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PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND POLITICS, A CULTURAL CLASH: THE CASE OF TENTH AND MONROE

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Questions have been raised concerning the role of politics in the development of the Atlanta BeltLine policies. From one point of view, the BeltLine policy development and implementation agency, Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. (ABI) seems to ignore many political considerations, particularly those emanating from the neighborhoods. From another point of view, ABI is doing exactly what it should be doing to successfully complete the project. Both points of view are mutually exclusive. This essay argues that these opposing conceptions come from a culture clash between two disciplines. One particular such disagreement, how to develop a piece of land at 10th and Monroe in Northeast Atlanta, serves to illustrate this clash.

KEY WORDS

Culture clash

Atlanta BeltLine

Politics

Public Administration

Rational/comprehensive

Political science

Questions arise from time to time concerning the viability of Wilson's public administration-political science dichotomy. Does it exist? Did it ever exist? The answer to these questions, at least in theory, becomes evident if one were to look at the structure of various university departments. For example, at Central Michigan University, Georgia State University as well as the University of Georgia, just to name a few, not only are the disciplines separated by

department but also by colleges. Clearly, this is not coincidence. Indeed, this split between the two disciplines is made even more noticeable by considering that they came from shared roots. Built in to this separation, then, is the belief that the dichotomy exists.

Whether it exists or not, the belief in the dichotomy has led to an interesting reality: each discipline now incorporates a very different paradigm, with the ultimate effect of a culture clash between them. Because of this culture clash, politics as understood by political science and the development and execution of policy, as understood by public administration have a difficult time comprehending each other's outlook.

While the focus of this discussion concerns the local level of government, the very purpose for the establishment of public administration was to take the politics out of governance from the local to the federal level. Simply put, to protect those who govern from the evils of politics. Although this view is understandable from the origins of the discipline, as a result of the abuses of urban machine politics, is it realistic? Can administrators be shield from politics? Indeed, is such a purpose even desirable?

A particular land use case in Atlanta, Georgia highlights this culture clash. This case pits neighborhoods and neighborhood leadership, whose culture is consistent with that of traditional political science, against planners from the Atlanta BeltLine, Inc., who take the view ingrained within the culture of the public administration discipline. This conflict concerns one property near the intersection of Tenth Street and Monroe in Northeast Atlanta. Much more will be said about the parties and the issue below.

Conflict

Each of disciplines has a very different view regarding the role of conflict. Although sometimes stuck with a pejorative connotation, without conflict, it is impossible for a society to make the kinds of choices it must make in order to progress. Without conflict there is no need for policy to be made, thus no need for governance. And just how realistic is that? The nature of conflict is the very essence of politics: who gets what, where, when, why, and how. Politics is born out of conflict. If, as is commonly accepted, it is the job of a public administrator to establish and implement policy, then, according to the traditional political belief, these tasks cannot be separated from politics, nor should they be.

Many of university public administration programs play down the role of politics. Once again, consider the purpose of the separation of the two disciplines. Instead of by understanding and developing strategies which are consistent with the political considerations in mind, conflict can be solved by taking a rational/comprehensive view. Strategies are developed, then, from the belief that it is the professional training that leads to the ability to deal with conflict. The cultural difference is evident: professionalism over politics. These differences themselves result in culture clash which opens up a whole new set of conflicts. This is becomes rather clear in the case of the Atlanta BeltLine as it pertains to the conflict regarding Tenth and Monroe.

Atlanta Neighborhood Politics

Before we consider the actual conflict, a discussion about the politics surrounding the Tenth and Monroe issue is in order. To adequately comprehend this conflict, the reader must understand a bit more concerning the nature of the political structure of Atlanta and its neighborhoods. The city of Atlanta is divided into twenty-five neighborhood planning units

(NPUs). These NPUs were created as a part of the city's charter in 1974 specifically to give Atlanta's neighborhoods a great deal more political power. They function as quasi-governments. (For example, the NPU leadership must take the same oath of office and ethics declaration as all elected officials.) Each NPU encompasses anywhere from four to ten neighborhoods depending on the size of the neighborhoods. All of the NPUs are roughly equal in population. Their political power comes from the ability of these units to act upon and make recommendations concerning important civic and legal items. For example, all land-use proposals must be acted upon by the specific NPU. These include variances, rezonings and special use permits. The NPUs are also mandated to act upon some specified city ordinances (1) as well as liquor licenses. Although these actions are advisory in nature, it is most unusual for the two land use boards as well as the city council to disapprove of an NPU's action. That, in and of itself, gives the NPUs a great deal of political power. Added to this, however, is the fact that most city council districts normally comprise only two NPUs. As a result, politically, it would very much be to the disadvantage of a particular member of council to go against the wishes of his or her own or neighboring NPU.

In addition to the NPUs are the neighborhoods. Neighborhoods in Atlanta also have a great deal of political power. As with the mission of the NPUs, Atlanta's neighborhoods are also tasked with acting and making recommendations on all land use proposals alcohol licenses before they go to the NPU. The fact that the city council agrees with the proposals (2) and recommendations of the NPUs the vast majority of the time, and the NPU accepts the proposals and recommendations from their own neighborhoods the vast majority of the time points to this political power. The neighborhoods, then, have a great deal of influence in respect to the

city council. In addition, the neighborhoods have an ability not given to the NPUs. They are able to negotiate as well as enter into contracts with outside parties (3).

With this political power, both the NPUs and neighborhoods provide a significant obstacle for any party who wishes to change a particular land use. Individual city councilors understand this and react to the NPUs and neighborhoods accordingly.

If, as mentioned above, politics are all about who gets what, where, when, why and how, then the NPUs and neighborhoods are all about politics. And their actions are easily understood by traditional political science. Neighborhoods according to this conception, have the right to be, indeed must be, involved in this determination and therefore the political process. Conflict is not to be dismissed nor ignored. It is to be faced head on and managed to the neighborhood's best interest. To negotiate conflict is preferred; however, to the extent that negotiations fail, the neighborhoods will use any political means at their disposal, including pursuing their goals through the judicial system. Any kind of global outlook is essentially meaningless. What matters is controlling the outcome of the conflict in the local neighborhood's favor.

A Clash of Cultures

This, then, is the culture of political science and it is the culture of Atlanta's NPUs as well as its neighborhoods. Such a culture, however, runs counter to that of public administration. Public administrators are educated specifically to be professional. They are taught the idea of minimizing or ignoring conflict and its attendant politics from the very beginning of their educational process (4). The public administrator paradigm is rational, scientific and comprehensive. Although one sees this tendency especially pronounced in urban planners, all

public managers view their mission as doing the overall good of the entire community. They often view neighborhood politics as locally and inwardly oriented. Because of this component of their culture, it is very difficult for many public administrators to appreciate the politics of a situation as they arise. By not being able to conceptualize the political implications of some of their decisions, they often fail to understand the intensity and emotional nature of the opposition. This, then, is the public administrator's culture, and in respect to Tenth and Monroe it is the culture of the Atlanta's BeltLine professionals.

Tenth and Monroe

The specific culture conflict concerning Tenth and Monroe in Northeast Atlanta actually concerns a relatively small parcel of land. At the present time, although owned by Atlanta Development Authority (5), it serves as a parking lot for a restaurant at the edge of Atlanta's Piedmont Park. In its early history connected to the BeltLine, a suburban developer, Wayne Mason, had purchased and was prepared to construct two forty-story condominium towers on this property. This land use was vigorously opposed by the both neighboring NPUs: F and E, who were successful in convincing the city not to rezone the property. Unlike the present conflict, the Atlanta Planning department realized that such a rezoning would not be in the best interest of the city as a whole. In this instance, there was no real conflict between the neighborhoods and the public administrators associated with the BeltLine (6). Over time, The Atlanta Development Authority (ADA) acquired this parcel of land for the Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. (ABI). The ultimate proposal was to have the property rezoned to a higher density use, possibly

useful for an eight story hotel. Currently, the property is zoned R4, single family housing. This zone as it now stands is consistent with the adjoining neighborhood.

It is over the R4 zoning that the conflict has arisen, leading to additional conflicts between BeltLine planners and the NPUs F brought about by this proposal. To being with, it is the NPU-F policy of not allowing any rezoning that would change single family residential to a higher use. The NPU is quite firm regarding this policy. There is an additional issue which has exacerbated this conflict is that several residential properties adjacent to that of the BeltLine has been purchased by a developer, who is planning to redevelop the houses on his property for a more intensive use. However, he cannot rezone his current R4 properties because to do so would constitute a spot zoning which is illegal in the state of Georgia. This one sliver of property, then, protects the entire adjoining subdivision from becoming multiuse or multifamily. The neighborhood sees the BeltLine plan as a way of destroying their way of life by adding density, which many NPU-F residents consider to be intolerable. The specific neighborhood, Virginia-Highland, as well as NPU-F are willing to stop the entire BeltLine process to keep their neighborhood intact. The neighborhood is not incorrect in their assumption. It is likely that if this piece of property is rezoned, they will most likely lose a significant portion of their single family zones. Their perspective, however, is at the very essence of the culture clash. No thought whatsoever is given to the effects of their possible decision to stop the BeltLine on the forty-three other BeltLine neighborhoods located in the Southeast, Southwest, and Northwest quadrants of town. Their determination of who gets what, where, when, why and how applies only to their one little corner of the city. All politics are local, and this certainly is.

The BeltLine administrators believe themselves to be the stewards of the entire city's wellbeing in general and the stewards of the city's finances as it regards the Beltline, specifically. They have a mission: to implement the project as quickly and as cost efficiently as possible for the benefit of the entire city. A cost/benefit analysis of having this property rezoned and selling it at a higher profit for a higher density use would most likely prove them correct. This is the way they their public administration culture causes them to look at the development of the BeltLine, and it would be impossible to veer away from their mission. If it means rezoning a residential property to higher density to enable them to sell it at a higher price, and to use that income to further finance the development, so be it, especially if such action benefits the entire city. This is exactly what they should be doing. The BeltLine administrators wish to determine who gets what, where, when, why and how for the greater good of the city. Local neighborhood politics are unimportant, carrying out their mission is.

Conclusion: Stalemate

Thus, there is a complete stalemate at the corner of Tenth and Monroe. Neither the residents of NPU-F, nor the BeltLine officials are able to, perhaps cannot, see each other's point of view. Because of the culture clash between politics, as understood by political scientists as well as the neighborhoods, and ABI's administration and execution of their mission, as understood by public administrators, this stalemate will not be settled any time soon. Although this may be the first of the serious conflicts between the BeltLine organization and the neighborhoods, as long as this culture clash is evident, there very well may be many more such stalemates in the

future, as BeltLine policy is developed and implemented. An understanding of the nature of this culture clash among all of the parties will lead to better communication, fruitful negotiations and most certainly improved community support for the project.

NOTES

(1) The way the actual piece legislation is written will determine if it must be heard and voted upon by the NPUs: if it is sent to the NPUs for comment but no official vote. It also may indicate that the piece of legislation is not to be sent to the NPUs at all.

(2) There are some land use proposals which do not have to be approved by either the neighborhoods or the NPUs. Under several of the "Quality of Life" zoning districts including but not limited to MRC 1-3 and NC 1-2, land use changes are approved by the zoning administrator and not city council. For a complete rezoning, it must be brought up to the city council as a paper. Under these circumstances, neither the neighborhood nor the NPU can act upon the proposed change. They may, however, make a non-binding recommendation. Since this is such a recent procedure, the political power in regards to this action is yet to be determined.

(3) The current city budget is recommending a grant of $100,000 for the sole purpose of allowing the NPUs to negotiate with outside developers to protect their interests as needed. The author of this essay is in the process of writing this policy for the city.

(4) Many public administrators understand that conflict and politics cannot be completely avoided. Although in theory, this is a significant part of their culture.

(5) The Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. (ABI), a public corporation, is a subsidiary of the Atlanta Development Authority, a separate government unit within the government of the City of Atlanta. Since the ADA is a government entity and the ABI is not, the ABA has the ability to float bonds for land purchases. As a result, all of the BeltLine land is under the control of the ADA.

(6) Most of the professionals associated with the BeltLine are employed by ABI. These individuals include not only planners, but administrators, community outreach professionals as well as real estate professionals. One of the BeltLine planners, however, is employed jointly by both the city planning department and ABI. The planning department has a very close association with ABI, however, and is very reluctant to modify any land use proposal suggested by the BeltLine professionals.