

Reykjavík – the Future City

Bjarni Reynarsson, PhD
Information and Development Division
Reykjavík City Hall

Tjarnargata 11
101 Reykjavík, Iceland

Tel: +354 563-2097
Fax: +354 563-2198
E-mail: Bjarnir@rhus.ryk.is

Paper presented at the conference:
Area-based initiatives in contemporary urban policy, Danish building and
Urban Research and European Urban Research Association,
Copenhagen 17-19 May 2001

Abstract

The goal of this paper is to provide a short overview of a few of the main public participation programs, which have been in progress in Reykjavík, Iceland, over the last two years, emphasising the programs that relate to urban development and planning. The following projects will be introduced: the Future City, the Urban Study Centre, an inter-municipal regional plan, and a public referendum on a major planning issue.

At the beginning of 2000, Reykjavík City launched an urban policy program titled "The Future City". The objective of the program was to facilitate a dialogue between the people of Reykjavík and the city authorities concerning a future vision for the best possible development of the urban society, a strategic plan for the capital over the next 15 years. The base material for this urban-policy program was attained with different methods, i.e., conferences, discussion groups, expert working groups, meetings with the representatives of various public and private organisations in the city, and through surveys. The materials were analysed and a summary of the main policy-related findings were published in newspaper format, which was dispatched to all households in the city, and comments from them were requested. All of the materials and suggestions will be given to the city representatives for formulating the urban policy program for the capital city.

The Urban Study Centre, a collaboration project between Reykjavík City and the University of Iceland, began operation in April this year. It is anticipated that the centre will increase our knowledge of the changing urban society, and that it will facilitate us making better guidelines for the future. In the course of the last two years, a total of seven municipalities in the Reykjavík region have worked on an inter-municipal regional plan. Some of the main objectives include increased density of the existing urban area, and giving other means of transportation than the private vehicle a larger share in the total traffic flow. It is proposed that 5,000 new dwellings be built at the inner part of Reykjavík over the next 20 years. These plans will be introduced to the public this summer.

On 17 March 2001, the City of Reykjavík organised a public referendum on one of the main disputed planning issues in the city, namely whether the principal domestic airport, which is centrally located in Reykjavík, should be relocated or not. This was the first time that the residents of the capital city were given the option of voting on a highly debated planning issue. The preparation and results are introduced in this paper.

Introduction

Reykjavík, the capital city of Iceland, is located at Faxaflói Bay at the southwestern part of Iceland, a 45-km distance from the international airport at Keflavík. The name *Reykjavík* actually means the *City of Steam*, which is a reference to the vast geothermal heat in the area. All buildings in the city are geothermally heated. On a European standard, Reykjavík is a young city. Its population in 1900 was only about 6,000, whereas today its population is 110,000. Reykjavík is a relatively environmental-friendly city because of the extensive use of natural energy resources, geothermal heat, and hydropower. The main threat to the clean environment is pollution from private vehicles as there are nearly 600 vehicles per 1,000 people, i.e., significantly more than in most other European cities. There is not much polluting industry in Reykjavík.

Reykjavík has developed from being a small fishing village about 100 years ago to becoming a capital city where public administration, services, higher education and culture characterise the economy. Reykjavík was one of nine European Cities of Culture in 2000. The last five to six years are characterised by much economic growth that seems to have reached a peak last year. Despite much economic growth and general well being, unemployment has been maintained at a very low level; in fact it has been less than 3% over the last few years. The Icelanders work longer workdays than prevailing in Iceland's neighbouring countries. The employment share of elderly people, i.e., 60 and above is high in Iceland. Additionally, the birth rate is higher than in most European countries; hence the number of children and young people in the capital city is relatively high.

Reykjavík has grown very fast over the last few years and decades. The population of the capital area, i.e., Reykjavík and the six other municipalities that form the greater capital area, has increased by 62% since 1970, while the national population increased by 38%. Today, a total of 170,000 people live in the capital area, about 65% of the total national population of 283,000. The population of Reykjavík alone is presently about 110,000. About half of the population increase in the capital area over the last decade was due to people migrating from other districts to the Reykjavík area, or about 1,700 net per year, and an increasing number of foreign immigrants. In the last three years, an average of 550 foreign citizens per year moved to Reykjavík. Today, the foreign residents constitute about 2.8% of the total population of the capital city. The average annual population increase in the capital area during the period was about 2.3%, whereas it was 1.1% on a national basis. Due to the size of the capital area compared with other urban areas in Iceland, it is not likely that the migration to Reykjavík from the regional districts will decrease in the next few years. The large number of small fishing villages in Iceland have not expanded in the course of the last three decades because of the lack of employment variety there and limited opportunity of growth in the fisheries.

This extensive population growth has called for much construction and development expansion. During 1970 through 2000 an average of 85 hectares of land was developed as new building sites in the capital area per year; in fact the municipalities have had to work hard in recent months to meet the general demand for new planned areas. The last two decades have seen an average of about 1,200 apartments being built in the capital area per year, thereof 50% in Reykjavík. The new districts are built at the outskirts of the city, i.e., at increasing distances from the city centre, at the same time as the number of people in the older districts of the city is

decreasing. Many people are concerned about the social isolation of the suburban population, where social and cultural offers should be greater. The distance, which the people of Reykjavík have to drive daily to and from work, and when tending to their other needs, is steadily increasing. A clear example of this development is that during 1960 to 1998 the population of Reykjavík increased by 47% whereas the number of private vehicles increased by about 634%.

The population of the capital's neighbouring districts has increased significantly over the last three to four years, i.e., at the urban areas that are within one-hour's drive from the capital area. About 75% of the whole population of Iceland live in this area, a fact underlining the need for the formulation of a realistic development plan for the entire country, taking into consideration the position of the capital area in Iceland's population pattern. No recent research has taken place in the capital area's service area on how many people live outside the area but whose employment is there or vice versa, or on the links of the capital area to the other urban areas in Iceland.

Examples of Reykjavík City's development programs

Changes in administration

The fast and steady growth in urban development, and the speed and lack of time that characterise the city life call for various research and policy formulation, for example regarding services in Reykjavík. Considerable changes have been made of the administration of Reykjavík City in the last five to six years in order to meet the city's growth and the demands for more modern and democratic administration procedures, as well as improving the general living quality in the city. A few of the main objectives of these administrative changes are that

- the administration be as democratic as possible at the same time as being effective and efficient,
- good service be provided, and that the citizens and the businesses are regarded as consumers,
- the collaboration and the division of duties between the city council members be clear and defined,
- management does not accumulate power, instead distributes power and the responsibilities,
- administration be based on clear objectives and constant performance evaluation,
- positive attitudes prevail regarding changes.

Reykjavík City's municipal employees total about 9,000, and the number of city council members is 15. Currently, the number of committees in the city system is being reduced to seven to increase their efficiency, and also to clarify the responsibilities and power of the city council members who chair the committees. The goal is to divide the administrative system into three principal areas, i.e., financial administration, social and education administration, and environmental and technical administration.

Reykjavík City is currently working on various development projects that will benefit the policy formulation in the future. Following is a reflection of a few of the projects relating to the desirable urban development. At the beginning of 1999, a *Development and Information Division* was established at Reykjavík City Hall. The role of the new division includes preparing the grounds for comprehensive policy formulation on the desirable development of the city through the accumulation and dissemination of information, and by promoting increased research on the city community. The Development and Information Division has already carried out many important projects

and research. The capital's homepage has been reviewed and improved considerably, proposals are being prepared on district-focused services of the city, and the collaboration between the city's institutions in development and research has been strengthened.

The Future City

At the end of 1999, the Development and Information Division launched the *Future City* project, which is a preparation for a long-term policy for the city, carried out in collaboration with the people of Reykjavík, i.e., with the involvement of some 800 people. This long-term policy formulation pertains to the image of the city, its activities and service role. The project is about obtaining ideas, a certain databank, on how the city might be in 15 years. The material for the databank was obtained as follows:

- **Seminars:** four seminars were held at Reykjavík City Hall, addressing the desirable urban development, industry, the family and ethical issues. At each seminar three to four main addresses were given, followed by debates. About 600 people attended the seminars, which were televised. The participants were invited to join the debate groups on the subject of each conference, however, not many did.
- **Nine lives of the city:** nine groups of experts presented reports on their work, each in their special field. The projects they addressed were: 1) Urban development, 2) Improvement administration, 3) Service role of the city, 4) Employment and economy, 5) Family and service, 6) Social issues, 7) Culture and leisure, 8) Position of children in the urban society, 9) Views and values of the city's residents. All nine reports are sophisticated papers and very useful in the policy formulation work.
- **Collaboration with private organisations:** collaboration and introduction meetings were held with various public and private organisations in the city. About 250 introduction letters were dispatched. These organisations include kindergarten and primary school parents' organisations, sports clubs, district organisations, youth social centres, and political organisations. The representatives of these groups were invited to an introduction meeting where they were given a booklet with a few questions on the desirable development in the city for distribution within the organisations. Only limited replies came out of this part of the work, although it fuelled some discussions within the groups on the future of the city. This was helpful for the databank.
- **Meetings with the personnel and managers of city institutions:** the project was introduced to them, and there were discussions on future projects and the foreseeable problems and opportunities.
- **Mayor's district meetings:** in the spring of 2000, the Mayor of Reykjavík held nine meetings with the residents of the city's districts, introducing the objectives of the Future City project. All recommendations on improvements of the city's services were gathered and referred to the relevant city institutions for disposition.
- **Voice of the regional districts:** six meetings were initiated with the representatives of municipal councils outside the capital area on the role of the capital city and how it may improve in respect of the regional districts. These were very good meetings with several useful suggestions being addressed.
- **Homepage:** a homepage for the Future City project was established, providing the people of Reykjavík with the option of learning about the project, and to present questions and comments. The homepage was frequently visited.
- **Opinion polls:** materials were accumulated from recent opinion polls on the service of the city, and special polls were conducted regarding the project. The results yielded important information on the views of the people of Reykjavík on various city issues.

Last February, materials regarding this effort were accumulated and reported on in a special publication that was sent to all households in Reykjavík. This work has provided the city council members with extensive and useful information for the formulation of a long-term policy for Reykjavík city.

As stated above, the objective of the project was to accumulate ideas on the desirable development of the city, and to generate discussions among the people of Reykjavík. Some of the methods used worked fairly well, whereas others did not; hence important experience was obtained on how to launch a public debate in Reykjavík. The participation in the project must be deemed as having been good as over 800 individuals participated, over 2,000 attended the introduction meetings, and thousands watched the direct television broadcasts from the conferences.

Urban Study Centre

On 17 March 2000, the Mayor of Reykjavík and the Rector of the University of Iceland signed a cooperation agreement on an Urban Study Centre, i.e., a venue of collaboration between the City of Reykjavík and the University on urban studies, with a special focus on the capital area. The objective of the establishment of the centre is to organise, strengthen and coordinate research and education in subjects directly relating to towns and development, referred to as urban studies. This will be realised, for example, through increased research-related advanced urban studies, the introduction of research, and by arranging conferences and lectures in urban studies. The Urban Study Centre will be located at *Skólabaer*, a building owned by the University of Iceland at Sudurgata, right in the middle between Reykjavík City Hall and the University. The Centre was opened a few weeks ago. This fall semester will see for the first time a special university course in urban studies as a 30-unit extra subject. Reykjavík city's institutions working on development and research projects will cooperate closely with the Urban Study Centre on various research in years to come.

Inter-municipal regional plan for the capital area

The municipalities in the capital areas have for just over two years worked jointly on a regional plan for the capital area. This work is now in its final phase. The main focus is on land use, communication, urban development, and environmental issues, as well as emphasising the formulation of a coordinated policy in these matters. Much information has been accumulated in connection with this joint work.

The planning period is until 2024, whereas after 2018 a decision has to be made on whether the main urban development will be towards north from Reykjavík, at the southern part of the capital area in Hafnarfjörður or at the Vatnsmýri area where the Reykjavík domestic airport is currently located. Until this time, the focus is on utilising for development to the extent possible the areas that are at the centre of the capital area. The proposals focus on increased urban density, including 5,000 new dwellings inside the current inhabited areas in Reykjavík. According to the proposals, it is anticipated that about 1,600 hectares of land will have to be used for new construction at the capital area over the next 25 years; hence it is essential where and how these areas are arranged. The municipalities in the capital area must follow the policy of the regional plan when they revise their general plans in continuation of its confirmation. The regional plan will be introduced in detail in the course of the next few months.

Reykjavík airport – to be or not to be

Reykjavík airport, which was built by the British and American occupation forces in World War II, is located at a short distance south of Reykjavík city centre. Parallel to the city's expansion and to domestic aviation being in a tough competition with the private vehicle, are the increased discussions on

whether the airport, which covers about 130 hectares of land in the middle of Reykjavík, should be moved in order to give way to new urban development and to strengthen the city centre, and in order to facilitate the pending expansion of the university area. Additionally, it is highly important in the work on the regional plan for the capital area to get conclusions on whether this land may be utilised for new development in the future in accordance with the plan's policy to increase urban density to the extent possible. In April 2000, the Executive Council of Reykjavík City Council appointed a group of experts to evaluate whether there exist other options for locating a new domestic airport in or near the capital area. Last December the group presented its conclusions, listing five options:

1. A relatively unchanged airport (one runway removed).
2. One of the two main runways be moved out to a landfill into the ocean south of the airport.
3. A new airport on landfills at sea at Skerjafjörður, about 2 km from the present airport.
4. A new airport 4 km south of the capital area.
5. The domestic aviation service be moved to the international airport at Keflavík, about 45 km from the capital area.

The Executive Council of Reykjavík City Council decided last December to have a public referendum, and last February a decision was made to have it on 17 March. The voting was on

- a) whether the airport should remain at its present location, or
- b) whether it should be moved to another location after 2016.

Additionally, the voting was to be electronic, the first time this is tried in Iceland.

Since New Year's much discussion has taken place in Iceland on this issue, both in the news media and among the general public. Never before has there been such extensive debate on the capital area's planning issues. People divided into groups. Those wanting the airport to remain at the same location stated that Reykjavík would be failing in its role as a capital city and a centre of communications if the airport were to be moved. They said this is not only a matter of interest for the people of Reykjavík, but for the nation as a whole. The other group stated that it could not be deemed as acceptable future arrangement to use such valuable and extensive land next to the core of the city for aviation activities, which are decreasing. They said that the construction of dwellings and buildings for the knowledge industry at the airport area entails the capital city's main progress options over the next decades. Additionally, this would strengthen the city centre. The Information and Development Division at City Hall was requested to prepare the public referendum, i.e., to introduce the matter to the people of Reykjavík as extensively as possible. This was done as follows:

- **Homepage:** a special homepage was established (flugvöllur.is) where any research relating to the issue was introduced and questions answered.
- **Introduction booklet:** a special introduction booklet was sent to every household in the city (included in the booklet on the Future City project).
- **Seminars:** four seminars were held, addressing the various sides to this issue. The seminars were arranged as follows: a) The views of the young generation (university students), b) The development of the city and aviation, c) The views of the parliamentarians and the city council members, and d) The views of architects and planning specialists.
- **News media and advertisements:** the referendum was extensively advertised in the news media and at the advertising stands in the city. Iceland's largest newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, published five large detailed

articles on the issue, and State Television (national television) had two programs where the representatives of the interested parties presented their views.

About 37% of the people of Reykjavík who are eligible to vote participated in the referendum, which turned out to be a considerably lower ratio than public opinion polls before the referendum indicated. Their prediction was 60% voting participation. In previous public referendums on keeping dogs in the city and on the merger of Reykjavík and another municipality, the participation was significantly less, or below 20%. The conclusion was that 51% voted in favour of the airport being moved after 2016 and 49% voted in favour of it remaining at its present location after this time. The electronic voting method was successful and will undoubtedly be used in the next municipal elections a year from now. The least proportional participation was among young people, 25 years and below, whereas the highest proportion of voters was middle-aged people. This pilot project in democratic working methods with the direct participation of the general public in decision-making on an important planning issue went well. There was much debate on the matter although many are of the opinion that the voting participation should have been greater.

After the referendum, the city council members disagreed on whether the results were binding as a regulation by the city council stipulates that the results of a referendum are only binding if the voting participation is 75% or more. The Mayor of Reykjavík has emphasised that even though the results do not meet this provision, the results are morally binding and that in a proposal on a new regional plan for the capital area the focus will be on the aviation activities being moved away after 2016, i.e., after the expiry of the present general plan for Reykjavík.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to cast a light upon the administrative projects the City of Reykjavík is engaging in at this time with an effort to increase the participation of the public in formulating a city policy for the future. It is essential to disseminate information between the city authorities on the attempts to increase the collaboration between the city authorities and the public in important matters; to encourage the people of Reykjavík to participate in strategic decision-making. In order to create a model city we must look ahead to the future - a future that will not be realised without realistic debate and public participation in policy formulation.

References:

Nordstat, 1999. Reykjavík in Major Nordic Cities and Regions, Helsinki

Bjarni Reynarsson, 1999. The Planning of Reykjavík, Iceland: three ideological waves – a historical overview. *Planning perspective*. 14, 49-67.

Bjarni Reynarsson, 1999. Planning in Iceland with Emphasis on Reykjavík. Paper presented at the Nordisk forskersamling in Lillehammer, Norway, September 6-7.

City of Reykjavík homepage: reykjavik.is