Citizen-centered planning

Use more citizen-centered planning (Collaboration): When only a few understand "how to play the game" suspicion, anger, and conflict rise. Our community will be strengthened if citizen voices are incorporated and respected at all levels, from long range planning for infrastrucure, to zoning, to specific decisions to build. We must incorporate both citizen voices and values into our planning for growth and development and be transparent with both processes and information.

The subject of how to deal with growth and development has been a source of community conflict for many years. Current issues include downtown development and sewer and transmission infrastructure. Conflict over development has been so persistent and generated such emotion that many in the community call it the "development wars." The city has provided new portals for citizen input, consolidated some programs and services for easier access and developed an advisory comprehensive growth plan, yet the city's own 2015 Performance Report said that, at 28 percent, "citizen satisfaction with how well the city plans for growth has reached a new low."

The tensions and divergent views generated by growth, particularly with regard to current downtown development, were well reflected in our surveys and in forum comments:

"I am concerned about the city council's blatant disregard for business development, especially downtown. The lack of economic development will kill our town."

"No growth = no business = no jobs = more crime"

"Columbia is trying to grow too fast and the city leaders are not listening to the cries for help."

More of the comments, though, reflected frustration with the process community leaders use to make decisions. These included concerns about lack of vision:

"Our city council is guilty of being RE-ACTIVE instead of PRO-ACTIVE. They spend most of their time cleaning up messes rather than presenting clearly defined programs aimed at acheiving specific goals."

"they don't think big; they avoid the hard issues until those must be addressed, they don't hold boards and commissions accountable and at times seem to ignore."

"Do we want Columbia to become very large and very urban?"

"Vision, don't forget VISION!!! Our current elected officials and paid staff appear to lack VISION. They are always working in hindsight mode."

"Everyone is concerned that our city leaders oppose growth rather than have a goal where the city could go."

They also included concerns about how "citizen input" is sought and used:

"I believe that every-time the city has a big meeting, says we hear you, and subsequently doesn't change their action or direction or explain their lack of action they cause significant damage to the public trust."

"Hold more meetings during the day and evenings. Not everyone can get to a meeting for discussion at night. The buses don't run all that late. Announce these meetings in the paper, radio and TV more than one time."

"Citizens are less likely to engage in processes, even ones that seek to be inclusive, when they hold little faith that the results of those processes will be implemented."

"City asks for citizen input and then doesn't do anything with it."

The list of specific issues identified by paticipants as ones where leaders were "not listening" included trash roll carts, sewers, streets, "dismantling 'nostalgic' buildings" and parking.

As to these and other issues, participants also want adequate information to evaluate both the issues considered and the decisions made:

"I would like to see more analysis of development issues. The growth of the city is an important topic, and we really only hear the views of people who are really wealthy and people who are really angry about any change downtown."

"People want to be informed."

"Convey to the public the goals, the process, and the outcomes."

"Even when there is good information that contradicts the angry public conceptions on a topic, our council repeatedly fails to point out that information and argue against incorrect viewpoints."

"This is all really complicated and needs to be unpacked in a way that people can read and understand."

Participants also wanted information on how planning aligned with citizen needs, offering comments like "think about infrastructure for all — ability to get around, access to jobs, etc." and "[r]eliable transportation and infra-strucure is key to increasing mobility and consequently equity."

Some participants were more likely than others to see city government as well organized and open, stating that "... many do not realize they do have means to make their voice heard or know how to go about doing so." Others

also recognized citizen responsibilities to "tune-in, speak-up, and listen to other citizens." One summarized as follows: "Who is responsible? Has to be a mix. Government has to invite involvement, community has to respond." Other comments by participants included "stop yelling and faulting," a fear of retaliation for speaking up, and references to a "vocal minority" diverting attention from the interests of the "vast middle."

Overall, participants wanted to see "more open democratic systems for discussion," beginning with participation when defining the goals to be met or the problems to be solved. They also want adequate information, presented in a timely way, in context and in formats that are easy to understand. Add to this adequate opportunities for dialogue beyond the traditional "hearings" and public comment. And they want their elected leaders to report back on actions taken, decisions made, and the reasons for those actions and decisions.

Overall, citizens want opportunities for meaningful input, beginning with participation. They also want adequate, accessible information, more opportunities for dialogue and for elected leaders to report back on actions with reasons.

One participant recommended that in making changes, we should "start now, before the city grows more." The following chart sets out some of the changes suggested by forum participants, along with some related concerns.

Use this space to gather your thoughts for dialogue, to make notes as others speak, or to reflect:

MY EXPERIENCE: **I CAN LIVE WITH:**   **WE SHOULD START WITH:**

MY IDEAS: **I CAN'T ACCEPT:**   **WHAT I CAN DO NOW:**

Suggestions	Concerns	My thoughts
Community members can work together to hold elected leaders accountable for using the community vision and values to make longer term planning decisions.	In our diverse community it is hard to say what is a "community value." The free market provides an adequate mechanism for balancing individual choices.	
City council and county commission should regularly report back to citizens on decisions made and the pattern, pace and metrics of growth in the area.	This is a diversion of staff time and such reports not only cost money but could invite further conflict.	
Businesses can work with the city to ensure adequate transportation access for low income residents to areas with jobs.	Where to live and work are individual choices. This approach to planning could be costly and inefficient for both businesses and taxpayers.	
The city would work to strengthen neighborhood associations and proactively engage them in planning decisions.	These might not be representative or inclusive and such a process could unreasonably constrain market choices.	
All community leaders can model civil disagreement and acknowledge different points of view.	We elect our leaders to make decisions and, like us, they have freedom of speech. They can best decide what works in advancing their goals.	
Government and other community organizations could actively work to involve those they serve in planning on how to best serve needs, including schedule meetings at different times, providing child care, etc.	This is costly, inefficient and delays decisions. And the overall benefit is unclear — citizens have opportunities for input now that they don't use.	
Local media could invite citizen ideas for resolving identified problems and identify the source of suggestions.	This has a cost, and is not necessarily aligned with the news mission. It may also give unrealistic expectations for change.	