

The Value of Community Input in Crafting Local Policy

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In the early half of the 20th century, the city planning profession exercised its authority in ways that were not responsive to citizen needs. Planning policies from the 1950s, such as urban renewal and redlining, were notorious for their callous indifference to local residents and detrimental effects on the American urban fabric. Since then, the involvement of the general public in data acquisition and scientific inquiry has grown to the point that the term “citizen science” has been coined to describe the process. Citizen science encompasses many different techniques cities can employ to develop policies that are more responsive to public needs.

A History of Public Input in Planning

In the early days of the planning profession, public participation was scant, with input from local government officials and planning commissions serving as the primary methods for discerning local citizen’s needs. During the high tide of post-war modernism, many planners felt that planning was a purely rational endeavor and that cities were amenable to improvement through scientific analysis and inquiry, so no public guidance was needed.¹ By the 1960s and 70s, the failures of this approach were becoming self-evident as federal urban renewal programs were displacing residents and undermining the urban fabric. This prompted many planners to advocate for new approaches to the profession. Chief among these was advocacy planning.

First mentioned in a 1965 article by Paul Davidoff, advocacy planning professed that planners needed to be more forceful advocates for different groups and individuals within the city rather than serving as impartial experts acting under some unitary public interest.² To achieve this, Davidoff suggested planners prepare multiple plans, rather than rely on a single, master plan to guide local decision making. Under this paradigm, planners would also be responsible to a particular interest group in the city and attempt to express

the values and objectives of the group. Planners would still have their own ideas and thoughts about the wisdom of certain policies, but at the end of the process the preferences of the group must prevail. Advocacy planning signified a major shift away from the idea of planning as a purely rational exercise towards the idea that planners must reconcile competing group values to forge a plan that best represents a collective community vision.

Another major innovation in the planning discipline to incorporate public input and decision making was the use of charrettes, which condense the planning process into short brainstorming workshops involving the public to resolve the issues. A charrette typically lasts between four and seven days and involves multiple design meetings and public workshops.³ At the beginning of a charrette, organizers will convene a public workshop and divide participants into small working groups where they describe their vision of what the design site will look like after the plan is fully implemented. Based on this input, the organizers will develop various drawings and plans based on the public vision and project objectives. The drawings and plans are then subjected to another round of public input, input which the team uses to conceive the final, preferred design along with implementation strategies. At the final meeting, the design team showcases all the project elements and demonstrates how the plan will be conceived moving forward.

Charettes present the public with an opportunity to actively inform what type of land uses and community design principles are incorporated into local plans. Charrettes can be powerful tools to foster public participation, but they are not without their downsides. A poorly planned charrette can frustrate the public and if the city does not meaningfully act on public input from meetings it can lead citizens to believe that the city is merely offering a pretense of public involvement.⁴



Credit: Amy Walker

Community Input in Planning

Tensions remain in planning's role as a kind of arbitrator for competing notions of the collective good. These tensions often appear when rewriting zoning ordinances and comprehensive plans.

Staff of the City of Mobile, Alabama are rewriting the city's zoning and land development code, the first major rewrite of its kind since the 1960s.⁵ One component of the plan is the creation of a new overlay district, called the Africatown Overlay District. The district is centered on the historic neighborhood of Africatown, home to 2,000 residents including descendants of 110 enslaved Africans brought to the Mobile region in 1860 on the slave ship *Clotilda*, known as the last slave ship to land in the United States.

Africatown has experienced a long history of social and economic discrimination, including in the land use surrounding the neighborhood, such as siting smog-producing paper plants and other heavy industries near the neighborhood. In light of past discrimination, residents and activists for Africatown are asking that additional protections be built into the code to protect the neighborhood from heavy industry.

Representatives with the NAACP and the Mobile Environmental Justice Action Coalition made many recommendations for addressing heavy industry nuisances, such as building 10-foot walls to separate residences from neighboring industries, imposing more beautification requirements on non-residential developers, and doing more to address waterfront conservation. As of May 18, 2021, the city's revised zoning code remains in limbo as local officials and Africatown residents continue to debate ordinance revisions.⁶

Citizens as Applied Problem Solvers

Citizen science can also help city residents better understand the environmental concerns within their community. One interesting initiative using citizen science to address environmental problems is Smell Pittsburgh. Smell Pittsburgh is a crowdsourced mobile app used to track noxious odors and emissions and report them to the Allegheny County Health Department.⁷ That county received an 'F' in a 2021 State of the Air report. The mobile app is a valuable tool in helping the county get a better handle on lingering air pollution problems. Since Smell Pittsburgh was started in

2016, the app has triggered more than 20,000 reports to the Allegheny County Health Department.⁸ The app's developers are now working on a similar version for Louisville, Kentucky. Once the app is running, University of Louisville researchers plan on using smell reports by correlating app data to statistics on hospital admissions in order to determine if the presence of noxious smells points to health impacts from air pollution.

Citizen science does not need a new app to succeed. Sometimes all it takes is subtle refinement to an existing initiative to transform community outreach into an information gathering exercise. In coastal Mississippi, a microplastic monitoring project looked at microplastic abundance in the Northern Gulf of Mexico, bringing together multiple partners spanning the Gulf from Texas to Florida.⁹ Mississippi State and other project partners trained local citizens to sample and count microplastics from beach sediment and coastal waters. At the conclusion of the project, over 500 samples were collected by citizen scientists and critical data were gathered on the type of plastics found in coastal waters.

One of the simplest ways members of a community can aid local planning efforts is to play an active role in the reclamation and repurposing of public space. Over the past decade, such actions to repurpose public space have come to be associated with the term tactical urbanism. Tactical urbanism may be defined as different design fixes – either temporary or long-term – that aim to address common community problems, particularly in the realm of streets and public spaces.¹⁰

In Oxford, Mississippi, for example, local leaders installed temporary bike lanes to better understand future infrastructure needs. The project temporarily transformed a portion of a key road to include two bicycle lanes and additional crosswalks.¹¹ The project has been described as being consistent with Complete Street design principles, which aim to have roads that incorporate infrastructure for all users instead of just catering to automotive traffic. These temporary bike lines also have a citizen science component as well, as local volunteers have been involved in data collection to assess the project's effectiveness.

Since the completion of the project in 2016, similar pop-ups were installed in Oxford. In 2018, a 2,063-foot portion of another road was reconfigured to increase visibility of the bike lane and crosswalks and install other road modifications proven to be effective to control traffic. This portion of road

was selected when speed data demonstrated that a majority of vehicles on this stretch of road traveled above the posted speed limit of 30 miles per hour. Don Feitel, a member of the Oxford Pathways commission, noted that “Using temporary material means that we can easily test various treatments and see which works best before anything is permanently installed. It brings a flexibility to the process the city might not otherwise have.”¹²

Conclusion

By engaging with local members of the community, city governments can better address past problems while creating fruitful grounds for information exchange that can guide planning going into the future. 🦋

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Endnotes

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