

## **Executive Summary**

### **2002 Developer Focus Group Report**

The developer focus group was held on January 11, 2003 in the Town of Cary. A total of 7 developers participated in the session to discuss citizen involvement in the planning & development process.

#### **Citizen Involvement**

The developers felt that citizen involvement was crucial to the process. They wanted the citizens to participate early on in the process before it was costly to change plans. There were some concerns expressed about citizens not directly affected by the proposal impacting the process and the fact only one citizen could slow or stop the process. The developers wanted the Town staff to take a more proactive role in the process. They believed the Town should work with the developers early on in the process to explain to citizens what can and cannot be changed. There was concern that citizens do not understand the state/local rules and regulations that cannot be altered. There was also an issue with the Town being too technical in its explanations to citizens. Additionally, the Town needs to be able to answer citizen inquiries on projects or direct them to the developer.

#### **Notice**

The developers felt the Town was doing an effective job in notifying citizens of proposed developments in terms of the number and timing of notifications. They felt this was different from citizen perceptions of too few opportunities that were too late in the process because citizens did not understand the process. Citizens perceive any plan they viewed as near approval and not subject to change. The developers suggested labeling the plans as “concept only” and adding a design development stage where they work with citizens to incorporate their input into the plan. A more formalized documented process was suggested where the developer would document citizen involvement and plan alteration as a condition for Town approval. Again, the Town would be present to explain to citizens what can and cannot be changed during this stage.

#### **Proposals to Improve the Process**

The developers reviewed the pros and cons of nine proposals designed to improve the planning & development process. The first of these was including pamphlets in the notice letters summarizing the proposed planning & development process. The developers were very positive about this proposal. However, the pamphlet and letters should be written in understandable terminology.

The proposal to have the Town staff meet annually with homeowner’s associations was not viewed favorably due to the workload of meeting with the large number of associations. Possibly having the associations ask for meetings, informing them of nearby developments as they occur, or using these meetings only for long-term plans (not projects) were suggestions to improve this proposal.

The proposal of having the Town staff organize meetings with affected neighborhoods to talk about planning or development activities as they occur received a mixed reaction. The developers indicated this depended on the scale of the project. They noted the Town may not have enough information early on to answer questions.

The developers gave a positive reaction to having the Town work with property owners to develop and keep updated neighborhood plans. They felt this was crucial and the Planning Board should also be involved and interact with the citizens.

The proposal to have a Town staff ombudsperson or liaison to work specifically with citizens during the planning & development process was viewed positively. They felt this would give the citizens one person they could contact for information. The developers had concerns with who would designate the liaison and would prefer it be a citizen rather than Town staff member.

Changing the Town's Planning & Zoning Board by assigning seats geographically was supported by the developers. They agreed that this was important to the process. One developer suggested this would work more effectively if used with the liaison proposal.

The developers liked the proposal to have developers meet with affected property owners regularly during the months immediately prior to initiating a development activity. However, they had concerns with making it required as opposed to recommended. They preferred the developer to provide documentation of such contact and the Town takes this into consideration before approval.

There was little support for creating a new Citizen Advisory Board appointed by Town Council that would develop a structured communication effort between citizens and developers. They felt this only added to the bureaucracy.

Finally, creating groups of citizen volunteers into Citizen Advisory Councils (CACs) that would review issues of interest to their neighborhood and express their concerns to Town Council was viewed mostly favorably. The developers felt the Councils need a charter with rules and guidelines. These guidelines should include that individuals outside the community cannot be members and the role of a CAC is strictly advisory. They felt CACs are an excellent way to keep citizens in those areas informed.