

An abstract painting with a textured surface. The background is a deep, vibrant blue. Overlaid on this are several large, soft-edged shapes in bright yellow and a smaller one in reddish-pink. The colors blend into each other, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is reminiscent of a watercolor or a soft-focus photograph of light reflecting off a surface.

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PROJECTIONS *volume 8*  
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PROJECTIONS *volume 8*

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# **EXPLORING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN SWEDEN - HOW TO IMPROVE PLANNING FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL EQUITY IN AN “ECO-FRIENDLY” CONTEXT**

## ABSTRACT

Environmental challenges, especially climate change, are highly discussed topics in the Swedish public debate, but questions about who is causing the problems and who is affected by them are seldom asked. This also applies to questions of who defines what should be regarded as acute environmental problems and what constitutes high-quality environments. This paper explores how environmental (in)justice issues can be framed in a Swedish social context, drawing from three cases: municipal promotion of eco-friendly lifestyles, large-scale infrastructure planning, and planners' attitudes towards justice. The three cases deal not only with distributional, procedural, and substantive aspects of justice, as is common within the US environmental justice framework, but also with discursive dimensions of justice. We argue that elucidating such examples of environmental (in)justices is crucial to nuance the mainstream, consensus-oriented sustainability discourse in Sweden.

## INTRODUCTION: Environmental Justice: From the United States to Northern Europe

One of the principles expressed in the 1992 Rio Declaration is that equity is at the core of sustainable development on a global level. This perspective is also reflected in policies and planning in Sweden where sustainable development has been high on the agenda for the past 15 years. But, while justice between the global North and South is generally acknowledged in Sweden, promoting justice among different groups *within* the national boundaries has not been emphasized in the national sustainability debate. This might relate to the fact that it is difficult for Swedish citizens to see the environmental impact caused by their mobility, consumption, or housing choices. Complex problems like air and water pollution, for instance, are not always tangible on the local level. When environmental problems do not appear to directly affect the people who cause them, their high-energy lifestyles are more likely to continue. Thus, in a planning context, studying the (a)symmetry between the origin and impacts of environmental problems could be a way of recognizing socially and environmentally unsustainable planning, thus providing important input into current strategies for sustainable development.

Several studies in the United States have shown that disenfranchised, low-income, and/or minority populations are generally more at risk of being exposed to environmental hazards than other groups (Bullard, 1993, 2000; Hofrichter, 1993; Faber, 1998). For this reason, grassroots groups, policy-makers, and academics have attempted to address such environmental injustices by reducing the exposure of marginalized communities to toxic industries, hazardous waste sites, or landfills (see, e.g., Faber, 1998). Environmental justice perspectives have also recently been explored in the British context, where they have been identified as crucial to the development of efficient strategies for sustainable development (see Agyeman, 2005; Agyeman & Evans, 2004; Mitchell & Dorling, 2003; Scandrett, Dunion, & McBride, 2000). Until now, however, Swedish policy-makers, researchers and NGOs have, overall, not paid any attention to such perspectives (Bradley, 2004; Isaksson, 2001).

Sweden is known historically for its welfare system and progressive environmental policies; international evaluations from the early 2000s, for instance, identified Swedish administrative and institutional structures as one of the most successful platforms for the implementation of Agenda 21 (Eckerberg, 2001) and thus for achieving sustainable development. The current Swedish strategy for sustainable development, formulated by the Central Government in 2004, emphasizes the interrelation between social, economic, and environmental sustainability, and highlights the importance of social justice in this context (Swedish Government, 2004). Although a great deal of attention is paid to social issues in the formal strategy, it is unclear what this means in the planning practice. The overall message being communicated in the strategy document is consensus and win-win solutions, in which economic development, social justice, and environmental protection fit smoothly together in the endeavor for green growth (Hilding-Rydevik, Håkansson & Isaksson, forthcoming). Nothing concrete is said about potential conflicts, controversies, or power issues embedded in sustainable development policy and planning practice (*ibid.*).

In this paper, we understand sustainable development as focusing both on protecting the resource base and enhancing social justice, and – not the least – on the connection between the two. It is therefore necessary to consider how natural resources are distributed, how decisions affecting the environment are made, and how environmental qualities are defined. The objective of the paper, is to show how environmental (in)justice issues can manifest in a Swedish urban context. To do so, we will leave the policy documents behind and focus on planning practice, exploring three cases from our research on planning in Stockholm: municipal promotion of eco-friendly lifestyles, large-scale infrastructure planning, and the attitudes of Stockholm City planners towards justice. The

cases highlight different aspects of justice: Whose voices are acknowledged in planning processes? Who gains and who loses from planning outcomes? How are environmental qualities and problems distributed among different social groups and generations? Lastly, how are notions of environmental benefits/drawbacks constructed? These three cases illustrate procedural, distributive, and substantive aspects of justice, which are common in US and UK environmental justice research (e.g., Turner & Wu, 2002; Agyeman, 2005). However, our last question adds a discursive approach to justice: we focus on the framing of environmental problems and the consequences of this framing in terms of what issues and whose impact(s) are considered in policy and planning. To use a discursive approach thus means shedding light on tacit preconditions and underlying norms and assumptions in planning. It also means illuminating questions of what environmental goods and externalities are to be distributed, amongst whom (people within a community, all people living now, or future generations,), and according to what principles of justice (everybody being equal, justice according to needs, or according to performance). Regarding substantive justice, a discursive approach adds questions about *what* should be regulated by minimum standards. These types of questions appear to be important, as we will see, for an analysis of environmental justice in Sweden.

### Case 1: Eco-friendliness—According to Whom?

Swedish urban regions, like most other European cities, are becoming increasingly multicultural and diverse in terms of lifestyles, socio-economic conditions, and gender roles. This implies that people already have, and continue to develop, a variety of relations to environmental issues such as energy use and perspectives on nature and the ecosystem. A current research project (Bradley, forthcoming) looks at how urban planning strategies in Sweden, promoting eco-friendly living, relate to the increasingly multicultural and socially diverse population, focusing on the following questions: What notions of eco-friendly lifestyles are being encouraged in the rhetoric of current planning strategies? How do the strategies reinforce, or conflict with, the everyday lives of people with differing cultural backgrounds and socio-economic conditions?

The goal of the project is to comment and elaborate on the existing planning strategies in terms of justice *within* the environment (i.e., among different groups) and justice *to* the environment (i.e., to non-humans and future generations). Our first case study took place in Spånga-Tensta, a city district in northern Stockholm. Spånga-Tensta is one administrative unit, but is divided into two quite different residential areas: Tensta and Gamla Spånga (see Images 1 and 2 below). Tensta is an area with multi-family houses from the 1960s where 85% of the residents have foreign background<sup>1</sup> — compared to an average of 26 % in Stockholm.<sup>2</sup> Income and education levels in Tensta are furthermore considerably lower compared to the Stockholm average.<sup>3</sup> The adjacent area of Gamla Spånga consists of mainly one-family houses, built at the turn of the last century and onward, and a population with ethnic background, incomes and levels of education similar to that of the overall Stockholm region.<sup>4</sup> This case study is based on interviews with local residents (both individual interviews and focus groups), a resident postal survey<sup>5</sup>, interviews with planners and officials, and an analysis of strategic planning documents. In total 45 residents and five officials have been interviewed and 175 residents have responded to the survey.

This study reveals a prevalence of a discourse in which the commonly-accepted “Swedish” ethnic identity is connected with a general notion of environmental responsibility in the form of tidiness, recycling, and familiarity with nature and animal species. This is a notion that warrants criticism, however, since the residents termed “Swedes” give off not only some of the largest ecological



footprints per capita in the world,<sup>6</sup> but their footprints are also larger than those of non-Swedes in Sweden, who often reside in multi-family houses, and do not own cars, etc. (Bradley, forthcoming). In other words, what has been defined as environmentally-friendly behavior appears to have been framed by Swedish middle-class norms and habits. It is also worth noting that the public strategies for sustainable development used in the case study area have primarily been directed toward low-income and immigrant households in multi-family houses residing in Tensta rather than at the energy-consuming lifestyles and travel habits of the more affluent “Swedes” who reside in one-family houses in Gamla Spånga. According to the city official in charge of sustainability work, 90% of his time and resources was devoted to promoting change in the low-income areas, where the predominantly



**IMAGE 1.** Housing in Tensta. *Photo: Karin Bradley.*



**IMAGE 2.** Housing in Gamla Spånga. *Photo: Karin Bradley.*



foreign-born population was encouraged to recycle, keep the area tidy, and use public transport and low-energy light bulbs, etc., while hardly any of his time was used for advancing eco-friendly living in the more affluent area nearby. Furthermore, the urban development plans for Tensta have primarily focused on improving the low-income high-rise area, making it denser and more “urban,” partly motivated by environmental concerns. Paradoxically, this poorer area is already very dense and the use of public transportation is considerably higher than in the more affluent neighboring area.

Altogether, this research raises the question as to whether the discourse on planning for eco-friendly living entails processes of normalization, perhaps unintentional, by which “the Others” -- foreign and/or “troublesome” residents -- are to be transformed into “well-behaving Swedes” (ibid.). In this study, the discursive aspect of (in)justice lies in how complex societal interactions, in which planners and planning play an active role, have come to produce notions of desirable lifestyles that suit and reinforce the preferences of the dominant Swedish middle classes. This reinforcement of the Swedish middle-class high-energy life styles does not directly affect less affluent neighboring communities, but it affects global warming and environmental degradation on a global level. Thus, what we are dealing with here is an issue of “(un)fair share in environmental space,” i.e., how the consumption of the earth’s resources is divided amongst different groups and generations.<sup>7</sup>

Another suggestion as to why the policy focus is skewed towards low-income areas may be related to the fact that local tidiness gets mixed up with eco-efficient living. For instance, the municipality has, within its budget for local sustainability work, initiated a project called “Spånga-Tensta Nice and Tidy” where local organized residents are reimbursed for regularly cleaning a part of the neighborhood.<sup>8</sup> The assumption underpinning this project is that this activity leads to “greater awareness of waste management and an attractive and healthy outdoor environment,” as well as overall “environmental gains”.<sup>9</sup> This is an example of “sustainability policies” which include both measures to improve the local environment towards more greenery and tidiness, and measures to reduce the use of resources. These two types of sustainability measures are often treated as one package with the assumption that improvement in the first type goes hand in hand with improvement in the second. However, in the case study, the wealthier area of Gamla Spånga is green, attractive, and tidy, and thus seemingly “unproblematic” from the visible sustainability policy point of view, but it is nonetheless an area of high resource consumption, thus qualifying for the promotion of more eco-friendly lifestyles even more than the “untidy” and poor area of Tensta.

In summary, through a clearer definition of what type of “environmental improvement” is intended, with which goal, and for whom, and through learning from different ways of saving natural resources, urban planning policies could be better attuned with social and cultural diversity (justice *within* the environment) and could become more environmentally progressive (justice *to* the environment) (ibid.).

## Case 2: Traffic Infrastructure—At Whose Expense?

Another example that illustrates environmental justice in Sweden comes from the field of infrastructure planning in urban areas. “The Dennis Package,” one of Sweden’s most extensive infrastructure projects to be planned and implemented (in part) in the 1990s, was an initiative by the Swedish Government, which commissioned the Director of the Bank of Sweden, Bengt Dennis, to lead the negotiations between the State, the Stockholm County Council, and the municipalities of Stockholm. The goal of these negotiations was to reach an agreement on infrastructure investments that would improve environmental conditions, accessibility, and economic development in the Stockholm region (Isaksson, 2001, p. 49).

The ensuing Dennis Package was the result of more than two years of negotiations. It was a large-scale scheme of infrastructure investments -- including a ring road and a bypass (as shown in Figure 1) -- and public transportation system investments. The Package also introduced toll roads on the most costly new roads, namely, the western link (part of the bypass) and the eastern link (part of the ring road) (ibid).

The analysis of the Dennis Package was based empirically on an analysis of local, regional and national planning and policy documents, interviews with planners, policy-makers and stakeholders, newspaper material, and statistics about the Stockholm area (Isaksson, 2001). The environmental justice aspects in this project are related to the location and design of the new major roads. To reduce the negative environmental effects of the projects, the western link bypass and the eastern link were planned with the construction of a system of tunnels. The adjacent central parts of Stockholm, as well as the well-to-do municipality of Ekerö, would receive the most direct benefit from these measures of environmental harm reduction, which were being paid for by a massive national budget, including revenues from toll roads. Meanwhile, other roads in the Dennis package were planned to be built above ground in municipalities and districts where the average income was considerably lower, such as the Northwestern districts of Stockholm (Hjulsta, Tensta, and Akalla). These areas have a higher rate of unemployment (more than 8% in 1994, as compared to 5,5% for the region at large), a larger percentage of residents of foreign background (more than 20% in 1993, compared to 7% in the region at large), of lower income (more than 20% of the inhabitants were dependent on social welfare in 1993, compared to 8,5% in the region at large), with health problems (in parts of these areas, more than 35% of the residents had been ill over long periods of time or were not working at all due to sickness pension in 1993, compared to 22% in the region at large) (The Office of Regional Planning and Urban Transportation, 1995).

In many cases, the new roads would cut through local green field sites of importance to outdoor life and recreation for the inhabitants of these poorer districts. Worth noting is that the residents in these areas have a lower level of car-ownership than in many other parts of the city and the region, thus they would not benefit as much from the investments in new road infrastructure.

Part of the explanation for the uneven distribution of benefits and burdens in the Dennis Package relates to the different values given to different environmental qualities and areas of special interest. In general, areas with well-known cultural heritage qualities such as royal castles and parks -- like the Drottningholm Castle located in Ekerö, as well as the old royal parks and castles in Djurgården and Haga in the Eastern and Northeastern parts of Stockholm -- attracted much media attention. Meanwhile, several areas of importance to outdoor life and recreation in the poorer neighborhoods were not considered, for example the green areas of Järvafältet in the Northwestern parts of Stockholm, or Gömmaren, Glömsta and Hanveden in the Southern parts of the region. At some point during the planning process, concerns were raised about the environmental consequences for the affected suburbs. In one of the political debates in the city hall of Stockholm in 1994, one Social-Democrat politician addressed the issue of unequal distribution of negative environmental consequences (Stockholm Municipality, 1994). However, there were only a handful of similar statements in the extensive political discussion and media debate (Isaksson, 2001, p. 160).

In 1997, the government put an end to the plans to construct the western link of the bypass and the eastern link of the ring road. However, several of the roads that were planned to go above ground in the Southern parts of Stockholm were built, as well as most parts of the roads in the Northwestern and Northern parts of the region. Today, the western link, now called "The Stockholm Bypass", is



FIGURE 1. The ring road and bypass included in the Dennis Package. Source: Isaksson, 2001.

once again included in current infrastructure plans. The environmental justice consequences are as obvious today as in the 1990s, but the issues remain unaddressed in the general policy debate.

### Case 3. Planners' Attitudes Towards Justice

Our third case of environmental justice aspects in Swedish policy and planning is taken from a series of seminars organized by our research group for planners in leading positions at Stockholm's City

Planning Office (documented in Orrskog, 2008; Zimm, 2007). We held six seminars in 2006 on the theme "Planning for Good Environment and Justice under Diffuse Circumstances," with a follow-up seminar in 2007. The initiative of the seminars came from the planners and were meant to give both planners and researchers a deeper understanding of contemporary challenges in planning (Orrskog, 2008, p. 3-7). The seminars consisted of a series of focused conversations on how discourse, mobility, justice, and diversity can be understood in the context of various ongoing planning projects in Stockholm, urban planning trends in other European countries, and how the future role of planners could be shaped. Seven-eight planners and three-four researchers participated in the seminars. The planners experienced the seminars as a forum for reflection and have expressed their interest in maintaining and spreading the scope and content of their discussion through the Planning Office (*ibid.*, p. 69).

It was apparent from the conversations that the planners perceive their work as touching upon issues of justice, even if this is seldom expressed in an explicit way in their daily practice. However, these discussions revealed how the planners worked especially with issues related to procedural and substantive justice, as illustrated in the description that follows. The planners worked actively to apply new methods of involving different groups in the planning process with the intention to understand their viewpoints on the local environment and its future. One planner expressed it as follows: "We have worked with in-depth interviews, focus groups, neighborhood walk-throughs, and meetings with representatives of different groups. [And] we have actually become much better at this. (*ibid.*, p. 63)."

However, the planners also became aware of shortcomings, such as the difficulty of getting residents of foreign background involved and how to handle "emotional expressions" from, e.g., mothers with children (*ibid.*, p. 63). Thus, we see that the planners worked with procedural justice, even though it could be further developed through efforts to increase the ability of underrepresented groups to participate and become empowered to participate in the planning process.

Among the planners, the issue of procedural justice appeared to be the least contested, and the general standpoint was that procedural justice can be safeguarded through the process of broad public participation. Less attention was given to whether a formally just process necessarily results in environmental just outcomes. In other words, less attention was given to distributive aspects of environmental justice. However, this does not imply that environmental issues as such were neglected. According to the planners, environmental issues like noise and air quality were best managed by respecting environmental norms and regulations<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the planners were on the whole satisfied with the substantive environmental justice and argued that current planning practice gave higher priority to environmental sustainability than to social sustainability, even if this was changing (*ibid.*, p. 15). One planner said: "Nature had higher intrinsic value in the 90s. Nonetheless, the Swedish National Road Administration still has shelf after shelf of official reports about the expected environmental effects of Route E18, but hardly a sheet on its social impact, such as barrier effects." (*ibid.*, p. 15)

In sum, the planners underlined procedural justice and believed that substantive justice is (or could be) fulfilled by norms and regulations, while they paid less attention to distributional justice. Discursive aspects such as what constitutes a good or bad environment and who defines them were not subjects of focus.

Furthermore, the planners saw planning as a situated practice, closely related to normative and ethical issues such as environmental justice, but in the beginning of the seminar series, they seemed blind

to their own potential role or responsibility in relation to this. Rather, they tended to hide behind their formal role of merely executing political, and therefore often shortsighted, decisions. One of the planners stated that: “[...] Politics today involves very little problematizing. It’s very one-dimensional, very short-sighted and very limited—and we know all that so well. That often makes our issues very simple, too simple”. (Planner at Stockholm’s City Planning Office at the follow-up seminar, October 26, 2007). At the end of the seminar series, we noticed a slight shift in the planners’ opinions and they started raising the idea that they could be more pro-active by trying to put vital issues as related to environmental justice on the political agenda (Orrskog, 2008, p. 67). They had no desire to bypass democratically elected politicians, but they began to see an opportunity to raise political awareness, e.g., on environmental justice issues that are not normally elucidated or discussed in the political debate.

A past example of where they did try to influence the outcome is when the local government of Stockholm decided that 20,000 new residences would be built between 2003 and 2006. Not only were the planners under stress to fulfill this goal in such a short time, but they felt it was difficult to do it in a socially acceptable way. In an attempt to be able to defend “their” plans, they tried to take justice concerns by mixing different forms of rental/owner-occupied dwellings to facilitate for different income groups to dwell in the same area (*ibid.*, p. 17). Thus, the planners tried to adapt the plans to more just principles, or, as one planner put it, “By being good at providing [what the politicians demand], the result can also be adapted to what we think is good.” (*ibid.*, p. 17).

Another situation when the planners expressed their will to become more proactive, is when they have knowledge of undesired environmental or social consequences of political decisions, which they can more actively communicate to the politicians, who might then decide to redefine their “order” to the planners so that the outcome becomes more environmental just. An example that came up during the seminars was the Swedish school reform that changed a long-standing situation by which children had almost always enrolled in the school that was physically closest to them, to allow parents to choose the school they wanted for their children<sup>11</sup>. The planners noticed that this reform had caused increased travel and thereby increased pollution, as well as more traffic in proximity to the schools, which was harmful to the local school environment. None of these issues had been brought up when the political decision was taken. During the seminars, the planners suggested that the spatio-environmental consequences of political reforms should be investigated more thoroughly before implementation (*ibid.*, p. 25-27).

The above discussion shows an opening on the part of both planning and decision-making for increased reflection and action regarding environmental justice.

## CONCLUSION: Environmental Contestations for the Future

The three cases explored in this paper illustrate issues of environmental (in)justices in a Swedish planning context. The first case involves distributive justice in terms of resource use and discursive justice in terms of the production and reproduction of notions of eco-friendliness, in which “Swedish” high energy consuming middle class norms and habits remain unchallenged. The case of The Dennis Package deals with distributive justice in infrastructure planning. The case illustrates how adverse environmental impacts mainly affect disenfranchised communities. The third case shows how planners work actively with procedural justice and see substantive justice as fulfilled by environmental norms and regulations. However, when analyzing the second and third cases in more depth, the discursive dimensions of justice become evident. For instance, procedural justice is not only about a fair process

but also about issues preceding the process, i.e., which issues are brought up, defined as relevant, irrelevant or not even thought of. A discursive approach to substantive and distributive justice thus adds questions of *what* is to be regulated and *what* is to be distributed and who defines and formulates them.

The findings on environmental (in)justices are in themselves a critique and contestation of the currently dominant Swedish sustainability discourse and its strong focus on consensus and win-win strategies. Our three cases show that environmental planning is far from a consensus affair. Sustainability policy and planning entails fundamental conflicts and justice issues that need to be considered. However, the currently dominant sustainability discourse provides no help in identifying, acknowledging or discussing justice aspects—on the contrary. For this reason, we argue that environmental justice research is an important contribution to the Swedish sustainability debate and it needs to inform more greatly the work of planners and policy-makers. Shedding light on environmental justice issues, as we have done in this paper, is a means of revealing fundamental political and ethical dimensions of sustainability politics and planning, and of making them more tangible and engaging—not only for researchers, but for politicians, planning professionals, laypeople, and all of the many other social actors who have and will continue to have important roles in the quest for sustainable development.



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## [ENDNOTES]

1. "Foreign background" is defined as foreign citizens born abroad or in Sweden, and Swedish citizens born abroad, data from Dec 31, 2003. Stockholm's Municipality: *Spånga-Tensta – Ditt stadsdelsområde i Stockholm 2004-2005*. Information folder.

2. The Statistical Office of Stockholm's Municipality. Data from Dec 31, 2006: <http://www.usk.stockholm.se/internet/omrfakta/tabellappl.asp?omrade=sdo03&appl=Omradesjmf&resultat=Andel>, Accessed, March 18, 2008.

3. In Tensta around 20% of the inhabitants in the ages 25-64 have an education level above high school-level, which can be compared to around 50% in Gamla Spånga and 52 % in the municipality of Stockholm as a whole (The Statistical Office of Stockholm Municipality, Data from Dec 31, 2006).

4. Ibid.

5. The resident postal survey was conducted by the Stockholm Municipality Statistical Office, USK (2005) and consisted of 175 responses from residents of Spånga-Tensta. 300 persons received the survey among the 35,000 residents in the city district).

6. The ecological footprint per capita in Sweden is 67 global hectares, which can be compared with the West European average of 61 global hectares, the North American average of 109, the African average of 8.5, and the average of the Middle East and Central Asia of 13.6 global hectares per capita. For a detailed explanation of how the ecological footprints have been calculated, see the report by Redefining Progress, "The Ecological Footprint of Nations – 2005 Update," which is available at: <http://www.rprogress.org/publications/2006/Footprint%20of%20Nations%202005.pdf>.

7. The concept "fair shares in environmental space" has been developed by Friends of the Earth International. For a more detailed description of the concept see: <http://www.foei.org/en/publications/sustainability/sustain.html>.

8. See the project description of "Spånga-Tensta rent och snyggt": [http://www.miljobarometern.stockholm.se/content/pdf/hu/godaexempel/rentsnyggt\\_beskr.pdf](http://www.miljobarometern.stockholm.se/content/pdf/hu/godaexempel/rentsnyggt_beskr.pdf), Accessed, Feb 21, 2008.

9. Ibid.

10. Norms and regulations, such as the 16 Swedish Environmental Quality Objectives adopted by the Swedish Parliament in 1999 and in 2005, the Swedish Environmental Code (SFS 1998:808) and the Swedish Planning and Building Act (SFS 1987:10).

11. Private schools started to appear with the Social-Democrat government, but when the right-wing coalition came into power in 1991 the Conservative Prime Minister declared a major change (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2003:34). From then on, parents have been able to choose to put their children in municipal or private schools, but also schools in other municipalities.

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