

Good planning can take sting out of projects

Key to better outcomes is to properly involve community, says **Emma Pharo**

The area of tourism I have had most experience in is called "soft adventure".

Often it is far from soft. Bouncing on a mountain bike. Jumping into dark canyon water. Paddling rapids.

The typical soft adventurer likes a challenge in the day and good quality food, wine and bed at night. Harnessing the potential of this aptly named "platinum credit card tourism" requires planning.

Governments at all levels need to decide what to back, how to tap into the distinctiveness of each region, and how to deliver the type of experience that has visitors coming back, with friends.

And there are plenty of examples of planning that succeeds: Think Blue Derby Mountain Bike trails.

There are also examples of inadequate planning that ends in angry letters and the Resource Management and Planning Appeal Tribunal.

Compared with Europe, North America and New Zealand, we are in the early stages of this soft adventure journey. The controversial nature of many soft planning proposals, such as pods in national parks and riders on rail corridors, draws me toward participatory planning.

Participatory planning became popular in the 1990s and still occupies many pages in the academic planning literature. But how does it work in practice and is it useful in the Tasmanian context?

Participatory planning can involve tools such as "town hall meetings" and "citizen juries". Whatever guise it takes, there needs to be face-to-face engagement, often over weeks, months or years in the case of a big development. This allows different people who are interested in the project to learn about each other's perspectives and create a sense of trust/collaboration.

The consultation that councils do for development applications can fit the participatory model, but usually do not. When there is public concern, it is often a case of "decide and defend", with little effort to consult and enable public participation.

Finding and listening to people can be expensive and beyond the resources of local government, particularly in regions where there is the strongest interest and need for tourist dollars. Community acceptance is not part of the required legal process so why

bother? Isn't this just more red tape? We elect politicians to make decisions for us so why not get back to our coffee and toast and leave them to do so?

We bother because we care. Governments at all levels run a risk by fast-tracking projects. Anyone who has been here for more than a few years will be familiar with the importance of a social licence. A developer can tick all the formal boxes, but still sink under the weight of organised public opposition.

I have watched with dismay at the effort that goes into fighting developments and fighting each other.

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In my role for Bicycle Network, I saw how effective a good planner is in public discussion. Planners know how to help negotiate conflict. They know council policy and how to put recommendations for aldermen.

These mechanisms can help avoid a proposal for a regional town descending into name-calling, as happened with the North East Rail Trail proposal. It is one thing to criticise someone in a distant way through a letter in the paper, but something else when you see them every second day in the main street.

Problems can be mediated using good planning process and early engagement in project development. Planners are professionals who can address tensions, present information, help stakeholders formulate objectives and actions and know what is possible under planning laws.

Planners play a vital role in harnessing the soft adventure tourism dollar in a way that is sustainable for the community and the natural beauty that brings tourists here.

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