

Working Papers of the Finnish Forest Research Institute 38: 74–77

Public Participation and Strategic Land Use Planning in Iceland

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1 Introduction

Strategic land use planning has a relatively short history in Iceland. Although planning has been done for population centres for many years, the first legislation regarding this type of planning was not written until 1964. Land use planning was more or less unknown in rural areas until 1998 when legislation was passed requiring all districts to submit approved strategic plans by the year 2008.

Throughout history, Iceland has been sparsely populated and land-use was based on centuries old traditions. The uniformity of agricultural methods made strategic land use planning a non-issue. The reasons for requiring detailed land use plans in Iceland are a combination of increasing foreign pressure (for example through the EU) and an increasing concern for environmental issues.

2 Different levels in making strategic land-use plans

National plans- for areas of national interest in some way, including national parks, and natural or cultural value areas

District plans- for politically demarcated districts

Special regional- plans such as plans for afforestation that are very similar to regional Danish *Driftsplan* (These deal with the region as a whole and do not reach the estate level.)

Special plans- for areas requiring an environmental impact statement

Detailed plans- for areas such as neighbourhoods, summer house areas and industrial sites.

All of these plans follow the same protocol and are intended to reflect the desires and goals of those affected by the plans.

The state planning agency is responsible for advising those making plans in manner of form, for

example what must be included. They are also responsible for making sure that district plans do not contradict state plans and that all state laws regarding land use are followed. They are in no way supposed to allow the agenda of the planning board to supersede the desires of the group for which the plan is intended.

3 The steps in making strategic land-use plans

- Public meetings or other methods of scoping the desires of those living in the area covered by the plan.
- Advice from various experts such as archaeologists, naturalists, engineers etc.
- Drawing up a draft plan
- Review by the state planning agency
- The plan is then put before the public for comment.
- Review of written criticisms of the plan made by experts asked to review the plan and all individuals submitting written comments
- Rewriting the plan in light of these inputs
- If the plan is changed to include any of the comments, then the entire review process must be repeated.
- The plan is then sent to the state planning agency for comment, again if changes are made it must go through the review process again.
- When the plan finally makes it through this process without change, it is sent to the Minister of the Environment for approval.

This seems like a system that provides ample opportunities for including the goals and concerns of the public. However if the process and how it works in practice is examined closely, it becomes obvious that when a plan is signed by the Minister of the Environment, it may not be representative of desires of the majority.

4 Factors limiting public input

Attendance by the public-Those few individuals who attend meetings and speak up, are usually persons with extreme views. They make up a core group and it is almost invariably the same persons who attend public meetings. Rarely are other individuals present, often the public is unaware that such meetings are being held.

Planning Agency bias-Although bias from the planning board should not be integrated into the plans, it is often included in the changes they recommend for the plans. District planning committees are usually made up of local residents farmers, shop keepers and such. While well aware of the desires of local persons, these individuals do not have the legal background and experience to realise that revisions called for by the state planning agency going against the desires of the community, do not have to be incorporated into the plans. They feel that the experts, in this case the planning agency, know best.

Written remarks from the public are few. The land use plan for one of the world's largest aluminium smelters, which is being built in eastern Iceland, was much talked about and critiqued, how-

ever only one written opinion was submitted. Also almost all opinions submitted expressed are negative. Seldom has a plan elicited a positive response

Financing-The state finances most of the work done by districts in drawing up their plans. Until such time as the state planning agency approves a plan, the districts must pay all expenses from their own budgets. Therefore, the state planning agency can (and has on occasion), forced districts into putting forth a land use plan that the district does not want by. This was done by simply refusing to approve it and release funding, until the district includes those aspects “recommended” by the planning agency.

As mentioned before, the concept of strategic land use plans was transferred to Iceland from Europe. Very often aspects of planning, are transferred directly from other countries or international organisations and do not reflect the Icelandic reality. Currently there is a movement in Iceland to place all estate level afforestation plans through the formal planning process. Granted in some countries this process may be desirable, especially where landholdings are small and the actions of one person can have a direct effect on the people living on nearby farms. Small holdings also effectively hinder the management of areas as ecological wholes. However in Iceland the average farm is 1,103 hectares and landboundries are almost always based on natural barriers such as rivers and gorges. This allows for the management of estates as ecologically distinct areas. These areas are large enough that afforestation does not have an appreciable effect on the neighbour’s livelihoods or quality of life.

Those persons involved with transferring ideas directly to Iceland are most often so far removed from the realities of average persons, especially those living in rural areas, that they do not realise that these restrictions have little or nothing to do with the Icelandic ecological or social situation. The results can be disastrous for those forced to live by them.

The media in Iceland serves as a soap box for those wishing to express an opinion. In recent years the afforestation program in Iceland has been criticised repeatedly. Because the Iceland Forest Service wants to work in accordance to the desires of the people, an IGM-Gallup survey was done in 2004 to test whether or not those opinions represented in the media were indeed those of the Icelandic people and if policy changes within the Iceland Forest Service were necessary. As these figures show, people are very positive about afforestation, the effects of forests on the land and its people and want more forests planted. Nor do the people feel that forests threaten other environmental and social values.

Percent of Icelanders surveyed who are:

In favour of increase the area of forests: 85%

Of the opinion that forests are good for the land:91%

Of the opinion that forests are good for the people: 92%

The Icelandic Forest Service has worked directly with state agencies and NGOs in the planning process on both national and regional levels. It is based on our experience from this work that the goal of preventing estate afforestation plans from being forced to go through the formal planning process was formed. If laws are passed making this type of planning necessary, not only could the plans be biased by those against afforestation and therefore against public will, but the expense and complexity of the system would prevent landowners from going through the process. This would effectively put a halt to the afforestation program in Iceland, again in opposition to the goals and desires of the majority of the people.

The IFS is however very aware of its responsibility towards various environmental and cultural issues and will continue to include consider these values in all aspects of its advisory and planning efforts.

Since many of the problems discussed so far reflect human nature and not the devious intentions of a few individuals, it is unlikely that problems such as these are limited to Iceland. The ELAV project in Iceland, involves designing a process by which a multi-resource land use plan can best be produced. This process can then be used in other parts of the county.

When attempting to define the desired uses of multiple resources, the first step is to learn from the public what resources they want to use and how. These can then be put into a framework that allows their utilisation in a sustainable manner. However, the main problem remains of trying to represent the majority of stakeholders, not just a few.

The problem was, what is the most effective way to elicit public opinion and how to gauge when this has been done.

From the various programs and projects, both those connected to ELAV and others, it has become abundantly clear that there is no patent answer or single method by which this can be done. The best method(s) depends entirely on the target group, and the persons doing the out reach work. Below are the methods deemed most effective in this effort.

On a national and district level- The only method that has proven effective has been to use telephone surveys designed by IFS and reviewed and administered by a third party. When dealing with groups of this size, because of the cost involved, it is impossible to address all issues. However this is the best and perhaps the only way to get a well founded idea of the attitudes and desires of the general public. Agencies and institutions dealing with planning at this level, owe it to the public to do this type of survey, regardless of the expense. For the study area, general attitudes of the public were taken from the IMP-Gallup survey done in 2004.

Small to medium size groups- It was relatively easy to reach this type of group and meetings have proven very successful . Experience has shown however, that exclusive use of local papers and web sites for advertising these meetings has limited results. Therefore letters are sent to all individuals known to be interested in specific aspects of the project. However, both the local paper and web sites were also used to try to reach interested individuals that were unknown to those planning the meetings. This resulted in an attendance rate much higher than that expected by meeting planners.

Specific user groups- The only method of reaching this group effectively is by one on one interviews done in the field. Again this method is expensive, but it not only provides specifically desired data, it also brings to light issues that may be overlooked by those designing the survey.

When the official procedure for obtaining public opinion is compared to that used by the IFS, a marked difference is apparent. The official procedure relies on the public actively seeking to make themselves heard, while the IFS approach actively seeks the opinion of the public. The IFS feels that despite the extra expense and work involved, it is well justified as it the most effective way of gathering the information necessary for resource planning in a socially responsible manner.