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Evaluating Strategies for Plan Coordination: A Survey of Canadian Planners

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Abstract

In the contemporary context, many Canadian cities have large numbers of plans that present major challenges for coordination and implementation. The paper reports the results of a survey of Canadian planning practitioners who were asked about the strategies they use to coordinate plans and policies. The most highly-rated strategy, collaborating and sharing data for consensus-based decision-making, reflects the dominance of the collaborative planning paradigm in motivating the discipline. Data analysis discovered strong correlations between perceptions of the efficacy of a strategy and practitioners saying they used the strategy: in other words, planners value not only what they have been taught in theory, but what they do in practice.

Keywords practice, coordination, implementation, survey, collaborative planning

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Evaluating Strategies for Plan Coordination: A Survey of Canadian Planners

Whereas fifty years ago the typical city might have had a comprehensive land-use master plan with sections or chapters on topics such as housing, transportation, and industry (Chapin and Kaiser 1979), today communities often create specialized plans on specific themes, including sustainability, active transportation, heritage conservation, economic development, and hazard management (Hopkins 2001). Cities in large urban agglomerations may engage with regional networks for waste management or rapid transportation systems, engendering complicated issues of governance (Meligrana 1999; Davoudi and Evans 2005). Moreover, many cities create district or secondary plans for special zones (e.g., business park, waterfront, or downtown) or for residential neighbourhoods, creating nested sets of plans that require effective coordination in the processes of preparation and implementation to avoid conflicting aims or unachievable objectives. The challenge of developing strategies for improving the coordination of planning activities has never been greater (Stead and Meijers 2009).

In this paper, we present the results of a survey of planning practitioners to evaluate their perceptions of the effectiveness of various strategies used to facilitate plan coordination and implementation. How do planners explain and justify their practices? Understanding planners' opinions offers useful insight into why they do what they do, even if their actions can't guarantee effective plan implementation.

The demand for integration for effective implementation is not new, as Stead and Meijers (2009) note: Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) described demands for coordination as common, and Jennings and Crane (1994) suggested coordination is the holy grail of policy-making. What makes the subject of interest for planning today is the plethora of plans that Canadian communities are generating in response to recent community and political pressures (Holden 2012). Mid-sized and large Canadian cities may have dozens of plans in place, both at the city-wide scale, and for neighbourhoods or districts, often featuring conflicting or unreconciled objectives and policies (Hall, Grant, and Habib 2017). While some cities actively attempt to coordinate across plans (Taylor and Grant 2015), others lack the staff resources or the political will to ensure policy integration (Grant, Beed, and Manuel 2016).

We begin with a brief review of relevant literature to situate our study. First, we discuss the context of planning in Canada and some factors contributing to the generation of large numbers of plans. Then we discuss literature on policy integration, plan coordination, and implementation relevant to our investigation, and summarize what recent surveys of practitioners say about contemporary planning practice. Following the literature review, we present the results of a 2014 survey of Canadian planning practitioners to examine their perceptions of the frequency and effectiveness of strategies intended to facilitate plan coordination. As Binder (2011) theorized, analysis demonstrates that practitioners value what their practice values: the survey results suggest that planners consistently evaluate the strategies that their institutions use as most effective for plan coordination. Does this reflect political naivete about the role of planning in the urban political economy (Harvey 1989; Keil 2009) or path dependencies that shape practice in ways that practitioners cannot overcome (Sorensen 2015)? We found planners somewhat conflicted about the importance of organizational hierarchy in creating positive conditions to facilitate plan coordination, a situation that may reflect tensions between

professional values that advocate collaboration and consensus-building, and political realities that leave planners taking directions from their bosses without considering broader ethical or distributional issues (Campbell and Marshall 1999; Fainstein 2000). In the final section of the paper we reflect on the implications of our empirical contribution.

Aiming for effective planning

Planning justifies its interventions by claiming to reflect the interests and needs of the community in which it is practiced (Kaiser and Godschalk 1995; Innes 1996; Healey 1997). Yet, as observers and practitioners have long recognised, planning is intrinsically bound up with politics (Altshuler 1966; Filion et al. 2015) and has been criticized as serving the interests of capital (Harvey 1989) and urban elites (Yiftachel.1998). Although planning seeks to be rational and efficient, it operates within organizations that respond to and engage political and economic processes that shape short-term decision-making and long-term policy implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984; March 1991; Peters 1998). As Sorensen (2015) argues, the institutions within which planning functions often generate continuity in policy outcomes even as organizations try to change.

The growing influence of new urbanism and smart growth approaches--with a focus on urban intensification, transit orientation, and streamlined development processes (Fainstein 2000; Grant 2006)—and of neoliberal philosophies—with their emphasis on improving the market for urban growth (Kipfer and Keil 2002; Keil 2009) have converged to undermine the earlier dominance of the master plan; at the same time, they reinforced political commitments to the idea of long-term planning. Because cultural and political understandings of community interest and needs changes over time, planners have responded with plans to address the issues and suit the paradigms of the day. Some examples of contemporary policy imperatives include the recent trend of creating sustainability plans (Conroy and Berke 2004; Grant, Beed, and Manuel 2016), climate change action plans (Burch 2010; Measham et al. 2011), and cultural plans (Kovacs 2010; McDonough and Wekerle 2011). As governments and planners have responded to multiple interest groups and agendas, plan-making activities and plans have proliferated.

Although municipal planning departments typically develop land-use plans, in mid-sized and larger cities other departments (such as engineering, transportation, or parks) and agencies (such as transit, water supply, or waste management) may produce specialized plans, with varying degrees of inter-agency and departmental coordination and cooperation (Hopkins 2001; Filion et al. 2015; Taylor and Grant 2015). Departments within a municipality or teams within a planning organization depend on information from other groups to make informed decisions (Hopkins 2001; Tindal and Tindal 2009); however, data may be withheld or shared imperfectly (McDonough and Wekerle 2011). Power imbalances within organizations, conflicting agendas, and divergent values may frustrate cooperation (Davies 2009; Filion et al. 2015). Agencies may have competing interests: for instance, a city engineering department may seek to reduce congestion through road widening, while the planning department hopes to increase cycling and transit investments (El-Geneidy, Patterson, and St. Louis 2015). Even when attempting to coordinate policies, agencies may have different aims or levels of commitment, hampering effective action (Tornberg 2012).

In Canada, land-use planning is generally managed by municipalities at the local or regional level, under authority delegated by the province or territory (Leung 2003; Hodge and Gordon 2014). Provinces may compel municipalities to adopt plans to respond to current concerns: for instance, they may pass legislation to require growth plans (Macdonald and Keil 2012) or plans to protect water-supply lands (Mitchell 2005). Planning scholars have argued that state planning mandates can affect the quality of plans (Berke and French 1994; Burby and Dalton 1994; Conroy and Berke 2004), but implementation also responds to local factors (Talen 1996a, 1996b; Grant, Beed, and Manuel 2016). Although it does not govern land, the federal government in Canada sometimes incentivises plan-making by linking access to funding: for instance, during the 1970s the federal housing agency encouraged neighbourhood planning through the Neighbourhood Improvement Programme (Carroll 1989), and in the 2000s federal authorities encouraged communities to develop sustainability and climate action plans to receive revenues from a national tax on gasoline (Grant, Beed, and Manuel 2016; Labbé et al. 2017). Municipalities face a neoliberal imperative to be efficient and accountable to the public while delivering programs and managing initiatives (Tindal and Tindal 2009), but the sheer number of plans in place and the limited financial and staff resources available can frustrate efforts to coordinate and implement policy (Taylor and Grant 2015; Filion et al. 2015). Nonetheless, communities in many places have developed a wide range of plans on themes including transportation (Hatzopoulou and Miller 2008), urban design (Southworth 1989), and risk reduction (Labossière and McGee 2017). Planners increasingly face a mismatch between the demand for new plans and the resources available to coordinate policies. Finding ways to ensure policy integration in spatial planning and other forms of planning has thus become increasingly important (Kidd 2007; Vigar 2009). As Stead and Meijers (2009, 317) explain:

As part of planning modernisation agendas, planning systems are being recast as mechanisms to improve policy integration, both horizontally, across policy domains, and vertically, between policy actors and scales of governance ... Integrated spatial planning is becoming more and more part of the planning orthodoxy throughout much of Europe and beyond.

In the UK, the New Labour government pushed an agenda of joined-up government in the 2000s, to encourage integration and coordination: results proved mixed at best (Stead 2003; Davies 2009).

Planning agencies sometimes create formal mechanisms to facilitate coordination. In the days of master planning communities used periodic comprehensive land-use plan review processes to coordinate various plans and policies within their purview (Hopkins 2001). Contemporary mechanisms may be in the form of an organization responsible to coordinate, as in the case of regional planning commissions created during municipal amalgamations in western Canada (Tindal and Tindal 2009). Alternatively, communities may adopt joint coordination processes, as Tornberg (2012) recommends for national-municipal transportation planning projects in Sweden. In some cases, the internal structures and processes of planning agencies may provide strategies for coordination. Research on decision-making and knowledge-sharing within governments has investigated the effects of organizational hierarchies on collaboration and coordination among agencies. Some models suggest that organizational hierarchies facilitate effective coordination by senior individuals or agencies with the information needed to direct coordinated action and the power to enforce it (Peters 1998). However, strong vertical hierarchies may inhibit informal

horizontal information-sharing and collaboration among groups (Peters 1998; Willem and Buelens 2007), potentially reinforcing the jurisdictional and departmental silos found in municipal governments. Canadian planners have identified horizontal processes such as interdepartmental meetings and committees as strategies for plan coordination within otherwise hierarchical structures (Taylor and Grant 2015).

Laurian et al. (2004, 555) suggests that several factors affect coordination and implementation in planning, including ‘the quality of the plan; the capacity and commitment of land developers to implement plans; the capacity and commitment of the staff and leadership of planning agencies to implement plans; and the interactions between developers and the agency.’ Administrative structures (Krause, Feiock, and Hawkins 2014), and the role played by senior executive officers in municipal organisations (Burch 2010; Grant, Taylor, and Wheeler 2017), can affect responsiveness and local priorities. Stead and Meijers (2009, 324) identify five categories of factors that may facilitate or inhibit policy integration: political; institutional / organizational; economic / financial; process / management / instrumental; and behavioural / cultural / personal. Integration, they write, depends ‘on political commitment and leaders who are able to convey the bigger picture and are able to look for the right partners with compatible needs to pursue crosscutting objectives’ (Stead and Meijers 2009, 324). In evaluating planning for climate change adaptation, Measham et al. (2011, 889) noted that factors such as leadership, institutional context, and competing agendas influenced the effectiveness of community actions.

In recent decades, planning scholars have often defined the planner’s role as one of collaboration with multiple stakeholders to build consensus around decisions (Innes 1996; Healey 1997). Consensus-building may facilitate coordination by enhancing social capital and trust among stakeholders (Innes 1996). High levels of trust within an organization improve knowledge-sharing (Willem and Buelens 2007) and may temper political or strategic decision-making (March 1989, 1991). Consensus-building may embed coordination deliberately in the plan-creation process, requiring the participation of all stakeholders and conscious consideration of diverse perspectives (Healey 1997). A Toronto study on cultural planning highlighted planners’ collaboration with the arts community and developers as crucial for implementing cultural planning objectives (McDonough and Wekerle 2011). A recent survey of U.S. planners indicated that planners today are more likely to conform to a technical role than to a political role, compared with their preferences in the 1970s (Lauria and Long 2017, 202). In a compelling paper on the relationship between values and practice, Binder (2011) argues that planners adapt their values to the nature of their practice: this leaves them generally persuaded of the effectiveness of their work. As he writes, ‘Regarding the “problem” of ethics and values: all practices self-legitimate – we all value what we do’ (Binder 2011, 237). Although actors have agency within the structures of government, they may identify conflicts between professional values and the realities of practice.

The literature on planning practice thus reveals a plethora of challenges faced by practicing planners and enumerates potential constraints on plan implementation. Yet little is known about how planners trying to manage a growing number of plans in the contemporary urban context see their own roles in the process. The next section of the paper discusses our survey of Canadian planners to understand their perspectives on the kinds of strategies they are using to coordinate diverse plans, and their evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategies available to them. How

do they understand their roles and options in the planning environment? Drawing on key themes emerging from the literature on planning practice and implementation discussed above, as well as our experience in studying Canadian planning, we developed a list of items for respondents to evaluate. We included such questions in a longer questionnaire dealing with various issues related to how planners develop and coordinate plans (for details on the survey, see Hall 2014). The survey—designed to understand practitioners’ perspectives—was the first step in a multi-year, mixed-methods study of plan coordination in Canada.

Surveying Canadian planners

The analysis that follows presents data from a 2014 online survey of Canadian planners. The survey comprised a non-random sample of 468 complete responses¹. To find respondents, we collected planners’ email addresses from local government websites across Canada, and also sent participation requests through the mailing lists of the Canadian Institute of Planners (the national professional body), Muniscope (a research service for municipal governments and their staff), and alumni networks of our planning program. We encouraged recipients to invite fellow planners to participate by sharing the link to the survey.

The survey sample constitutes a reasonable cross-section of Canadian planners. Geographically, the distribution of respondents was roughly proportional to provincial populations, although the sample slightly underrepresented Quebec and Manitoba. We received responses from every province and territory except Nunavut (in northern Canada). Smaller communities may have been over-represented: 41% of our respondents worked in communities of under 10,000 people, and another 22% worked in communities of between 10,000 and 50,000 people; 16% of respondents were from cities with over 500,000 people. Most major Canadian cities provided at least one respondent; multiple respondents replied from large cities such as Toronto and Vancouver. Most respondents had significant experience in planning, with 53% having at least ten years professional experience and 26% having five to ten years of experience. A large majority worked in the public sector: 59% of respondents described themselves as municipal planners, 15% were regional planners and 11% were development officers, which are generally public-sector jobs. Ten percent of respondents were planning consultants, likely in the private sector. We also received some responses from town clerks, planning technicians, building inspectors and similar planning-related roles. The survey did not ask respondents about their age, gender or other demographic characteristics.

We focus here on a section from the survey where we asked respondents to identify and rate potential plan coordination strategies. We asked, ‘What strategies or approaches are planners using to coordinate plans?’, and ‘Please rank the effectiveness of each of these as potential strategies for coordinating plans and policies’. Table 1 shows the list of options given for each question. Respondents selected from a five-point ordered scale for each option, from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’ to identify strategies in use, and from ‘very ineffective’ to ‘very effective’ to rank efficacy.

Table 1 *goes about here*

In addition to asking respondents to rate the effectiveness of each plan coordination strategy, we included general questions about plan coordination. We asked, 'To what extent is policy and plan coordination a priority in the community where you most frequently work', offering a five-point ordered scale from 'very low priority' to 'very high priority'. Another question asked, 'Based on your experience, do you agree or disagree with the following? Coordination is not a problem in our community: we can coordinate implementation across multiple plans effectively', with a five-point ordered scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. To understand respondents' perceptions of effectiveness and to measure how coordination strategies may affect the prioritization and implementation of plan coordination in communities, we correlated responses to these questions to whether respondents believed planners were using each strategy.

To understand why certain strategies might be more effective at facilitating plan coordination, we examined relationships between the use of coordination strategies and another survey question, 'What do you see as some of the challenges to coordinating plans and policies?' Table 2 shows the options for this question. We invited respondents to rate each option on a five-point ordered scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.²

Table 2 goes about here

We studied the relationships between the use of plan coordination strategies and the existence of coordination challenges by generating a set of ordered logistic regression models. We hypothesized that these variables would interact in two ways. In one case, proactive coordination strategies taken by a planning department would act to ameliorate challenges to plan coordination. For these strategies, we would expect that the presence of the strategy would make respondents *less likely* to observe the challenge. In the second case, the presence of certain challenges would prompt planning departments into reactive strategies. For these strategies, we would expect the presence of the strategy would make the challenge *more likely* to be observed. We predicted that the proactive strategies would dominate, and so made coordination challenges dependent on each coordination strategy in our regression models. Our desire to look at the effects of each strategy independently of the other strategies reinforced this decision. We included community size and respondents' years of experience as independent variables to examine their impact on coordination challenges and separate their effects from the impacts of the coordination strategies.

Measuring the effectiveness of coordination strategies

Table 3 reports three measures of effectiveness for each plan coordination strategy. The first is the percent of respondents who perceive the strategy to be either effective or very effective. The other two present the correlation between whether their community used each strategy and two measures of coordination efficacy in the respondent's community: whether they believe their community coordinates plans effectively and whether they see plan coordination as a priority in their community. Strategy use and perception of effectiveness were measured on five-point scales from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'; perception of priority was measured on a five-point scale from 'very low priority' to 'very high priority'. Table 3 reports Kendall's rank correlation coefficient, which is appropriate for ordinal data; Pearson correlation tests gave similar results. We noted a wide range in the share of those who felt each strategy was effective, though between 63% and 73% of respondents judged most strategies effective. Some 82% of respondents felt that collaborating and sharing data for consensus-based decision-making was effective, whereas only 26% agreed that allowing plans to lapse because of changing conditions was effective.

Table 3 goes about here

Perceptions of the efficacy of coordination strategies generally correlated with the extent to which respondents thought plan coordination was effective and prioritized within their communities, with a few exceptions. Although having a clear organizational hierarchy correlated highly with whether respondents thought their community prioritized coordination, only 65% of respondents saw hierarchies as providing an effective plan coordination strategy. Another discrepancy occurred around the strategy of creating processes or organizations to deal with specific coordination challenges: 53% of respondents agreed it is an effective strategy, although positive responses on that item had a much lower correlation with effective and prioritized coordination.

We were not surprised to see that most respondents agreed that allowing plans to lapse due to changing priorities and conditions was not an effective strategy for coordinating plans. Where communities do allow plans to lapse, respondents were less likely to agree that their community effectively coordinates plans and considerably less likely to see plan coordination as a priority in their community. In written comments that respondents could add after the questions, some planners noted that periodic plan review processes offered important opportunities for coordinating policies. For instance, one planner wrote, 'When we are undertaking a review of an existing plan or starting to prepare a new plan or policy, the first thing we do is try to determine the existing framework that we are in. Part of this process is seeing where we are going to be overlapping with other policies and plans.'

While the survey asked whether respondents believed that planners had opportunities for coordinating priorities at interdepartmental meetings, due to an oversight in the survey design we did not ask whether such meetings constituted an effective plan coordination strategy. Thus although 63% of those surveyed agreed that planners create special processes to deal with coordination issues, we do not know whether practitioners judged that an effective strategy. In a written comment, however, one planner noted, '[we] need to have more meetings for better

coordinating. Nobody looks at linkages. Every department worries about their own objectives.’ In contexts of potential inter-departmental rivalry, planners saw meetings as providing opportunities to identify differences and look for ways to resolve them.

Identifying challenges associated with coordination strategies

Table 4 shows the odds ratio parameter estimates for the ordered logistic regression of coordination challenges on strategies, community size, and respondents’ experience. In the table, odds ratios indicate how much more likely respondents are to observe the coordination challenge when the given strategy is observed. Odds ratios greater than 1 mean the strategy is associated with an increased likelihood of challenge, and ratios less than 1 indicate the strategy is associated with decreased probability. The results support the hypothesis that planners believe that coordination strategies may help mitigate problems and may be influenced by perceptions of a community’s challenges.

Table 4 goes about here

Only 41% of respondents agreed with the statement that their community had a clear hierarchy, the lowest for all strategies covered in the survey. The strategies of collaborating for consensus decisions and having a clear organizational hierarchy both correlated highly with effective and prioritized plan coordination. These strategies also related significantly to several coordination challenges. In our sample, respondents who observed clear organizational hierarchies were less likely to label several issues as challenges: too many plans, insufficient staff time and expertise, difficulty of changing past practices, and the lack of an established hierarchy of priorities. Those who said planners collaborate, share data, and consult for consensus-based decisions were less likely to see the independence of outside agencies as a problem. Where respondents observed these strategies, they were more likely to see changing community needs as a challenge for plan coordination. It is possible that planners think these strategies are effective in ameliorating challenges communities experience coordinating plans, helping to focus coordination efforts on community needs.

Holding interdepartmental priority coordination meetings similarly appears to ameliorate certain coordination challenges. Respondents who said this strategy is used were less likely to see insufficient data availability and staff expertise as problems than those who indicated the strategy is not used. While interdepartmental meetings do not appear to make coordination much more effective or a priority in respondents’ communities, they may help planning staff gain access to information, expertise, and relationships they need to facilitate coordination activities.

Coordinating policies when revising a community’s comprehensive plan was a highly-rated strategy that correlated strongly with measures of effective coordination. However, respondents who agreed that planners coordinated policies when revising comprehensive plans were more likely to identify insufficient staff time, staff expertise, and data availability as challenges to plan coordination. This strategy may be a coordination measure that planning departments necessarily resort to when facing limited resources for more frequent interventions.

The regression results help explain why allowing plans to lapse due to changing conditions was

not positively correlated with effective plan coordination. Respondents who experienced plans being allowed to lapse were more likely to identify almost all survey items as challenges, including dependence on political priorities and market conditions, competing interests among departments, professional rivalries, and difficulty of changing past practices. Planning practitioners are unlikely to make conscious decisions to allow plans to lapse, since their professional expectations favour consistent and coherent policies designed to ensure long-term predictability. We find it rather more likely that the presence of such challenges creates conditions under which planners cannot muster political, financial, or other resources to enable them to update plans. Allowing plans to lapse could thus indicate a level of dysfunction within local government that undermines the potential planners see for on-going planning policy coordination.

Our two other coordination strategies—creating processes or organizations for coordination and appointing champions to facilitate coordination—had few or no significant associations with coordination challenges. While appointing coordination champions significantly correlates with assessments of effective coordination, the regression provides few clues as to why. Perhaps the presence of coordination champions ameliorates challenges the survey did not cover. Two survey respondents commented on the item. One noted bleakly, ‘I have yet to see an effective champion of coordinating.’ Another wrote, ‘In small communities, appointing a champion becomes a challenge because the pool of volunteers/staff that we have to pull from is sparse at best.’

We found community size significantly associated with several challenges to plan coordination. Respondents from larger communities were more likely than those from smaller ones to identify too many plans, competing interests among departments, dependence on political priorities, and professional rivalries as challenges. Those from smaller communities, by contrast, were more likely to recognize insufficient data availability, changing community needs, and dependence on legislative requirements as challenges. Several respondents from small communities added comments to suggest that coordination problems were uncommon in their community. For instance, one wrote, ‘coordination of plans is low on the totem pole in most small communities.’ These results support an intuitive understanding that bigger towns and cities have larger planning departments and higher-stakes professional and political arenas, while small towns may have fewer resources but a more direct connection to leaders and constituents. Respondents with more years of experience in planning were more likely to identify planning’s dependence on political priorities as a challenge to plan coordination. We discovered no significant association between the extent of the respondent’s planning experience and other challenges.

Coordinating in practice

Our survey of Canadian practitioners found the profession’s dominant paradigm --- collaborative planning – scored most highly among respondents as a strategy for effectively coordinating plans, while planners dismissed the idea that letting plans lapse or expire could be a suitable approach.³ The conventional wisdom about good planning in the literature similarly informed practitioners’ assessments of good practice. At the same time, though, planners acknowledged the challenges of effective plan coordination and implementation. The scope of the issue—in terms of the number of plans and policies currently in play—may be new, but the problems of

trying to manage conflicts and dealing with the complications of politics in planning are not.

One potentially confounding factor limits the generalizability of some of our findings. Ten comments written in response to the follow-up question, 'Are there other options we have missed in this list [of strategies]', indicate that some planners evaluated the effectiveness of strategies in general, while others responded based on their own practice in specific communities. For instance, one planner wrote, 'some of the statements that I disagreed with are things that I agree planners should be doing, but I do not agree that we are doing them'. Another said, 'all neutral answers mean that these "should" happen, but don't necessarily happen in real life.' The question also triggered 11 respondents to reflect on the role of politics in limiting good planning. For example, one noted, 'I know there is a lot of room for these answers to change, but right now the political context in our city makes it hard to implement plans,' while another suggested, 'Planning and politics do not mix well and should be kept separate.' The comments illustrate practitioners' perceptions that their practice does not live up to their expectations of how planning should work, and perhaps a level of naivete about the potential of planning to be politically neutral.

What can we conclude about effective strategies for coordinating multiple plans? Our analysis examined the potential effectiveness of plan coordination strategies from two perspectives: asking planners whether they believe that strategies are effective and measuring the association between the use of each strategy and planners' views of the effectiveness of planning in their communities. The results from each of these perspectives largely reinforce each other. Planners viewed collaborating to build consensus, coordinating policies when revising comprehensive plans, and appointing coordination champions as effective strategies: these strategies then significantly correlated with measures of effective coordination. When offered the opportunity to add strategies that the survey had not mentioned, only six respondents gave options, which included sharing best practices, doing policy scans prior to initiating a plan, using computer programs to compare proposals to plans, and developing memoranda of understanding amongst agencies. In one comment on a survey, a respondent explained how planners deploy 'best practice' strategies in search of the 'public interest':

A best practice is to take the team approach where the planner takes the lead on circulating applications and sits down with other managers/staff responsible for other affected areas to coordinate comments and work through conflicting policy to provide an overall recommendation or policy direction that balances competing interests so that the planning policy remains in the overall public interest.

The survey data indicate that planners' faith in their own efficacy influence their views of which strategies are effective. As Binder (2011, 230) argues, 'Habit is central for understanding the nature of practice.' For each plan coordination strategy included in the survey, we found a statistically significant positive correlation between respondents believing the strategy is in use and judging it effective. Although planners generally value what they do, we did find some exceptions. For instance, while clear hierarchical structures correlated highly with perceptions of effective plan coordination, planners undervalued them as a strategy for action. A profession whose theoretical and practical discourse is increasingly influenced by paradigms of collaborative planning and consensus-building may leave its members somewhat ambivalent about hierarchical structures and the significance of leadership in moving coordination forward.

At first glance, it may seem contradictory to find that consensus-building through collaboration and clear organizational hierarchies are both likely to help planners coordinate multiple plans. In practice, however, planners must find ways to bridge departmental differences, local politics, community demands, and expectations from other levels of government. Having the skills to develop consensus while working in organizations that employ hierarchical structures to manage decision-making has become part of what planners define as their jobs. Practitioners appear able, for the most part, to resolve incongruities between valuing collaboration and consensus-building while working within structures where hierarchy and local politics shape outcomes.

Planners surveyed see coordinating policies and plans as a critical part of their responsibility, but they name many of the same kinds of impediments that Stead and Meijers (2009) identified, including political, fiscal, organizational, and process factors. Several comments, especially from planners in smaller communities, identified insufficient resources (staff and time) as impediments to plan coordination. In comments, six respondents from the provinces of Ontario and Alberta specifically mentioned that provincial legislation, departments, or tribunals complicated efforts to coordinate plans. One wrote, 'With the legislative changes imposed on communities, we simply lack the resources to do much planning.' Another planner, though, argued for a more nuanced role for planners.

Fiscal prudence is critical to all decision-making when making and coordinating our 'plans'; however, as Professional Planners we must not rely solely on the fiscal aspects related to issue resolution as the basis for the opinions and recommendations that we formulate. So, while money is important, it cannot be the sole driving factor, or the highest priority factor, even when we know that 'politics rules'. Conveying this message to the decision-makers (elected officials) is a critical and continuing challenge throughout the country, especially in times of austerity.

In conclusion, our study provides additional insight into the kinds of strategies that planners perceive as guiding their practice while offering an empirical example of the way that planners' practice may influence what they value. It reveals a profession that retains the decades-old aspiration that its practice should be apolitical, and the faith that what planners do matters. Although Canadian planners may be on the leading edge of having to coordinate a large number of plans, they generally rely on tried and true organizational strategies and belief systems rather than developing new ones. As we try to answer the broader question of what strategies enhance plan coordination in contemporary conditions, understanding the way that practitioners place themselves in the process hints at the challenge of finding new ways to deal with the complexities of everyday planning practice.

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Table 1: Options for "What strategies or approaches are planners using to coordinate plans?" [strongly agree to strongly disagree with each option] and "Please rank the effectiveness of each of these as potential strategies for coordinating plans and policies" [very effective to very ineffective with each option]

- Collaborating, sharing data, and consulting with others facilitate consensus-based decisions when policies may conflict.
- Policies are coordinated when the comprehensive plan is revised.
- Champions are appointed to facilitate coordination around critical issues.
- Communities have a clear organizational hierarchy that facilitates choices.
- Processes or organizations are created to deal with particular coordination challenges.
- Communities allow plans to lapse because priorities and conditions change.

- Interdepartmental meetings provide opportunities to coordinate priorities.

Table 2: Options for “What do you see as some of the challenges to coordinating plans and policies?”

Category	Survey option
External forces	Depends on legislative requirements
	Depends on market conditions
	Reflects changing needs in the community
Politics in planning	Difficult to change past practices
	Depends on political priorities
	No established hierarchy of priorities
	Professional rivalries affect outcomes
Jurisdictional silos	Competing interests among departments
	Insufficient data availability
	Plans don't apply to outside agencies
Insufficient resources	Insufficient staff expertise
	Insufficient staff time
	Too many plans

Table 3: Effectiveness of strategies for plan coordination

Coordination strategy	Percent agreeing strategy is effective	Kendall's rank correlation between strategy use and statement:	
		My community coordinates effectively	Plan coordination is a priority in my community
Collaborate for consensus	81.8	0.23 ***	0.24 ***
Coordinate policies when revising plan	72.7	0.18 ***	0.28 ***
Appoint coordination champions	67.5	0.19 ***	0.13 ***
Clear organizational hierarchy	64.5	0.24 ***	0.32 ***
Create processes or organizations	63.0	0.08 **	0.11 ***
Allow plans to lapse	26.3	-0.09 **	-0.21 ***
Interdepartmental meetings	[not asked]	0.08 **	0.12 ***

Statistical significance: * 10%, ** 5%, *** 1%

[Table 4 in a separate file]

Notes

¹ Although over 700 respondents completed parts of the survey, we analyzed the results only of those who completed **all** sections. We offered the survey in French for those preferring that language. Because we used non-probability methods to recruit participants, and do not have an accurate estimate of the universe, we cannot calculate a response rate or sampling error.

² To streamline data analysis, we collapsed categories such as 'Very effective' and 'Effective' into a single category of 'Effective'.

³ Not all respondents supported the consensus-building model. One wrote, 'Consensus-based planning defeats leadership and creativity,' while another said, 'I see consultation being substituted for leadership on a regular basis.'