

## **Executive Summary**

### **2002 Past Participant Focus Group Report**

The past participant focus group was held on January 11, 2003 in the Town of Cary. A total of nine past participants sat in the session to discuss citizen involvement in the planning & development process.

#### **Citizen Involvement Issues**

The first question was a clarification question. The participants were asked if they were thinking of the involvement opportunities or were they thinking of the outcomes when they rated their overall satisfaction with citizen involvement in the process. About half were thinking of the outcome only and the other half were thinking of both the involvement opportunities and outcomes concurrently. This indicated the outcome was the key determining factor in relation to their satisfaction.

The past participants also felt to some degree the Town does not listen to them. The predominant perception was that the projects were “done deals” when presented to the public. There were other beliefs that contributed to this perception including notice letters were not always sent out and the Town does not attempt to make these letters stand out.

Three themes emerged regarding the participant’s expectations concerning the Town listening to them. First, the participants would like the Town to be more of an advocate for them. Developers are perceived to “hold all the cards” in the process. They have legal representation and know the process in detail, not true for the citizens. Second, the Town needs to take into account “quality of life” issues in approving developments. Third, the Town needs to improve its notification process. The participants recognized that just because the Town does make changes that it did not listen to them. However, they were wary of the Town supporting changes then approving a different set of plans. They referred to this as “bait & switch” techniques.

Most of the participants felt they had no impact on the outcome of planning or development activities. This perception comes from personal experience as many of them gave examples. They felt the Town was working with developers and not taking the citizen’s concerns into consideration.

#### **Notice Letters**

The past participants gave several features they would like to see in notice letters to improve them. They would like to see the pros and cons of the proposed projects as it would affect them and their property values. They would also like to see the notice letter stand out from other mail, possibly putting all communication from the Town in a green envelope and putting a content statement on the cover. The letter needs to be written in concise, understandable language and list a contact person to call who can answer questions. Several participants noted that maps are effective as well.

The participants would like to receive the letters in advance with enough time to put them on their calendars. One month time frame was mentioned several times. A reminder postcard of the meetings at a later date was also mentioned as a desired feature.

## **Timing of Notification**

The participants were somewhat mixed into how soon they should be notified when a proposed planning or development activity is submitted. A few would prefer immediately and others would rather be notified in advance with enough time to place it on their calendar. The group did note that immediate notification may make it hard for the Town staff to answer questions because they may not have all the needed information at that point. One suggestion was to send a postcard early on with a link to a website with details on the proposal. The participants stressed the Town needs to return all calls concerning developments.

The participants did not believe the website was the proper way to notify them. They would prefer a notice letter first. The Town can include a link to the website (Town's or a developer's) in the letter to give additional details.

Time constraints did not allow a detailed discussion on letters, phone calls, or e-mails as notification methods. Most past participants indicated a notification letter should be sufficient if done correctly. They would also like to see an informational letter concerning developments the Town is working on in the next 18 months or so.

The participants indicated they would prefer to deal with drafts of plans prepared by the Town staff than help with the actual drafting of the plans. They key is that the drafts can be altered or changed due to public input.

## **Formal Involvement Opportunities**

The participants were asked what they expected to happen at a public information meeting. They indicated they would like to hear the pros and cons of the proposal and how it would affect them. One member indicated he would like to know more about the process such as when you can speak and what you can speak about. Another issue mentioned is the fact the Town needs to listen to citizens and take things under advisement. They need to follow-up later with reasons for their decision with details and clarification. Feedback was the key.

## **Proposals to Improve the Process**

The past participants 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 participants were very positive about this proposal and believed it was a good method to improve the process.

The proposal to have the Town staff meet annually with homeowner's associations was not viewed favorably due to the fact that many sections or neighborhoods do not have homeowner's associations.

The proposal of having the Town staff organize meetings with affected neighborhoods to talk about planning or development activities received a positive evaluation. They especially liked this proposal as compared to meeting annually with homeowner's associations.

The past participant gave a very positive reaction to having the Town work with property owners to develop and keep updated neighborhood plans.

The proposal to have a Town staff ombudsperson or liaison to work specifically with citizens during the planning & development process was generally viewed positively. However, they felt this individual should serve more as an advocate for the citizens as well as an information source. This person would present the citizen's point of view at meetings. The participants liked the fact this person would also give citizens just one contact to call for information on a proposal.

Changing the Town's Planning & Zoning Board by assigning seats geographically was not supported to a great degree by the participants. They indicated that this has the potential to force neighborhoods to compete with one another and even "gang up" on some neighborhoods to dump undesirable projects on them.

The past participants were in support of the proposal to have developers meet with affected property owners regularly during the months immediately prior to initiating a development activity. However, they made one change to the wording. They objected to the term "immediately prior to" and would prefer "prior to within a reasonable time frame" instead.

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. The participants felt there were too many projects going on and did not like that Town Council appointed the members. They felt the Council would appoint members with views similar to their own. They did like the idea of a CAB for annexed citizens outside Cary to them give more of a say.

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 participants felt that if the CACs were structured correctly it would give the advocacy to the neighborhoods they desired.

### **Homeowner's Associations**

All the participants strongly felt that neighborhoods without homeowner's associations were at a disadvantage compared to neighborhoods that had them. The group mentioned that organized homeowner's associations had financial resources and legal representation at their disposal. They also felt that CACs may be a method to counteract this disadvantage. However, the financial and legal resources of homeowner's associations were still a concern even with CACs in place.