Expanding Local Voices...

Public Participation in the Age of the Internet

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Public participation has always been a double-edged sword. As we noted in the first issue of *The Community Planner:*

> *Elected bodies are typically ambivalent about public participation. While elected officials would like to be able to say that they provided substantial opportunities for public input, a claim that plays well during election season, public input can lead to a perceived loss of control and can result in programs and approaches which may run counter to their positions. In jurisdictions where political power is closely held, public participation in the planning process can be seen as a threat.*

Public participation has, for many years, been treated as the "kumbaya" part of comprehensive planning: a range of activities meant to bring citizens and elected officials to the table to grapple with issues and define their community's future. The rise of the Tea Party over the past three years has complicated and changed the nature of public participation, often adding politically-driven rhetoric, misinformation, and anger to what had been a relatively calm process. The introduction of the internet and online processes have also done much to increase anxiety and highlight the digital gap between younger citizens and older elected officials.

When we started this issue of The Community Planner, we started with the idea of developing a compendium of community input techniques and a more specific discussion of the nuts and bolts of community participation. What we noticed was that we kept drifting back to the idea of a "sense of place." How do people see the same place differently? What colors their perceptions of place. As with other subjects covered by *TCP*, this one is far larger than a single issue.

Milt Herd is back in this issue with a short "Tools of the Trade" article on his "Treasured Places" activity. I first encountered Milt's Treasured Places activity when he worked on a local village plan. While "Treasured Places" shares similar features to other SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) activities, it is the only one that focuses participants on establishing their own definition of "place," both in terms of what they value and why.

This issue heralds the start of a new feature in *The Community Planner,* the product review. While we have included software reviews in our discussion of tools of the trade, it has always been in context to something else. Carol Lindstrom, our local research and data guru, contributed an excellent article on developing and analyzing surveys, as well as a product review of SurveyMonkey, an affordable online survey tool we have been playing around with for the last couple of years.

We also welcome Karen Drake, AICP to the pages of *The Community Planner*. Karen is the Comprehensive Planner for Blacksburg, Virginia, a town with a long history of innovative approaches to planning. Karen's article on the use of blogs in garnering public input and managing information is an essential read for anyone thinking about using a blog as part of their comprehensive planning process.

We hope you enjoy this issue of *The Community Planner.*