Avoiding the wrongs of human rights in urban planning

Urban planners conduct cross-country scan to develop best practice bylaws and policies.

By Jennifer Pascoe on November 7, 2017

When it comes to urban planning, the average Canadian might think of developing residential neighbourhoods, amenities such as schools, grocery stores, community centres, or places of work and commuting to all of those places in community via accessible roads and walkways. They might also think of the semi-controversial subject of infill housing.

But what about crowds gathering in public places, expressing opinions on lawn signs, living in tent cities, backyard bee-keeping, raising poultry in the city, or women who become pregnant while living in adult-only buildings? Furthermore, when do stereotypes and community fears extend beyond NIMBYism and cross the threshold into violation of human rights and the Canadian charter of rights and freedoms? And what are the human rights issues that urban planners need to consider when building our cities?

Sandeep Agrawal, professor in the University of Alberta Faculty of Science and director of UAlberta’s urban planning program, is all too familiar with what can go wrong when human rights are overlooked by planners.

“I want to ensure that Canadian cities and regions are inclusive in nature and that municipalities are required to follow the constitution,” says Agrawal. “We are looking at theoretical frameworks around rights and what constitutes a ‘just’ city.”

Agrawal’s foray into human rights and urban planning began nearly a decade ago, when he was called upon as an expert witness in the case of the taxicab industry versus the City of Toronto licensing system. Just five years ago, he was again called as an expert in the case of bylaws pertaining to group homes and whether stereotyping was bordering on human rights violations. His report contributed to changes in bylaws in the City of Toronto and provincial policy statements in Ontario.

Since then, Agrawal has been looking at similar issues in Alberta. Now, building on his expertise, Agrawal and his colleagues—two lawyers and one human rights advocate—will be looking at 33 metropolitan areas across the country. All viewed through a human rights lens, the researchers will analyze plans, policies, and bylaws and interview key informants including high level planners, city solicitors, and human rights commissioners. The research is being supported with a grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

“We want to see a pattern that may emerge through the study as to areas where human rights are issues and challenges, and we want to propose how we can deal with them,” says Agrawal. “We want to proactively identify potential violations of human rights and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. If we don’t come up with some best practices, there could be serious consequences.”

Source: Faculty of Science