Kenneth L. Carper's Commentary on "Cutting Roadside Trees"

Commentary On
Cutting Roadside Trees

Several interesting ethical considerations are raised in this transportation engineering dilemma. The most prominent issue is the conflict between local interests and the interests of the public at large. Other topics that will be discussed in this commentary are: the potential value of effective organized public opposition, the role of the engineer in a governmental planning agency, and the emerging field of environmental ethics.

Transportation planners know that highways generate a great deal of local controversy, perhaps more than any other public works projects, with the exception of airports and nuclear power plants (Goldstein 1987).

"Roads are immensely popular with all those who do not live near them." (Lucas 1987)

Forest Drive has become a main traffic conduit. The population of Verdant County has grown substantially, and the volume of vehicular traffic on the highway has doubled in the past ten years. Public safety is threatened by the condition of the highway. Thus far, however, fatalities have been limited to drivers who were exceeding posted speed limits. The Verdant County Road Commission, motivated by concerns for public safety and liability, has decided to widen the roadway.

A local citizens' environmental group opposes widening Forest Drive, however, as the quality of the local environment will be diminished. The opposition group does not wish to see a number of healthy trees sacrificed, especially when the problem appears to be driver carelessness.

Moral theory can be employed to support either side in this conflict. Finding a solution entirely acceptable to both sides may not be possible, but the next step ought to be a series of public hearings in which all considerations are fully reviewed.

Objections, aired in appropriate public forums, can be of great value in arriving at the best planning solutions (Lucas 1987). Enlightened planners will not only welcome objections, but will assist in making the objections effective. Considering opposing points of view nearly always improves the quality of reasoned judgment. This process implies open communication and free access to relevant information by all parties.

Communication with the public is a difficult problem for the planner or engineer in itself, but the most important questions are (Goldstein 1987):

a. How does a planner handle a situation where his client's values are far from his own?
b. How is the planner to comport himself when engaged on a project which may be nationally (or regionally) highly beneficial but adversely affects a particular locality?
c. How is the planner to form and express his judgment in matters involving the aggregation of preferences.

In the public forum, planning experts should go beyond a presentation of their recommendations. They should be willing to fully discuss all factors considered in reaching their conclusions, and should actively listen to informed criticism. During the discussions the planner should honestly express uncertainties in planning assumptions. The opposition will likely raise valid arguments, beyond those already presented. In this case, for example, Kevin Clearing will be asked to acknowledge that improved roads generate increased traffic, and he should be willing to honestly respond to this fact. Public hearings have little positive benefit when the opposition parties feel they have not been honestly received.

This raises the topic of the role of the professional engineer in a governmental agency. Governmental bodies are generally more concerned with those issues that affect large segments of the population, and tend to be less concerned with local interests that affect few citizens. The ethical planner will maintain sufficient independence to ensure that local interests are carefully considered. Grave injustices may otherwise be imposed on individuals for the benefit of the majority.

The subject of environmental ethics is also relevant to this case. Most planning engineers are aware that their decisions are environmental experiments as well as social experiments. Their role is as the agents of change. Often the environmental

effects of planning decisions are irreversible.

Environmental ethics is a relatively new field of applied ethics, at least in Western philosophy (Martin and Schinzinger 1989). Western philosophers have traditionally held that humans alone have intrinsic value, and that the natural environment exists for the benefit of humankind. Environmental ethics questions whether morality is purely anthropocentric (human-centered). The environmental ethic suggests that trees (or spotted owls) may also have intrinsic value.

It should be noted that many environmentalists place the interests of humans far above that of objects in the natural environment and the interests of animals. Conservation of the natural environment and its resources can be justified on the basis of concern for future generations of humans who will have intrinsic value. This form of environmentalism is anthropocentric. Environmental conservationists do not necessarily ascribe intrinsic value to the natural environment.

It is not clear from Tom Richard's statement whether he bases his value for the threatened trees on a belief in their intrinsic value, or whether he wants to preserve natural beauty for future generations. A careful reading of his statement suggests the latter. However, it is likely that at least a few members of the opposition group will subscribe to the concepts of the new environmental moral theory. Kevin Clearing should be prepared to consider this viewpoint in the deliberations, which are sure to be lively and spirited.

Suggested Readings:

1. Goldstein, Alfred 1987. "The Expert and the Public: Local Values and National Choice," *Business and Professional Ethics Journal*, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 25-50.
2. Lucas, J. R. 1987. "The Worm and the Juggernaut: Justice and the Public Interest," *Business and Professional Ethics Journal*, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 51-65.M
3. Martin, Mike W. and R. Schinzinger 1989. *Ethics in Engineering* (2nd edition), McGraw-Hill, Inc., New York, NY, pp. 262-278.