



March 2018

Useful Community Development... quick notes

This Month: Spring Cleaning, Does Your City/Suburb/Town Really Care, Good Signs
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Spring in the Northern Hemisphere: Time for Spring Cleaning!

Those of you who read our website know that we think almost any time is a good time to organize a neighborhood clean-up. The benefits of an easily organized one-time project with visible results are hard to beat.

You might want to think bigger too. A very [readable academic article](#) details the impacts of a clean up campaign (admittedly more than a morning's work) along a three-mile long major street in Flint, Michigan. They cleaned vacant lots; added benches, lighting, and plantings; repaired sidewalks; and strategically replaced a corner liquor store with a chain sandwich shop and turned the vacant lot across the street into a small park.

Researchers found that results included several new businesses, reduced crime, reduced fear of crime, better mental health, and more participation in community activities. Don't you think those are some good outcomes?

Does Your City/Suburb/Town Really Care What You Think?

Focus for a moment on the amount of time residents are given to learn about a proposal or an opportunity, before gaining their one and only opportunity to give an opinion. Think about your own or a typical experience of a Community Development Block Grant hearing or a public hearing on a rezoning, conditional use permit, or variance. Here we highlight one site visitor's experience with a comprehensive plan, but the same principle applies to everyday decisions that impact our neighborhoods.

Our U.S. site visitor e-mailed twice to describe an experience with a charrette. Charrette is a term borrowed from architecture that now is being used loosely for many kinds of processes where citizens, stakeholders, or designers participate in an intense exercise in trying to solve a problem. Lately we're hearing too many similar stories. Consider whether the good citizens of this city really had ample opportunity to talk about their comprehensive plan for the next 20 years. Here are some excerpts:

"Before the date I went by the Planning Department and asked the Planning Director for any materials they had. He said quite explicitly they had no materials to give out in advance.

After we got organized there was about 40 minutes or less to work on the map describing our ideas about what we would like in a Comprehensive Plan to guide the city . . . for the next 20 or more years. Nothing was discussed in the group that assembled to start with about 40 people nor was there time to discuss much of any substance in the group sessions with the maps. This was a pretty good turnout of all sorts of people interested in doing their best to express their ideas. They had almost no opportunity to discuss anything. After the separate group map sessions we reassembled to go over our proposals.

I took this lack of opportunity to discuss anything as a group to be a deliberate part of the organization of the affair. Of course I could have stood up and shouted out my points and forced the organizers to listen but I decided this was useless.

The main purpose as far as I could see was so the Mayor and Planning Department could say they had requested and provided a public forum for public contributions to the Comprehensive Plan. Now they will go and review the contributions and find favor with what they agree with and have already planned to include. Perhaps they will have another session but only under the same time limitations and other tightly controlled circumstances.

Predictably the Mayor does not want the entire range of suggestions and topics he might get in a relatively open meeting discussed. The matters that might be brought up he does not want to deal with."

OK, folks, after hearing our visitor, do you think this was a good process for public input on a comprehensive plan? It might have worked if the subject were a single building, and there were only a couple of up-or-down choices to be made, but is it reasonable to discuss the future of a city in 40 minutes? We agree with our site visitor; it's surely no way to find out what thoughtful citizens really want for their whole city. This kind of process does not give any opportunity for debate and dialogue, or for those who know less about the situation to learn from those who know more.

In fact, the city probably could have learned as much by conducting an online survey, and residents would have enjoyed an evening at home. Sending "a pretty good turnout" home with nothing to show for their efforts only builds cynicism.

[Charrettes](#) have many pro's and con's for helping to shape development proposals or sites. But if you agree with us that this was a bad tool for use in building something as complex as a comprehensive plan, see our [community engagement](#) and [planning with kids](#) pages for alternatives.

The Big Point here: be sure to match your technique to the complexity of the information that needs to be learned and considered.

Good Signs Make a Good User Experience

With people outdoors more this season, make sure your signs in parks and districts are helpful to all types of visitors. Well-designed signs can not only provide orientation for tourists and the home folk, but they also can be inspiring or educational in telling stories about the history or future of the site in question. Hard work can make them pretty too. If interested, check out this helpful [Project for Public Spaces](#) article.

New Website Content This Month: We wrote about [annexation](#), an important topic for growing towns and cities to consider as part of a sound planning program. Also there's a new page on [Transfer of Development Rights](#), a complicated tool for preserving natural, agricultural, or historic resources and for preventing sprawl. Check out the completely revised and updated our page on how the [smart electrical grid](#) might impact your community resiliency if you're doing a resiliency plan. New question and answer pages included [how to justify rezoning my home to commercial](#) and [city requiring deed restriction before final inspection](#).

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