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Dialogue in Norrtälje, General Public Contributions to Road Planning

Public participation in planning is an interesting aspect on the influence of culture on the degree of sustainability of urban life. If the public is involved in the planning on a serious level, and is given the opportunity to discuss crucial questions before decisions are made, then the whole planning process may benefit from it.

The design process in all spheres of planning must develop towards increased public participation. If the citizens do not feel a sense of commitment towards the city and its future development, then there is no basis for urban sustainability.

In order to create a model for working in dialogue with the general public on road planning in Norrtälje, a small town north-east of Stockholm, the Swedish National Road Administration, Vägverket has linked a R&D programme with the road project "Bypass Norrtälje". The project was launched in the early spring of 1997. The dialogue concerned road planning and associated environmental impact reports. The subject of the discussion was whether through traffic should be allowed in the town, as it is today, or if a new road should be constructed just on the edge of the city. Both alternatives had their pros and cons. The discussion has focused on how life in a small coastal town is influenced by the road and its subsequent impact.

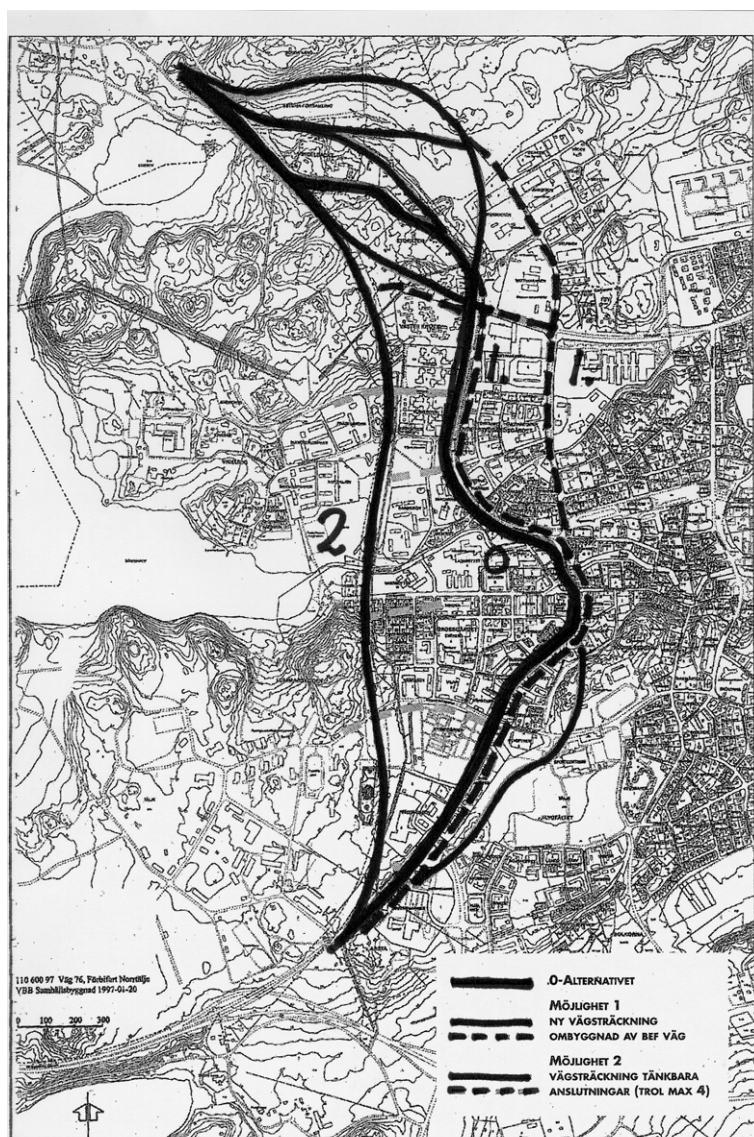
The participants were organised into working teams that convened at regular intervals. A joint committee with representatives from the working teams, Vägverket and the local authority was set up to meet roughly once a month to exchange views and information. These meetings comprised a genuine dialogue between the parties. Vägverket has been criticised for not allowing greater input from the general public to influence environmental impact reports. In the case of Norrtälje the views of the public have to a large extent been instrumental in determining the contents of the environmental impact report.

Background

The project was initiated by the Swedish National Road Administration, Vägverket, since the traffic problem in Norrtälje needed to be resolved. The local authority had not had much success in planning the through traffic. As far back as 1940, the local planner had had the foresight to put aside land for future bypass traffic. In 1960 a new generation of planners

thwarted the original plans by locating housing areas in close proximity to the designated road. The situation at present is that Norrtälje has developed into a very popular recreation area with lots of tourists in summer. Summer residents tend to prolong their stay in Norrtälje and its environs and through traffic is heavy in this small town. The huge articulated lorries of the forest industry outside Norrtälje are obliged to make their way through built-up areas, since no alternative routes exist. To render complete the picture of the traffic situation, the regional bus system has not been designed for optimum traffic security. Bus stops have been sited along the through road in such a way that they are frequently the cause of traffic congestion.

The noise, the pollution and the hazards posed to pedestrians and cyclists are considerable, as is the everyday aggravation experienced by local citizens. They are in fact so obvious, that a considerable number of citizens have agreed to enter into a planning dialogue with Vägverket and to devote a number of evenings to the discussion of this subject.



Plan showing all the different alternatives. Alternative 2 is the bypass, Alternative 1 is an upgraded through route while Alternative 0 shows the present situation. Different combinations of alternatives were discussed as illustrated on this map.

Dialogue Project organisation

Vägverket was responsible for organising the whole project while the local authority was involved in the dialogue process. The dialogue project was arranged in conjunction with the regular road study and environmental impact report. The project manager's special dialogue group arranged the dialogue with the public. I was engaged as an external researcher in the dialogue group in order to participate in and study the actual dialogue process, and to evaluate it. The dialogue group consisted of the project manager, the deputy project manager, an environmental expert, a behavioural scientist and the external researcher who specialised on evaluation and dialogue. Except for the researcher, all the participants in the dialogue group were employees of Vägverket. The behavioural scientist was engaged as a specific dialogue co-ordinator.

The dialogue started with an invitation to the public to participate in the road study. A general meeting was arranged in November 1996. During that meeting the public was invited to join working teams, to discuss the traffic situation and to take part in the planning process and the road study. Some 60 people agreed to participate and 8 working teams were set up. The working teams were expected to work independently and they each nominated two group members to represent them in a consultation group that held regular meetings on a monthly basis. The local authority planner was engaged in the consultation group, which was administrated by the dialogue group. Several experts were invited to the consultation group meetings along with the regional bus company, the local school administrator, the local traffic planner, politicians and others.

A general hearing with a panel of local politicians was held towards the end of the dialogue project. The final meeting of the dialogue project, a general one, was held at the end of April 1997. The project manager from Vägverket summed up the debate and the alternatives that had been discussed, pointing out the following stages in the road project. The participants summed up their conclusions in the general discussion and a questionnaire was distributed among the participants as a record reflecting their attitudes towards this particular dialogue project.

Different opinions from the public

The participants in the dialogue held various views on the environment in question. Most of them lived in the area concerned and some of them lived along the through route, thus being confronted with the problems generated by traffic. Those who lived along the planned bypass route were concerned about future traffic. People who lived in the area between the existing and the planned routes were apprehensive that they should be caught between two evils if a new road was to be built. The parents, children and teachers from a school situated in the area between the two roads lodged massive complaints against the construction of the new road. The teachers were contacted by the dialogue group in order to enter into some manner of dialogue with them and the schoolchildren. Some of the school classes discussed the planned roads and produced drawings with comments.

The local authority planner presented the politicians' points of view as well as the planning intentions. The public, too, had several opportunities to penetrate and discuss the existing alternatives. They also presented their own alternatives.



Message from the schoolchildren: Don't just plan for yourselves. Think of the children. Don't forget that you destroy the nature. Think of all the trees and the animals that will die.

The consultation group met on four occasions and the Vägverket planners and their local authority counterpart were able to continue working with the environmental impact report and road planning between the meetings, using the successively gathered information from the consultation group. The existing conflicts, although not resolved, were elucidated and everyone was able to grasp the consequences generated by the different alternatives.

A topic of discussion was the quality of urban life in a small coastal town like Norrtälje and the impact of traffic on this way of life. Everyone was anxious to maintain the old character of Norrtälje with small shops set along narrow streets. A great number of tourists come to Norrtälje for this very reason.

The local planner presented a report on commercial development for small towns. This report assumed that in the future everyone would want to drive their car to a supermarket on the outskirts of the town rather than doing their shopping in the small town centre. That would be the death of Norrtälje. The discussion on this subject became quite animated. Most of the participants wanted to sustain the qualities of Norrtälje while the commercial interests placed emphasis on promoting a profitable business sector in order to maintain a sustainable town.

The bypass route would keep the tourists away from Norrtälje, which is not sound business practise. If, on the other hand, all tourists were to visit Norrtälje, then no one would use the bypass. What, then, was the original point of a bypass? It was specifically conceived to reduce the number of accidents as well as to minimise the levels of noise and emissions that are at present a cause of concern.



One of the meetings of the consultation group. Planning proposals have been distributed to the members as a basis for discussion.



Some of the participants in the consultation group.

The members of one group presented their own alternative featuring a long tunnel under the central part of Norrtälje. Vägverket examined the proposal thoroughly and came to the conclusion that it was not feasible. The group members were quite upset about this, but the other groups did not sympathise with them since they, too, found the proposal unrealistic.

The groups asked a number of questions concerning road safety, speed limits, noise, roundabouts, prognoses for future traffic, public transports, local planning, etc. The Vägverkets representatives and the local planner answered their questions as directly as possible, and no later than at the next meeting.

The participants

The groups consisted of some 60 participants, 75% of whom were men and 25 % women. Eight groups were established, all of which followed out the project. Most of the participants were over 50 years of age. About eight participants were local shop-keepers. The participants represented themselves in the dialogue, but in an unofficial capacity many of them acted on behalf of local societies. Several housing co-operatives along the road were thus unofficially represented in this dialogue. A teacher from the local school also participated in the dialogue.

These group members were under no obligation to report to their respective associations, but they nevertheless acted as links in a loosely-knit network.

Those who turn up of their own free will do not represent the majority of citizens. They form a small group, the members of which are more concerned about the future of their town and they are also willing to give up their spare time. These people harbour lots of viewpoints and it is important to pay heed to all opinions that they give voice to. It must, however, be borne in mind that they are not fully representative. Since the dialogue project was advertised in the local newspapers everyone who wished to participate could do so.

Experiences

Planning is at the best of times a lengthy process and the dialogue project only reflects a limited segment of this process. It is difficult for the participants to grasp the overall situation and to follow up the continued planning process. The continuity of planning indeed poses a problem to those who are interested in public participation. The interested public wearies of taking an active part when "nothing happens" for such a long time. Vägverket now realises that a road project requires different dialogue activities appropriate to different parts of the process, **a chain of dialogues.**

The findings from Norrtälje and from other public participation projects point towards the conclusion that the most successful dialogues are achieved when the participation in itself is a learning process, whereby the public develops a more comprehensive knowledge of planning, its complexity, administration and technical character. The public is then in a position to make useful contributions, especially as informants about life and culture in the area. They can point out what is essential to study in-depth and they can also contribute to the inventory of fundamental data.

One important experience from this project, was that the documentation of all the meetings was crucial to the process, and for this reason minutes from all meetings were distributed to all the working teams. Many general meetings arranged by Vägverket are not documented thoroughly, with the ensuing problem that you quickly forget what has been said. The status of the participation process is much enhanced when it is properly documented.

What happens now?

The dialogue project was completed in May 1997. The formal road study document and the environmental impact report were then referred to all official parties and authorities for consideration. It was also made public in the local library. Later on Vägverket decided that this project was not on their top priority list and as a consequence no funding was available for it. Nothing, then, will happen in Norrtälje. No decision was taken on the crucial question of bypass versus through traffic. This means cementing the status quo and allowing the through traffic to continue in the foreseeable future.

The project manager is now investigating other possibilities of improving the traffic safety in Norrtälje. It may be that some new proposals will be discussed in a new dialogue.