



Planning consultant, professor, writer, speaker, social media guru, visionary... the list of what Sean Hertel, RPP, is working on right now might make your head spin.

Registered Professional Planner

PROFILE

NAME:

Sean Hertel, RPP, MCIP

LOCATION:

Toronto

POSITION:

Urban Planning Consultant

He's helping the City of Markham coordinate the first development phase of the massive and complex Langstaff Gateway redevelopment project. He's affixing an "equity lens" to the City of Ottawa's transportation master plan review on a team led by IBI Group. He's aligning land use planning and implementation tools in Peel Region with the major transportation station area policies of the growth plan on a team led by Perkins + Will.

With R.E. Millward & Associates, he's conducting the land use planning analysis for the O.R.C.A. Project, proposing an over-building of the rail corridor in downtown Toronto. Then, on a team led by Common Bond, he's supporting a cultural heritage landscape area study for the Oakville Harbour. Plus, other projects at various stages of ramping up or down.

Hertel is also a research fellow at the City Institute at York University and a lecturer in the planning schools at Ryerson University

and University of Waterloo. He does quite a bit of public speaking, and he writes. He recently contributed two chapters, with Blair Scorgie, RPP, of SvN Architects + Planners, to the housing anthology *House Divided*, published by Coach House Books.

You describe yourself as "visionary incrementalist" — what does that mean?

A visit to Hamilton two years ago to meet with Chief Planner Jason Thorne, RPP, inspired the term. Walking around downtown, you could see that change was slowly percolating through the streets, lots and buildings. You could feel that something significant and transformational was happening, but it was happening slowly, almost like honey moving over the surface of warm toast. Step by step. Block by block. Building by building. And not the sexy stuff, either. Zoning changes. Adjusting parking requirements. Grants. Partnerships. Talking with and listening to pretty much everyone. The heavy lifting. Having the vision to think big and the patience and commitment to getting the small wins along the way. This really resonated with me.

How can visionary incrementalism be applied to demographics?

I've got the perfect story: former Toronto Chief Planner, Paul Bedford, RPP, just after amalgamation in 1998, would corral his planners (including a young me) into large rooms to get his key points across. One time he showed a picture of a kid, who was about five years old, standing on the Humber River pedestrian bridge with the

city towering behind. "We're planning for him!" Paul said, pointing at the screen. "Where will he go to school? What kind of neighbourhood will he grow up in? Will he be able to afford to stay there when he gets older?" And he went on and on. I was stunned at the beautiful simplicity of the image. Suddenly, planning for 25-year horizons was no longer an abstraction. It's something I think about often. Thanks Paul!

What is your perspective on changing demographics?

Perhaps more than ever in our professional history, we're planning for an uncertain future. Change used to be measured in decades, and now it's measured against the latest release of a social media platform (Hello TikTok! Goodbye Snapchat) or smartphone. Thinking about pre- and post-Facebook, for example, is almost quaint compared to the technological, biological (I see you, COVID-19), and political whiplash we've endured in the past year alone. Change is no longer an act of extrapolation, plotting a predictable arc along which we'll end up. We're living in a new calculus. We can't solve for X with a Y variable anymore. There are multiple Xs and there's more to find than Y. We don't know what we don't know.

What do communities/municipalities need to be paying more attention to build a better future?

People! Planning for people sounds so obvious but it's anything but. Just take a look at the *Planning Act*: show me where it says we're planning for people. It's

the “use versus user” conundrum. We planners talk a great deal about “the public interest” – I certainly do! – but just who is the “public” and what are their interests? I challenge planners to think of the last public consultation they attended: who was the audience? Were they a representative sample of the community with the biggest stake in the issue you were meeting about? Probably not! As my friend and colleague, Jay Pitter, challenges us to ask, “Who’s not in the room?”

Take transit debates across Ontario, from London to Toronto to Ottawa. I like to be provocative and say that the “public” we’re planning for most these days isn’t those who use transit but those who drive. Just recently, Premier Ford posted a video on Twitter of himself in the passenger seat of an SUV, speaking to Ontarians to promote his government’s latest transit announcement: “We’re sitting in bumper to bumper traffic here... familiar to thousands of people every single day. It’s costing us billions and billions of dollars in gridlock throughout Toronto and the GTA. We’re building subways for the people... we’re finally going to get the city moving again.” This is so weird! If this were true, he would have made that video in a packed slow-moving bus or subway car or waiting five-people deep to get onto a train in rush hour.

What are some demographic trends that affect your areas of speciality?

People are making more and longer trips, and likely the best reason is the lack of affordable housing. “Drive until you qualify” is certainly not a new thing, and now there’s the phenomenon of “transit-based sprawl”

in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area. Housing and jobs are creeping farther out, along the tentacles of the GO Rail network from Union Station in downtown Toronto. People are now commuting from Kitchener! London, too! I don’t think this type of sprawl is really any better than the highway sprawl emblematic of Los Angeles or any other large North American city. People are still largely driving alone to train or bus stations and parking in vast parking lots.

The other challenge to this kind of sprawling housing-travel relationship is growing social inequity. Planners (me included!) call for the creation of compact mixed-used communities where people are less dependent on their cars and instead walk, cycle, or take a quick transit trip. All good stuff, but here’s the rub: how many people can actually afford to live in these places? Who is the “public” we’re planning for? The consequence, which I do think (and hope) is unintended, is that the mixed-use “main streets” and “transit nodes” we’re creating are increasingly becoming enclaves for the wealthiest (and, generally, whitest) among us. The most vulnerable, including racialized communities, become squeezed out and pushed further to the social and geographic peripheries of our planning areas.

Are there any projects, past or present, that have particular significance for you?

There’s one moment, on a transit corridor project just outside of Chicago, when so many core values as a planner crystalized and which really shapes the way I go about my work. Someone on the project team said to me, point blank, “Tell us how to get more white people taking the bus.” I felt like my

head was going to explode and all I could do was to burst into laughter. When the person didn’t join in, I knew this was going to be a very challenging project. From that moment on, I became laser-focused on social equity and planning for people.

With respect to demographics, what do you tell your planning students?

I tell them that we’re planning for people not buildings or infrastructure. It’s easy to get lulled into planning for the big shiny things and making things look nice, but if things don’t work for people, we’ve failed. I tell my students to make things personal, to think of real people when analyzing housing, employment, transportation, etc.

Do you have a message for your fellow RPPs and future RPPs?

Unlike engineers, we’re not bound by the laws of gravity. Planners don’t live in a binary world, where the laws of gravity either keep a bridge up or make it fall down. Our currency is not Newtonian. We deal in nuance, because we live in a nuanced world. Our profession is a social science, which is virtually limitless in perspectives and approaches. We need to embrace that! 🙏

This interview has been condensed and edited for length.



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