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Editorial: Community engagement

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This issue of *Municipal Engineer* illustrates one or more of the five shared principles that underpin sustainability: living within environmental limits; ensuring a strong, healthy and just society; achieving a sustainable economy; using sound science responsibly; and promoting good governance (Patel, 2011).

The issue opens with three briefings from the 'current trends in municipal engineering' series. The first briefing by Faggi (2011) is concerned with beach management as a leisure activity. Here the problem is, in part, the absence of community engagement and the deterioration of a leisure resource through environmental pressures.

The second 'current trends' briefing by Ferreira (2011a) is about highway safety. It describes a tool to guide decision makers in the allocation of resources for capital and maintenance schemes. It is driven by the aim to substantially improve Portugal's standing within the EU for road safety. The third and final 'current trends' briefing, also by Ferreira (2011b), describes a new method of optimising highway maintenance through a pavement management system.

The first paper (Kamvasinou, 2011) describes a common problem in many cities. Plots of land have been abandoned from their previous use or left over from some other development. The paper shows how such pieces of land are often reservoirs for a variety of temporary uses that can become a permanent asset to the community. The author argues that derelict sites cannot simply be abandoned and left unmanaged. There are a range of funding, ownership and management issues that need to be implemented to ensure that they are used appropriately. Several case studies within central London are used to illustrate aspects of this approach; some becoming nature reserves, others a place for children to play. This approach should be compared to a case study in a previous issue of *Municipal Engineer* where large scale redevelopment in east London was the desired outcome (Malik, 2011). This comparison illustrates very different outcomes but the golden thread through them all is the importance of engaging the community to ensure that the proposed outcome is embraced by neighbours.

The second paper takes this concept much further where Burrage (2011) argues that a green space can be an agent, in its own right, for social cohesion and sustainable development. Rather than think of land merely as 'open space' it should be thought of as a 'green hub'. This formulation leads to the concept of a place where people, from differing backgrounds, mix and meld their cultures and knowledge in order to build a community.

Examples are given to illustrate the elements of this approach and where these outcomes are developing. The philosophy described is still in its infancy although some aspects have been seen in other places 'Encouraging sustainable communities and healthy lifestyles depends upon high quality green spaces' (Stainsby, 2009). Burrage argues that this approach requires the professional to work closely with residents, not merely as the occupiers of adjacent land but as citizens with opinions and skills that have the right to be included in the design process. This approach is not without precedent 'The environmental case for regeneration is not enough: sites have to demonstrate their ability to catalyse economic and social improvements by tackling ... fragmented communities' (Jones, 2010) but the depth of engagement is.

The third paper picks up another aspect of this debate by looking at the heritage of some of the largest and oldest industrial facilities within many counties, naval dockyards (Coats, 2011). These places generally consist of large areas of land and water but are increasingly abandoned as being 'surplus to military requirements'. Their walls encompass an immense stock of historically important structures, many of which are listed as being the first, best and only example of this type of engineering.

Abandoned facilities quickly deteriorate and governments wishing to avoid the loss of a potentially valuable asset are tempted to offer it for redevelopment. Despite military security mitigated against widespread knowledge of the heritage 'behind the walls', communities have campaigned for the preservation of 'their' heritage. This links to an earlier themed issue of *Municipal Engineer* where it was pointed out that the 'challenge to the historic city is ever changing and there is a need to understand, retain and adapt cities as living places that have a viable future as well as a past that can be cherished' (Roberts, 2010).

Thousands of people supported their families from work associated with the dockyards. When an industry dies the commercial centre quickly finds itself in difficulties. This has been the fate of many cities. The fourth paper addresses this issue using the example of the Main Street Canada (LeBlanc, 2011). The author stresses that this is not proposed as a recipe that can be adopted everywhere, instead it is a philosophy that needs to be internalised by professionals dealing with city-centre regeneration.

The paper shows how the Main Street died in many Canadian communities through a mixture of suburbanisation and competition from edge-of-town shopping malls during the 1960s. Regeneration programmes, carried out during the 1970s, focused upon streetscape and paving but failed to take a holistic view of community and business needs, and so lacked success. The Main Street programme learnt from this and adopted a different approach. It is now followed by many Canadian and North American towns. The programme is described along with the principles that contributed to its success; principal amongst these is a deep engagement in all facets of community and business needs.

Within the UK the government has announced a study into the health of the high street. The outcome of this review will undoubtedly require engineers to implement many of its findings. Before everyone dusts off their street furniture catalogues the final paper (Loveday, 2011) gives good warning against adopting such an approach. The author argues that too many city centres are copies of their rivals and local distinctiveness has been lost. Examples are given of identikit street furniture found around the globe, from San Francisco to Singapore. Little wonder that shoppers travel to regional centres when their local centre has so little to attract them.

Loveday describes how Norwich used its historical identity to shape its place and design its future in order to ensure a position in the league table of top UK destinations. 'Norwich 12' succeeded in part through its engagement with the heritage community, a loose collection of groups and statutory bodies, and their incorporation into an organisation that could direct their efforts to prevent Norwich becoming a clone-town. This is no small task, time and resources are required for it to succeed, but far less than dealing with the consequences of failure.

The paper pulls no punches in describing the effort required. It highlights the question: how do we ensure cultural heritage in an age of globalisation? Global brands may be highly desired but if the price for that is the loss of diversity and distinctiveness then ultimately the price may be community disengagement.

The issue closes with a book review on *Asset Management* (Jenkinson, 2011). Municipalities should integrate asset management into their organisational culture to ensure that citizens receive best value for their taxes.

Each of these papers illustrates one or more aspects of community engagement. This is not a nice-to-have-option within a programme of works. It is an intrinsic element of design and management to ensure that the facility meets the needs and aspirations of the community. Municipal engineering is not only about clever ideas and good value; it is about ensuring that people value and embrace the infrastructure in their community.

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