

A Public Interest Framework for Public Policy Development: A property and urban planning perspective

Carolyn Wells
PhD Candidate
School of the Built Environment
University of Technology, Sydney

carolyn.g.wells@student.uts.edu.au

Abstract

Operationalising the concept of the public interest might not be the most fashionable topic for research, but its importance for the public is undiminished. Determining what will benefit the public in general (as distinct from governments or interest groups) is a perpetual struggle. The author's research into the public interest in planning and property development has identified different perceptions of the concept of the public interest and differing views about how the substantive content of the public interest should be determined. These are being used in the development of a public interest framework for formulating claims about the substantive content of the public interest and using that formulation of the public interest in the development of public policy options, evaluation of options and management of conflict among stakeholders. The framework proposes a method of moving beyond competing and conflicting priorities found within diverse societies through the application of both discursive and aggregative techniques. The framework is being developed in the context of land use conflicts in coastal NSW. An example is presented applying the framework to the issue of urban planning responses to sea level rise.

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1. Introduction

The public interest is an abstraction that is a matter of subjective perception. There is limited agreement about what the concept means and the most people give little thought to how the public interest might be identified or constructed. These issues are, however, addressed by writers in several disciplines including urban planning (eg Hillier, 2003; Grant, 2005; Healey 2003), public administration (eg Pal & Maxwell, 2004; Wheeler, 2006), and political science (eg Uhr, 2005; Hess & Adams, 1999; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004). John Uhr arguably captures a key conclusion of the current debate when he writes:

Appeals to the public interest typically work best when they invite participants in a decision-making process to prove that their participation and contribution take into account all relevant interests affected by a decision. Not all participants will agree, but the presence of due process (or it could be a code, or a protocol or a mediating institution or a reporting requirement) promotes a deliberative process of open discussion about the public-interest impacts of potential decisions. (Uhr, 2005, 36)

This paper proposes such a due process for determining the public interest and a framework for applying the public interest in the policy process.

Clarification of the concept of the public interest is needed as the term is widely used by politicians, lobby groups, journalists and the public, sometimes in ways that are justifiable but often in ways that are not. Because of the definitional difficulties the popular understanding of the concept of the public interest is poor and the concept is therefore open to misuse in rhetorical claims for the legitimacy of sectional interests or government policies.

The concept is also misused in many so-called 'public interest tests' that assume that a particular policy is in the public interest and then set about to test minor aspects of its implementation (see for example Hess and Adams (1999) on the National

Competition Policy). Two public interest tests used by the NSW government in the determination of planning issues, namely that used in the crown lands policy for marinas and waterfront crown lands (NSW Dept of Lands, 2005) and the draft test proposed for use in the assessment of proposals for billboard advertising (NSW Dept of Planning, 2007), can be similarly criticised in that they are biased by the assumption that because of the revenue they raise, commercial tenures and billboard leasing will be in the public interest and should be supported so long as some relatively minor implementation issues are addressed.

Despite the impediments, there are numerous calls for the development of the concept of public interest to continue. In urban planning for example, Sandercock & Dovey (2002) have called for a resurrection of the concept, Campbell & Marshall (2002) for the resuscitation of the idea, and Moroni (2004) for its rehabilitation. More balanced approaches to public interest testing have been sought by Hess and Adams (1999) and Johnstone & Wimbush (2002).

Practitioners attempting to determine the substantive content of the public interest would benefit from renewed attempts to operationalise the concept. This is especially pressing in NSW where over 190 Acts require that the public interest be considered when implementing the Act or when making particular administrative decisions under the Act (Wheeler, 2006). This includes the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979, which is the main legislation dealing with urban and regional planning in NSW. Planning has traditionally made strong use of the concept of the public interest when dealing with the externalities of private actions and with the tensions between public spaces and private spaces.

This paper presents an approach to the operationalisation of the public interest for practitioners who are seeking to develop policies and make decisions that serve the public interest. Section 2 considers five perennial questions about the public interest and briefly sketches the main issues. Section 3 outlines how the framework is being developed and Section 4 presents the proposed framework. Section 5 presents an example and Section 6 draws conclusions about the public interest and public policy.

It has been suggested (Gunn, 1989) that the concept of the public interest was often identified as a political expression whose demise would unclutter the mass of unresolved meanings that bedevil our language, but “we have now, no doubt, passed through the worst of the obsession with scouring political words in order to render them operational and so the danger of discarding ‘public interest’ because people used it in different senses is more likely now to seem quaint rather than threatening” (Gunn, 1989, 194). My aim is not to scour the concept of the public interest to render it operational, but to help busy practitioners to manage and benefit from its richness and complexity.

2. Five perennial question about the public interest

Any attempt to operationalise the public interest must address certain questions that have occupied theorists in political studies, urban planning and public administration over decades (and in some cases, centuries).

2.1 Is there only one public interest or are there many public interests?

This question arises from the linguistic tradition of referring to ‘*the* public interest’, which implies that we are allowed only one public interest. Hess and Adams (1999, 2) put the issue succinctly when they refer to “(the) public interest” and contend that the issue of “whether it is unitary (and therefore deserving of the definite article) or whether any given polity may encompass numerous public interests” needs to be addressed. Multiple public interests might be sectoral interests (such as the interests of the homeless, tenants, home owners or landlords) or collective interests that potentially impact on all members of society and which are possibly competing (such as providing affordable housing; limiting what is termed ‘over-development’ by limiting building heights and residential densities; and minimising the destruction of the natural environment by limiting urban sprawl).

The notion of a singular public interest seems perverse in a society characterised by social and spatial diversity, when we are allegedly considering the interests of future as well as present generations. The suggestion that there is one and only one correct formulation of the public interest has led to a belief in some quarters that there is no

such thing as the public interest, that it is a fiction, or a phantom that is used by interest groups as a smokescreen for sectoral or private interests (eg Lucy, 1988; Grant, 2005).

Alexander (2002) lists the arguments that justify reference to a unitary concept of the public interest based on “some collective moral imperative that transcends particular or private interests” as the need for: 1) social stability and order achievable through consensual polity; 2) social justice which calls for authoritative redistribution to redress inequalities; 3) a mechanism to overcome the possibility that individual preferences may not coincide with their true interests; and 4) collective interests that override individual interests and values (Alexander, 2002, 230-231). But he notes that problems arise when it is suggested that there is a social consensus behind the unitary conception.

The question of a method of moving from numerous public interests to the identification of an over-riding interest, without relying on the assumption of a consensus, needs to be addressed in any attempt to operationalise the public interest.

The framework described here adopts the position that there are multiple public interests that people have in common either because they directly influence the living conditions of all people, or because they are individual or sectoral interests that indirectly influence the living conditions of all people. These multiple public interests (also referred to as ‘public interest objectives’) are often competing, leading not only to intrapersonal tensions (when an individual is seeking two or more potentially incompatible objectives) but also to interpersonal tensions among people who do not place the same value on these interests. The framework also adopts the position that the optimal balance among these multiple interests, which maximises collective utility, is what is ‘in the public interest’ and constitutes ‘*the* public interest’ with respect to a specific issue, location, scale and time.

2.2 Is the public interest something we discover, or something we develop?

Does the process of moving from numerous public interests to the identification of an over-riding interest involve finding a pre-existing interest, or formulating one?

Moroni (2004, 2006) reviews and confirms the arguments that *the* public interest does not exist in fact (due to social diversity) or as an extra-individual value. This would lead to the conclusion that it cannot be found and needs to be deliberately developed. Even then its existence would be fleeting (Public Policy Forum 1998)

Hess & Adams (1999) outline an approach towards establishing a new model of public policy action that has both procedural and formative characteristics. “It is procedural in that it makes no *a priori* assumptions about the substantive content of public interest. It is formative in the sense that it acknowledges that public interest is being formed as part of the policy process itself rather than being a pre-existing reality to be found through searching” (Hess and Adams, 1999, 9).

However, common usage rarely refers to “developing the public interest” or “formulating our position on the public interest”. Instead, rhetorical claims about what is or is not in the public interest avoid any suggestion that the public interest is anything but a pre-existing fact.

It would seem that part of the task of operationalising the public interest is to decide if it is being found or formulated, and to align language and procedures accordingly. The framework described here adopts the position that *the* public interest has no *a priori* existence in fact and must be developed.

2.3 Should we consider only collective interests, or should we also consider sectoral and individual interests?

This is a key definitional issue of the public interest. The term ‘public interest’ can be used to mean many things, including individual interests held by the majority, or the goals that individuals hold for the community (ie “those things desired by the public-spirited side of citizens” (Stone, 2002, 21)), or both. Some (especially federal politicians) use the term ‘national interest’ interchangeably with ‘public interest’, which is questionable (Public Policy Forum, 1998, 12). The term ‘collective interest’ is also difficult to define although the notion of the collective interest is used extensively in categorisations of public interest concepts in planning, for example by

Banfield (1955), Held (1970), Howe (1992), Campbell & Marshall (2002), and Alexander (2002).

Debate on this issue is a recurring feature of the long history of the concept of the public interest. Gunn (1989) suggests that one “strain that links the centuries” is utilitarianism, and that by considering the writing of Jeremy Bentham in the context of that history, his focus on individual interests can be viewed as a means of “knitting private and public goods together”. Gunn suggests that in focusing on individual interests Bentham was condemning those in government who would argue for national interests that are not in the interests of its citizens and was furthering the cause “of reducing national goals to fit the concerns of private citizens” (Gunn, 1989, 205).

In more recent times the concept of a collective public interest has been attacked and discredited by public choice theory and its focus on individuals pursuing their own welfare (Buchanan, 1986; Hess & Adams 1999), compounding the issue of how to combine self-interest and public interest, particularly where self-interest and public interest work against each other to create problems of the commons. “The major dilemma of policy in the polis is how to get people to give primacy to these broader consequences in their private calculus of choices, especially in an era when the dominant culture celebrates private consumption and personal gain” (Stone, 2002, 25). Pal & Maxwell (2004) have proposed that formulating the public interest must involve balancing individual, business and collective interests.

However it is done, it seems that operationalising the public interest involves finding a way of considering individual and sectoral interests as well as collective interests.

The framework described here adopts the position that collective interests are at the core of the public interest, but sectoral and individual interests that indirectly impact collective interests should also be considered. The relationships between collective and sectoral interests need to be examined in an attempt to distinguish between sectoral interests that have a genuinely beneficial flow-on effect to collective interests and sectoral interests or partisan interests that are only disguised as collective

interests. Similarly, we must examine private interests and consider their relationship to the public interest, especially the collective interest in justice and due process.

2.4 How do we proceed - by seeking agreement through deliberation and consultation or by aggregation of opinions?

Supporters of the communicative turn in public administration and planning (including Gutmann and Thompson, 2004; Forester, 1999; Innes and Booher, 2003; and Healey 2006) argue for deliberation and consensus building, and the social benefits and enhanced understanding that they bring. Sager (2003) also suggests that citizen participation has specific benefits for the planning process, including reduce opposition, better information on the consequences of options, and a form of quality control over the products of planning.

On the other hand, the aggregation of opinions, used for example in elections, opinion polls and referenda, is an established means of determining the ‘will of the people’ in democracies although as a method for developing collective viewpoints it is not without its critics, including social choice and rational choice theorists such as Arrow and Riker who have challenged the mechanism and meaning of aggregation (Dryzek, 2000). The ‘science’ of aggregation has progressed on several fronts, including multi-criteria analysis (Saaty, 1980; Nijkamp, 1990) and Deliberative Polling® (Fishkin, undated). The latter raises interesting issues in that it demonstrates that a randomly selected representative sample polled on an issue and then participating in a carefully balanced deliberation process with access to competing experts, will change their opinion, and “the resulting changes in opinion represent the conclusions the public would reach, if people had opportunity to become more informed and more engaged by the issues.” Given the commonly expressed concern that the public might not know what is in their best interests, this approach might appeal to some, but its use is unlikely to appear legitimate to the majority of the public who were not involved in the process. Legitimacy is one of the main advantages of the traditional aggregation processes, and the public will indicate a serious lack of legitimacy with a call for a referendum, perhaps the most fundamental aggregative process.

Therefore the operationalisation of the public interest involves finding a means of gaining the benefits of deliberation as well as the legitimacy (to the general public) of aggregation.

The framework described here proposes that both methods be used, but in different phases of the formulation process. Multiple public interests should be identified through deliberative and discursive processes involving experts and specialists, lobby groups and interest groups, the general public and spokespersons for those who cannot speak for themselves. To move from multiple interests to a formulation of *the* public interest the proposed framework uses an aggregative approach that collects and aggregates the weights that people give to each of the multiple interests. This step should use a multi-criteria method but not necessarily a zero-sum method, as that would reflect a political assumption that one interest cannot be achieved without a reduction in the achievement of another, which is a tactic used to promote one public interest objective over another (eg economic prosperity over environmental protection; or public security over public freedom).

2.5 Who knows best – experts, bureaucrats, the market or the public?

Views on this issue vary. Dryzek (1997) describes discourses advocating decision-making by bureaucrats and experts (bureaucratic rationalism), by market forces (economic rationalism) and by the public (democratic pragmatism). Lichfield (2006) recommends integrating these competing approaches when she writes of the dynamic interaction between rational planning and communicative planning, using one to enhance the other, by alternating the technical work of the planning team and subject specialists, with consultation involving local groups and the wider public.

One of the many tensions between professional bureaucrats and the public relates to expectations of the consultation process, such as: who will be consulted, how, and with what effect? In particular, there is often disagreement about “which group, class or section of the general population is the relevant ‘public’ (or ‘publics’ if several groups, classes or sections are involved) and whose best interests must be considered in making the decision” (Wheeler, 2006, 18). In public administration it is not uncommon for one person or small group to have the authority to take all of the

decisions including defining the ‘relevant public’ to be consulted, the criteria and the weightings of the criteria, the evaluation of the opposing cases and the final decision. The information released about these decisions is often limited. If informed and involved, the public might have reached the same conclusion, but that is a risk and expense that most public agencies are not willing to take.

Therefore operationalising the public interest also involves addressing the issue of public involvement in the process and the degree to which the decision making process is visible and contestable.

The framework described here proposes that these parties be represented in differing concentrations in different phases. The deliberation phase of identifying multiple interests needs to involve parties with specialist knowledge, stakeholder groups, interest groups and those with responsibilities regarding the issue. In the aggregation phase the emphasis should shift to collecting the views of a randomly selected representative sample of the public. In addition, as the operationalisation of the public interest must be pursued *for* the public, in all phases the decision making process must be visible to and contestable by the public.

3. Method of developing the framework

The current project adopts the pragmatic assumption that a framework for formulating and applying the public interest is more likely to succeed if it accommodates (or at least acknowledges) as many perceptions of the public interest as possible. Therefore part of the current research process is to understand people’s perceptions of the concept of the public interest and how we might know what is or is not in the public interest.

An approach based on the identification of discourses is being used because discourses about the public interest are likely to be associated with deeply held views about issues such as altruism, individual rights, social control etc which frequently surface in public debates on land use planning and property development issues.

These deeply held views could obstruct productive debate if people perceive that their views are not being accommodated within and respected by the process.

Accommodating perceptions revealed in discourses is preferable to other approaches to operationalising the public interest such as philosophical logic, or political preference, because it is likely to be more inclusive and less likely to cause procedural breakdown.

Q methodology¹ is being used to identify discourses about the concept of the public interest in the property and planning sphere in coastal NSW. Discourses identified to date, within the population of postgraduate students of planning and property development at UTS who are also employed in the industry, include:

- a ‘market-led approach’ that equates the public interest with market demand and considers the ‘relevant public’ to be property buyers and renters;
- a discourse revealing ‘methodological purism’ that sets high standards for the thoroughness of the process of identifying the public interest and considers the ‘relevant public’ to include all parties who are impacted including future generations, and both the local and wider (sometimes global) communities;
- a ‘public participation focus’ that advocates public input, particularly at the local level and gives precedence to the local community in the definition of the ‘relevant public’.

The Q method research is being repeated with differently constructed populations to verify these and/or identify other discourses.

¹ Q methodology identifies attitudes towards an issue held by a group of people and uses the statistical technique of factor analysis to systematically examine the range of discourses held by that group (Stephenson, 1935; Brown, 1980, 1986, 1993; McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Addams, 2000). It analyses opinions of subjects and makes the structure and form of those opinions manifest for the purpose of observation and study (Brown, 1986, 58). The structure is not assumed beforehand, and, unlike processes such as the construction of a psychometric scale, the attribution of meaning to the subjects’ patterns of opinion only occurs when the data is analysed (McKeown & Thomas, 1988, 22). Factor analysis in Q methodology involves correlating the subjects (not the traits or statement scores as would normally be the case) to identify subjects with similar perceptions. These factors represent points of view and are interpreted using the statements that distinguish among the factors and the magnitude of the loading of each subject on the factor.

Q method enables the identification of areas of agreement and disagreement among the discourses. Issues on which each discourse has strong views can be identified.

These fall into the following categories

- areas where there is agreement across the discourses and where the framework can capitalise on that agreement (for example, none of the discourses described above want to see individual interests excluded from the definition of the public interest)
- areas of disagreement that can be readily resolved by combining the preferred approaches of all discourse groups (for example, while the market-led approach prefers to obtain information from market experts, and those with a public participation focus prefer to obtain information from the public, they both agree with the methodological purists that the use of multiple sources is valuable)
- areas of disagreement that cannot be resolved by simply combining the preferred approaches because they are oppositional (for example, the discourses had strongly opposing views about restricting property rights in order to serve the public interest, and whether the negative externalities of development can be dealt with by way of compensation payments).

These patterns indicate possible tactics for accommodating conflicting views when developing a public interest framework. However this approach will appeal more to the eclectic thinkers associated with methodological purism, than it will to those associated with the market-led approach who have a narrower set of preferred methods. Also, in some cases accommodating all viewpoints means concentrating on the areas of agreement even when this is similar to finding the lowest common denominator. For example, those advocating a market led-approach agreed to only one advantage of public consultation, namely that it could reduce the risk of unjust decisions, but not to other suggested advantages such as building community cohesion.

4. A suggested framework for operationalising the public interest

The proposed framework is described in 3 parts

- 4.1 describes an approach to formulating the public interest, so that it can be incorporated into a policy, plan or proposal;
- 4.2 presents a method of using that formulation in the evaluation of a policy, plan or proposal; and the generation of options that better serve the public interest
- 4.3 describes a means of using the formulation of the public interest to manage conflict.

All three employ the definitions already established (in section 2.1 above), namely:

Public interests (also referred to as public interest objectives) are those interests that all people have in common because they directly or indirectly influence the living conditions of all people. These are multiple, competing (sometimes conflicting) interests that are not equally valued by sectors of society

The public interest is the aggregation of individual views about the weightings that society should allocate to multiple public interests.

4.1 Formulating the public interest

The aim here is to develop well-grounded claims about the public interest that have legitimacy in the eyes of experts, stakeholders and the general public and that can inform policy development. The proposed process identifies relevant public interest objectives and estimates the importance the population gives those objectives.

Step 1: Public interest objectives are identified through public debate, public meetings, hearings, interviews etc in a process involving technical specialists, interest groups, local representatives, and other members of the public.

Deliberation is focused on identifying the full range of objectives by considering individual, sectoral and collective interests and whether individual

and sectoral interests flow onto collective interests. The 'relevant public' is also defined in this process.

Step 2: A representative sample of the 'relevant public' weights these objectives and their weightings are aggregated. This step would most likely be managed by a survey agency

Step 3: Data is summarised in a statement that incorporates weightings of competing public interest objectives. The process used and the results obtained are reported to the relevant public and others and further refinement occurs as needed.

4.2 Evaluation of options against the public interest

The aim here is to evaluate policy or planning options against the weighted public interest objectives obtained through the formulation process described above. The evaluation process is also likely to generate additional options that are aligned with that formulation.

Step 1: Convene an expert panel consisting of relevant technical specialists.

Step 2: The panel examines the options and obtains detailed information from key stakeholders, objectors etc.

Step 3: The panel scores each option against the public interest objectives (allocating positive and negative scores to indicate where an option progresses or impedes the objective) and applies the weightings identified in the formulation process. The process used and the results obtained are reported to the relevant public and others.

Note that the options are being evaluated against public interest criteria that were derived in a deliberative and aggregative process involving the public, rather than

against criteria that were selected to reflect official policies or priorities and without necessarily attempting to reflect the public interest.

The process described here is effectively a ‘public interest test’. It meets the standards that this research is proposing for public interest tests²

4.3 Using the public interest in conflict management

The aim here is to progress conflict resolution by demonstrating how the views of conflicting parties compare with the aggregated view of the public interest.

Step 1: A moderator prepares a profile of each party setting out their position in terms of the weightings it gives to each of the multiple public interest objectives identified in the formulation phase, and their view of the flows between their private or sectoral interest and the wider collective interest.

Step 2: The moderator explores with the parties how their positions differ from the public interest position identified in the formulation phase, and, if the

² The proposed standards for public interest tests are:

1. A public interest test must meaningfully address the collective interests of the general public and not only consider individual or sectoral interests.
2. A public interest test must recognise competing public interests and identify the trade offs among these associated with each option.
3. A public interest test must recognise social diversity and employ a process for incorporating divergent views, not merely arguing for the views of the individual or group who are conducting the test.
4. A public interest test must give adequate attention to both the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal or option, and not assume that certain features are in the public interest.
5. A public interest test must follow a documented and transparent process of identifying options, developing evaluation criteria, weighting those criteria, and assessing their impact of the options on the public interest.
6. A public interest test must involve the public in the process of determining what is in the public interest, for example in the identification of options, the setting and weighting of criteria and/or the assessment of options.
7. A public interest test must be carried out by persons who are reasonable independent and open to alternative proposals, and not constrained by their employment or affiliations to support a particular solution.
8. A public interest test must explain and report the process and outcome of the test to the public who might be interested.

options have been evaluated against the public interest, how the options were scored.

Step 3: The moderator works with parties to shift each party's position closer to the public interest.

A mapping tool that plots the positions of the protagonists and the position of *the* public interest with respect to several of the relevant public interest objectives is being developed as part of this research.

5. Example – Property loss in areas of sea-level rise

Sea level rise associated with global warming is causing the landwards migration of the shoreline, loss of public land which previously allowed public access to the coast, and loss of private land and private property. Storm events in some areas of the NSW coast result in houses being undermined and collapsing into the sea, and this is likely to become more frequent.

The NSW Coastline Management Manual (NSW Government, 1990) offers local councils several options for dealing with the problem, including:

- Protective (defensive) works such as sea walls, beach nourishment, and artificial headlands
- Planned retreat involving risk mapping and the identification of zones where the development consent lapses when the erosion escarpment comes within 50m of any building, at which time the owner becomes responsible for its removal
- Purchase of private land and buildings by local councils and the rezoning of the land for public use or temporary use
- Development controls to limit the damage potential of new developments and redevelopments, including greater setbacks, better foundation design, and the use of relocatable buildings

All of these options are controversial. For example: protective works on one section of beach are thought to increase erosion in adjacent areas; some residents are prepared to take higher risks than others; requiring property owners to meet the full cost of their loss of land, home and possibly livelihood is thought by some to be harsh, but the funds for property buyback are limited and are likely to be quickly exhausted.

Do some options better reflect the public interest than others? Are there other options that are more in line with the public interest?

The first step in determining *the* public interest in this matter is to identify the multiple public interest objectives and distinguishing between private interests (eg of property owners), sectoral interests (eg of beach users) and collective interests (eg of the general community) and understanding the flows among these. Deliberation and debate should involve a wide spectrum of parties including interest groups, specialists (eg in erosion control) and the general public. The list of issues should not be edited or censored to conform to government policy or partisan interests but should reflect a wide range of competing views. The objectives identified might include:

- Ensure public health and safety
- Protect people and property from hazards
- Provide and maintain public infrastructure
- Protect the natural environment from degradation by human activity
- Maintain public access to shoreline for recreation purposes
- Ensure continuation of waterfront industry and commerce
- Provide predicability and certainty through the planning process
- Assist those in greatest need who would otherwise experience hardship
- Compensate people who suffer because of negligence
- Provide due process and accountability to the public
- Make wise and efficient use of public funds

Some of these objectives are potentially in competition. For example, attempting protective works to hold back the rising seas is thought by some to be in conflict with the principle of wise use of limited public funds. Another example of conflicting objectives involves the selection of properties for purchase, in that the properties that

would need to be acquired to permit the continuation of waterfront commerce, industry and recreation might not be the properties belonging to those experiencing greatest hardship.

The second step involves the weighting of these objectives by a randomly selected representative sample of the 'relevant public', which might be the local ratepayers (if council rates were to be used), or a wider pool of the local public and visitors, or the state-wide population (if state resources were to be used). This sample would be asked to rate each objective in terms of how important it is to the well being of the general public, and these would be aggregated.

The third step would involve technical specialists scoring each option in terms its likely impact on each of the public interests previously identified, and the scores being weighted according to the weights assigned by the random sample. The weighted scores would then be summed to produce an indication of the extent to which each option is in the public interest.

Stone (1989) notes that difficulties remain embedded in the realm of nature, accident or fate until people come to see them as amenable to human action, whereupon they become political issues. In the planning sphere there are many issues on the boundary, including responses to sea level rise. Some individuals and communities see the consequences of sea level rise as an act of nature and other areas see them as a failure of government, especially if the local government permitted building in areas now being eroded or flooded. Therefore one would expect the weighting of objectives, the subsequent formulation of *the* public interest on this issue, and the evaluation of the options to vary by location, over time, and with variations to the scale of the relevant public.

6. Conclusion - Public policy and the public interest

This paper has described research that uses Q methodology to identify perceptions and discourses about a concept, the public interest, so that those discourses could be taken into account in the development of a framework to operationalise that concept.

The research uses the detailed data provided by this method to identify areas of agreement and disagreement, in order to maximise the degree to which the resulting framework accommodates the perceptions of the parties as well as their beliefs and values. The framework is also built on the consideration of five perennial questions relating to the linguistic, definitional and procedural impediments to understanding the nature of the public interest.

The strengths of the resulting framework include:

- The focus on public interest objectives, including competing and conflicting objectives as this shifts the focus from people in conflict to public interest objectives in competition.
- The separation of, on the one hand, the identification and weighting of public interest objectives and, on the other hand, the evaluation of options for achieving those objectives, which allows for the possibility of options that would otherwise meet with resistance to be shown to support the public interest, and options supported by public policy to be shown to be damaging to the public interest.
- The requirement that the all parties cultivate the public spirit and consider collective interests over their individual and sectoral interests.

The resulting framework is in some ways too simplistic and mechanistic, and in other ways it risks being overly complicated and attempting to encompass too much. In the introduction I explained that my aim is not to scour the concept of the public interest to render it operational, but to help busy practitioners to manage and benefit from its richness and complexity. Striking the right balance involves developing tools that busy practitioners can easily understand and apply. Only in this way will the concept of the public interest have any hope of being resurrected to its rightful place in the polis. Some might criticise the proposed framework for its assumption that values can be quantified, averaged and summed to produce *the* public interest. However this approach is necessary because something that cannot move beyond conflicting opinions to some sort of resolution is too easy to dismiss. Dismissal and neglect will continue to be the fate of the public interest unless we provide to practitioners a method of formulating the public interest.

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