

Book Review

John Meligrana

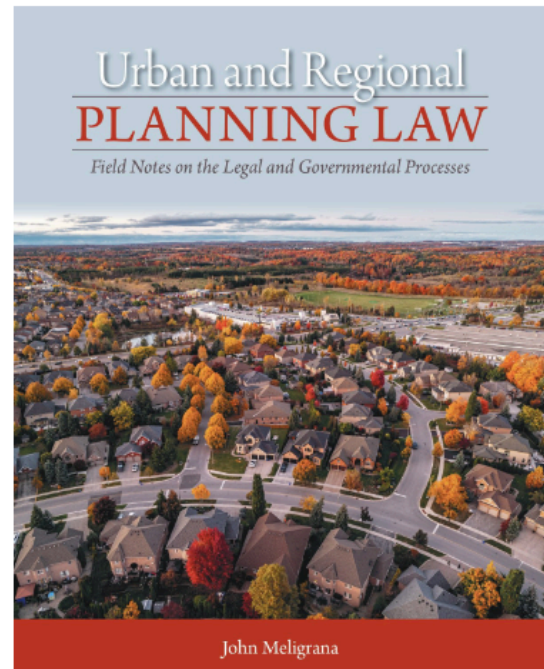
Urban and Regional Planning Law: Field Notes on the Legal and Governmental Processes

Available at [Northrose Educational Resources](https://northrose.ca/), 2026, 268 pages.

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Uniquely straddling legal and planning realms, Dr. John Meligrana's new book, *Urban and Regional Planning Law: Field Notes on the Legal and Governmental Processes*, is a welcome addition to existing resources for planning instructors, students, and professionals in Canada. Having taught Application of Planning Law at Dalhousie University since 2023, I have struggled to find a set of readings that are as helpful and 'lecture-ready' as these chapters are. That is not to say that Epstein's (2017) *Land-Use Planning*, and particularly Smit and Valiante's (2016) *Public Interest, Private Property*, will not remain key elements that inform and shape my teaching. However – and despite the focus on Ontario throughout much of the book (Ontario-based instructors must be salivating reading through its pages) – Meligrana delivers an engaging and sometimes funny book (yes, a planning law text can apparently do that). The book is of course more than that. First and foremost, it will help students understand and apply the principles and practices of planning law, across all levels of government.

Chapter 1 (The Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Practice of Urban and Regional Planning), begins with the Constitution and how the Charter is such a powerful, often underestimated force in shaping planning law. Meligrana takes readers through the most relevant sections of the Charter, including Reasonable Limits (1), Fundamental Freedoms (2), and Legal Rights (7,8). He makes it clear how Federal-level protections impact land-use planning at the municipal level. His description of



the Oakes Test, as well as the cases of *R. v. Pinehouse Pharmacy*, 1991 (SK CA), and *Sarnia (City) v. River City Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Sarnia*, 2015 (ONCA), effectively illustrate how the rights and freedoms we enjoy as Canadians may come into conflict with land-use controls. What I really appreciate is that Meligrana goes further, asking readers to imagine themselves as either these people and/or municipalities represented in each dispute.

In Chapter 2 (The Government of Canada's Role in Urban and Regional Planning), we remain at the federal level, but with a focus on Section 91 of the Constitution. Section 91 helps to outline the government's direct and indirect planning powers –



everything from taxation to criminal law. Again, Meligrana effectively incorporates real legal cases and disputes. One such case is *Canada Post v. City of Hamilton*, 2016 (ONCA), wherein he demonstrates federal paramountcy when federal and municipal plans come into conflict. He also brings interesting cases that deal with criminal law, such as *R. v. Gyles*, 2003 (ONSC) – a case that is as dramatic as it is Canadian. Without giving away too much, I will just say that much of the case is set at Tim Hortons and Country Style donut shops.

Next, Meligrana takes us through what may be the most important Chapter (3) of the book, *Indigenous Peoples and Urban and Regional Planning*. He does so while admitting that it was the most difficult chapter to write. However, given fragmented municipal responses related to Truth and Reconciliation efforts in Canada, it is clear that students need to be better educated and trained in this area. Meligrana does his part to advance this, including through fundamental statistics, definitions, and a recent history related to Indigenous-settler land-use disputes such as the Kanesatake Resistance (or Oka Crisis). This context will help students to better understand the TRC Commission's Calls to Action. He also provides examples on how different levels of government need to meaningfully consider and engage with Indigenous interests and communities. Meligrana also asks students to engage with the First Nations Land Management Act and other more recent policy initiatives, such as urban reserves, meant to return sovereignty to First Nations.

In Chapter 4 (The Provincial Government's Role in Urban and Regional Planning), Meligrana's engaging style of writing is on display from the beginning, when he uses the analogy of a parent-child relationship to describe the provincial-municipal relationship as it relates to land-use planning. As a new father myself, this one hits close to home. The focus here is on the government of Ontario, which

marks a clear departure from the preceding three chapters that are largely set on the federal level. This chapter – as is the case with the entire text – showcases engaging figures and photos throughout. Speaking to the latter, many of these Meligrana took himself throughout Ontario and Canada. On the actual content, he takes us through different sets of provincial plans (e.g. the Greenbelt Plan). He also devotes space outside of urban and southern parts of Ontario, including descriptions of the Far North Act. Meligrana's section covering the Ontario Land Tribunal is also very important to readers' understanding of conflicts and one important way they are resolved in the province.

In Chapter 5 (Municipal Governments: Powers and Responsibilities), we are presented with another section that provides great information for those in Ontario. The level of detail is impressive, including breaking down fundamental elements of what defines a community and what a municipal council is. Again, the author does a great job at bringing forward real cases from across Canada to describe how the ideas he writes about have relevance to planners. His sense of humor is clear in describing the city of Kingston's nuisance party bylaws. He invites the reader to grab a drink with him to “regale... stories of [his] youthful adventures”. I may take Meligrana up on that upon my return to Kingston's Princess Street. At the end of the Chapter, he devotes space to describing the roles of different kinds of municipal staff, including city clerks, which is important. Planning students would be well advised to know these roles in part so they can work well alongside them, or perhaps even become them. I've seen recent planning graduates serving as chief administrative officers in small municipalities in Atlantic Canada.

In his 6th chapter (Statutory Plans), Meligrana provides the reader a lesson on the scales and hierarchy of plans in Ontario. He effectively discusses a range of legal conflicts and cases



regarding the question of ‘what is a plan?’. The author also makes it clear what needs to be in a plan, outlines the S.M.A.R.T. objectives, and incorporates broader policy context related to things like climate change and affordable housing. Chapter 6 also contains great content on ideas surrounding public engagement and consultation as it relates to Ontario’s Planning Act. Much of this is situated within engagement scholarship including Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation – a great thing to see for someone who uses the ladder in their work! Meligrana closes this Chapter with some space devoted to community improvement plans, including the examples of the Cities of Kingston and Ottawa.

In Chapter 7 (Subdivision of Land), we remain in the Planning Act context, where the author begins with a definition of a subdivision. Meligrana articulates the importance of knowing the legal basis for, and context surrounding, subdivisions, but in a clear, concise way. So much of this chapter is practical, full of exercises that will help the students develop both understanding and skills related to subdivision. Like much of the preceding text, he shares some great visuals that describe what can be difficult ideas for students to understand. Notable among these are the seven(!) subdivision scenarios, which I can say will be engaging in-class exercises for students across Canada. Meligrana also goes through notable examples of property conveyances in Ontario, dating back to 1857 in Eastnor, Ontario. Despite being from Ontario, I had to look up where that is!

In his final Chapter (Land Use and Development Controls), the focus is on the powers that municipal governments are granted by their provincial government. Like much of the past few Chapters, Meligrana centers this around the Planning Act of Ontario. To me, there is some important overlap here with Chapter 5. Meligrana frames much of this Chapter around the ‘four prongs of land use

controls’: uses, environmental/cultural areas, built form, and three-dimensional controls. Like so many others, this would be such a great Chapter for those teaching planning law. It is full of examples, great visuals, and ‘boxes’ that ask students applied questions. It also tackles some new and contemporary issues relevant to planners today, including community benefits and backyard suites – I wish I had this chapter before building ours!

In the book’s Conclusion, Meligrana finishes with what he calls a concise guide for planners and planning students, and is centered around eight key themes: cooperative federalism, laws and regulations, case law as a source of planning knowledge, planning of “surplus” public lands, provincial-municipal relations, Reconciliation, regional planning, and land use controls and planning. Each is filled with a helpful combination of tips, key messages, and what he calls “glimpses into the future”.

To close this short review, and on behalf of instructors, students (current and future), and professionals hoping to sharpen their legal acumen, thank you, John, for writing this text. For the former two groups, I have no doubt it will be one of the most impactful books in the study of planning law in Canada. It successfully pairs foundational legal knowledge (including legislation and precedent-setting cases), with questions and exercises that will promote active learning. For professional planners looking to learn or refresh their legal understandings, this text will also be valuable. I could imagine it serving as an especially important reference for Ontario-based planners. This centering of professional usefulness is brought forward through Meligrana’s final message, where he lets us know that as his career as a professional planner winds up, he hopes the notes provided through this text will be helpful. John, if you are reading this, I can confirm this will be the case. Judgement in favour of the author.

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