

Citizen participation in urban and community planning: Bavaria case study

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Nowadays, virtually no major urban and community planning processes take place without citizen participation. This Bavaria case study demonstrates that the success of these participatory processes is dependent on a wide range of factors, for example, careful planning. “Time factors”, essentially the continuity of the different stages in a particular process, can play a crucial role.

Community and urban planning is a key local authority responsibility. Its goal is to ensure that a local area is planned and developed sustainably and in a forward-looking manner. In recent years and decades, there has been a profound shift in how these tasks have been addressed by local authorities. In the past, they were handled exclusively by planners and administrators in consultation with the relevant political leaders, and there was hardly any public involvement at all. As a rule, the only legal requirement was for the finalised plans to be put on public display and the public invited to comment on them. Today, however, the public is involved in the planning process from an early stage and may, for instance, be invited to contribute ideas at a point where various alternative proposals are still under examination.

Case study of a municipality in Upper Bavaria

This case study focuses on how citizen participation in urban and community planning has changed and the impact it now has on planning processes. We shall explore most particularly the specific role played by “time factors” in participatory processes, taking as an illustration a municipality in Upper Bavaria. A planned rerouting of a main through road in this municipality and the resulting benefits for the town centre have divided the local community. We shall also describe the communication process between the local authority and the public and the key role often played by mediators.

The Bavarian municipality of Inning am Ammersee is situated in the picturesque foothills of the Alps between Wörthsee and Ammersee, just 35 km west of Munich. Inning’s attractive location and excellent transport links make it a popular recreational destination for the people of Munich, who often set off on their weekend outings from the pier at Ammersee Lake.

The municipality’s importance has been bound up with its favourable location for many centuries. Between the 16th and the end of the 18th centuries, it served as a staging post and storage facility on the salt road from the residential seat of Munich to the town of Landsberg. Today, it lies on the A96 motorway that links Munich to the Allgäu region and Switzerland. There is a bypass that makes a large detour around the state capital of Munich and runs right through the middle of the municipality, connecting the county cities of Fürstenfeldbruck and Starnberg. This generates a large amount of through traffic within the town. While, for centuries, good transport links were a blessing, today high volumes of traffic have a detrimental impact on the lives of many local residents.

As long ago as the 1960s, the local authority's land use plan contained a proposal for a bypass to reduce the volume of traffic on the main artery passing through the municipality. At that time, the local community raised no objections to this regional planning proposal. Like all municipalities in the Munich area, the population of Inning has undergone rapid growth over recent times, rising by 40 percent to more than 4,500 over the past 25 years.

However, the decision on whether or not the road is built rests with the state of Bavaria rather than the local council. The regional roads departments established by the Bavarian government prioritise the wishes of local authorities and applications submitted by them. And indeed, over the past few decades, the construction of an Inning bypass was not deemed to be a matter of urgency. However, as time went by, views changed leading the local authority to draw up concrete planning proposals, primarily because a huge increase in volumes of traffic had caused a rise both in local noise pollution and in road safety issues. These plans and, indeed, the question of whether a bypass should be built at all have been the subject of much public debate. Some local residents have been concerned about the visual impact on the landscape in the area between the town and nearby Ammersee Lake and are not convinced that a bypass would actually be able to deliver the intended reduction in noise levels. Two local action groups were formed, one in favour of the planned bypass and one against. In December 2013, the issue was put to a local referendum, a form of citizen participation provided for under Bavarian local government law that involves a simple yes/no vote. A narrow 50.75 percent majority voted against the construction of the bypass. The public's decision is binding for the local council concerned.

However, the result of the local referendum did not resolve the issue within the community and the debate has raged on. Two key questions were (1) how can traffic noise in the area be reduced? and (2) how can road safety be improved for vulnerable road users such as children, the elderly, people with disabilities and mothers with prams?

In order to steer and shape a constructive debate and ensure good communication with the local community, in early 2015, the local council took the decision to engage a traffic planner to draw up a status report on all the municipality's roads and paths and to launch a citizen participation process on the subject of mobility. It also contracted an engineering firm to produce a "noise survey" to ascertain the actual noise pollution levels in the residential properties adjoining the main through road and motorway.

A participation strategy was developed in parallel with the aid of a moderator and mediator which set out the following steps:

Spring 2015:

1. **Data collection** to ensure an evidence-based approach and to allow actions and options to be identified for the subsequent discussion process.
2. **Broadening of the theme** from traffic calming to mobility so that traffic flows and different modes of transport in the municipality could be assessed and discussed.

Summer 2015:

3. **Presentation** of the preliminary results to the local council's transport committee.
4. **A first public workshop** to be held with randomly selected and personally invited participants. The goal of this public workshop is first and foremost to ensure that everyone is equally well informed. The traffic planner and noise survey experts will present their data and findings which will then serve as the basis for developing solutions in partnership with the public.

Autumn 2015:

5. The traffic planner is to assess the **feasibility** of the solutions, ideas and comments put forward by the participants in the public workshop and by the local council. A number of **draft proposals will be compiled** and presented at a second public workshop where specific implementation measures can be discussed.

6. **Technical meetings** are to be held with the relevant authorities to discuss the proposals in the revised traffic report and to carry out an initial review of their feasibility.

7. **Second public workshop:** presentation of the final traffic report; development and discussion of concrete implementation proposals (see above).

Winter 2015/16:

8. A **closed meeting of the local council** will be held to incorporate the public's proposals into a local authority action plan.

9. **Presentation of and vote on the local authority action plan** at a public meeting of the local council.

Spring 2016:

10. Begin **implementation** of the first measures.

Although everything went according to schedule up to Point 4, unfortunately the traffic planner was unable to assess the proposals from the public workshop and incorporate them into the final traffic report within the proposed timeframe. This caused the initial positive atmosphere, openness, constructive attitude and indeed curiosity to see how the process progressed that had been built up during the first public workshop to evaporate, leading to a new spiral of suspicion and dissatisfaction among the members of the public. In the end, a second local referendum on the construction of a bypass was held in January 2016. On this occasion, the bypass was rejected by a much larger majority than in 2013 (56 percent of the population voted against). The local council responded by removing the bypass from the local land use plan, and the issue is now off the agenda for the foreseeable future.

In June 2016, the now-completed traffic report was presented to the local community at an information and discussion event. On this occasion, an invitation to all local residents to attend the meeting was published in the local newsletter. The number of attendees was 20 percent lower than for the first public workshop. Following the clear-cut result of the local referendum, it was evident right from the outset that any future measures would no longer involve anything on the scale of a bypass. Instead, there would be a patchwork of smaller measures aimed at reducing the volume of traffic and associated noise pollution.

Despite this, numerous proposals were still forthcoming: improvements to local public transport, the construction of a bus terminal, remodelling of the town centre, carrying out a pilot project on innovative road markings in partnership with the roads department and county council, re-routing access to central parts of the municipality and improved cycle paths and parking facilities.

The local council will work on the outputs of this meeting throughout the summer of 2016 and submit the necessary preliminary applications to the relevant authorities by autumn 2016.

In this case study, the following goals and functions of citizen participation in urban and community planning were achieved with varying degrees of success:

- ***The public should be integrated into the planning and decision-making process. This includes providing them with access to the relevant documentation. They should be able to understand and influence the planning and decision-making process.***

Despite the fact that local council and local action groups facilitated extensive discussions and information, the moderators at the first public workshop still encountered a lack of clarity, incomplete knowledge of the facts and various misunderstandings over the planning and decision-making process. These issues were cleared up at the first and second public workshops. However, the overall process suffered from the fact that the final traffic report was not drafted and data was not supplied by the local authority within the timeframe promised at the first public workshop.

- ***Members of the public can raise concerns and contribute ideas in advance of the formal participation process, thereby helping to optimise the planning process.***

The entire process, from the original planning proposals in the 1960s to the time when the construction of the planned bypass actually appeared on the agenda, took far too long. The size of the community, effects on local residents and people's values all changed significantly over this 40-year period. People questioned could not even remember previous communication and decision-making processes. The public workshop did indeed provide an informal means of participation aimed at optimising the planning process. However, as described above, it proved impossible to sustain the positive and constructive mood that was initially created because of the time taken to complete the traffic report. Notwithstanding, some of the concerns raised and ideas gathered from the public workshop were in fact incorporated into the traffic report.

- ***The public should have a better understanding of the circumstances and background relating to the process.***

This requirement was met through the public workshop and the subsequent information and discussion event.

- ***The legitimacy of the planning and decision-making process is strengthened if public objections are taken on board at the decision-making stage or if good reasons are given for rejecting them. A reasoned explanation should also be provided of the weight attached to different interests when reaching an overall decision.***

Legitimacy was guaranteed through the two local referendums. Explanations were also provided for a variety of different issues, for example, why it is legally impossible to enforce a 30 km/h speed limit on state highways. The weight attached to different interests was not addressed through the informal participation process, but expressed via the outcome of the local referendum.

In general, the lesson that can be learned from this case study is that “time factors” – or more precisely “continuity factors” – have a significant influence on the success of participatory urban and community planning processes. The case of Inning am Ammersee shows that even with a successful public workshop, any confidence in the process that this builds up among the local community can quickly evaporate if the authorities fail to deliver their promises on time. In such circumstances, citizen participation can even give rise to an escalation of the situation or a sudden switch in public mood that can ultimately take on a momentum of its own. It is important to guard against these dangers through constant communication and continuous dialogue across all different levels. This case study further demonstrates that ideally professionally supported citizen participation should be incorporated into all levels of the process from the earliest possible stage.

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