

HOW DO WE PROTECT “PUBLIC WELFARE” AND WHAT *IS IT* EXACTLY?

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CLARB, the Council of Landscape Architecture Registration Boards, wanted to understand public welfare better because it prepares questions for the LA national exam that measures the candidate’s knowledge of health, safety and welfare. But how is public welfare measured? CLARB discovered that none of the design professions has a clear picture of this nebulous topic, despite the fact we are all required to protect “public health, safety *AND WELFARE.*”

Surprising, right? How can we protect “public welfare” if we don’t know what it is?

CLARB hired a Canadian research firm, ERIN Research, to analyze “Public Welfare.” Here is their definition:

Public welfare,
in the context of Landscape Architecture,
means the stewardship of natural environments
and of human communities in order to
enhance social, economic, psychological,
cultural and physical functioning,
now and in the future.

ERIN Research explored the ways landscape architects contribute to public welfare and found seven categories. (These can apply to other professions as well.)

Landscape Architecture:

1. Enhances **environmental sustainability**
2. Contributes to **economic sustainability**
3. Builds **community**
4. Promotes **health and well-being**
5. Encourages **landscape awareness**
6. Offers **aesthetic and creative experiences**
7. Enables **communities to function more effectively**

These categories don’t have code books that guide you towards compliance of minimum legal standards. Compared to the legal standards that govern **public safety** and **health, public welfare** is less tangible and harder to measure.

Interestingly, the public has demanded help in evaluating category one, environmental sustainability. LEED, Sustainable Site Initiative, and Green Guide for Health Care are voluntary programs that assist in evaluating healthy environments. Rather than a building code that is mandated by law, environmental sustainability is being ranked by new, privately governed systems to guide and honor successful design.

Going a step further, Minnesota decided energy saving is so critical, they passed law in 2010 that requires new public buildings to use the MN Sustainable Building Energy Guideline, which is similar

to LEED. Will we see more regulations and standards for public welfare get adopted as law? Which categories can we measure? How do we establish criteria for success or failure?

The public we serve is increasingly vocal about public welfare issues and is showing us what succeeds and fails. They are demanding changes to improve quality of life. With the help of social media options, it is possible for grassroots efforts to achieve widespread visibility despite a lack of government or corporate support. For example, the push for locally-grown food (an issue of public welfare) is largely driven via social media. It has been gaining momentum despite subsidies and politics that support distant, large-scale corporate farming.

There are many intriguing aspects of public welfare: 1. It is hard to define; 2. It is hard to measure; 3. Responsibilities of the designer are unclear. Interestingly, when the public welfare is adversely affected they can now use new, social communication methods to quickly gain power in successful grassroots efforts.

It's time we look at this topic in greater depth. More articles on Public Welfare will follow.