that information (Nelson et al., 1997; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Using frames unfamiliar to any given audience can even lead to the communicator losing credibility among that audience (Schön, 1987; Entman, 1993).

Framing is not spin or sales talk, but an appropriate way to help people make sense of situations (Goffman, 1974; Pan and Kosicki, 2001; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Planners, like other professionals, communicate to audiences that share specific interpretations of their communities and therefore need to fit new information into existing non-professional discourse (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979; Yearley, 2000; Corburn, 2003). By making new information make sense in the context of the local public's priorities, professionals can even discover novel solutions particular to their communities (Van Herzele, 2004). It is therefore rational for planners to pursue framing insofar as popular support is critical in enacting change (Jacoby, 2000).

Professionals' strategic use of framing can alter public reactions to a problem without changing the substance of the message (Tversky and Kahneman, 1986; Kahneman, 2003). For example, evidence has shown that planners can change the reaction to a proposal for more affordably priced housing by using the term 'lifecycle housing' instead of 'affordable housing' (Goetz, 2008). Framing not only affects reactions but also the relative popularity of different policies. Framing crime as an outcome of evil, for example, promotes more punitive anti-crime policies (Edelman, 1993).

This literature guides our research in several ways. First, while many of the above-mentioned scholars have theorized the importance of framing or demonstrated its importance in experimental research or in case studies, there is little understanding of the prevalence of what Schön and Rein called "frame reflection" (Schön and Rein, 1994) in the field of planning or its utility. Planning scholars and practitioners have long advocated densification as a way to address a variety of urban ills, and greater density can consequently be presented in a number of ways. Because researchers tell us planners deal with publics holding different values, and that different frames resonate variably across publics holding different values, we wish to understand how frames for densification resonate with communities of different demographic characteristics. Building upon the work of the aforementioned researchers, we also wish to understand whether different frames are effective tools because they represent conventional, widely held ways of talking about planning interventions. Finally, because many objections to greater density have to do with the local built environment context, we wish to understand whether prevailing land use and density (in terms of dwelling units per acre) in the area targeted for densification influences densification's reception.

3. Research design

3.1. Mail back survey

Our study gathered information about how urban planners have framed proposals to increase the allowed density of infill development