

## Expanding Local Voices...

# “Treasured Places” Exercise for Early Public Input

*by Milton Herd, AICP*

### Introduction

When preparing comprehensive plans or other public policy documents, localities are faced with the constant challenge of how to engage citizens and other stakeholders in the process. Public engagement is helpful in preparing the substance of planning policies, as well as to help build broad and sustainable support for the policy outcomes.

There are many ways to engage the public, from general approaches such as public meetings and steering committees, to specific techniques such as surveys and interactive exercises. Following is a brief summary of one kind of specific technique, called a “treasured places” exercise. There are many possible variations on this technique, so below is a brief description of one particular version, as an example of this tool. The reader can easily envision many ways to customize this technique.

### Purpose

The purpose of a “treasured places” exercise is to give citizens a simple framework in which to identify and express their priorities for the future physical form of their community. It is typically used as part of a larger public input meeting occurring early in a comprehensive planning process. The results of such an exercise typically include marked-up and annotated maps of the community, prepared by citizen participants, showing:

- First and foremost, those physical features and resources that the citizens value the most, particularly things that they hope to preserve, even as other things in the community may change or go away; and
- Secondly, those physical features and resources that citizens believe could or should be changed (expanded, reduced, modified, etc.) in ways that would improve the community.

**Note** that the definition of “place” is very broad in this exercise – it can include a corridor, a greenbelt or even a lake or mountain or other geographic feature, as well as the more conventional notions of place, such as neighborhoods, parks, historic sites, public gathering spaces, and the like.

The purpose of the exercise is twofold:

- It produces useful information about the values and priorities of the citizens who participate and those that they represent, particularly those special places and features that are most highly valued by the community, and

- It helps the participants to understand each other's values and priorities, especially in terms of where they share common ground, but also where they may differ. It identifies areas of agreement, but it also exposes conflicts, which lays the foundation for achieving consensus on planning policies.

The insight gained from this exercise helps planners refine their analytical methods as well as shape policy recommendations that emerge during the planning process.

### **Relation to Other Parts of the Planning Process**

Typically, this kind of exercise is conducted very early in the process so that the results can provide an underpinning for consensus-building and policy formulation. The exercise is typically conducted as a portion of a larger "open forum" or "conference forum" style of meeting. However, this tool can also be adapted to on-line methods, and other settings, with any size of group.

### **Detailed Procedures**

The exercise is very simple, and as noted above, can be customized with many kinds of variations.

Participants at the meeting are divided into smaller, breakout groups, preferably four to eight in each group, seated around a rectilinear or circular table. Each group is given a large plain, black line paper "base map" of the community which shows basic existing *physical* information, such as roads, streams, and woodlands, as well as orienting information such as property lines and place names. Ideally, these maps should also show basic planimetric detail such as structures, fences, etc., but no policy information like land use, zoning, etc. The map should be roughly ten square feet in area (30 by 48 inches).

Each small group is asked to brainstorm together, and mark on the map, using colored markers, two key sets of resources:

*Treasured Places* – those physical resources that they hope will be preserved and never be removed or substantially changed. These could be cultural or environmental. Typically they are features such as historic buildings, landmarks, parks, and other places of strong community identity, pride or enjoyment. Participants are asked to mark-up the map by shading, striping, outlining, or otherwise delineating these features using green markers to indicate "preserve".

*Opportunities for Change* – those physical resources that they hope will be changed – removed, replaced, rebuilt, expanded, etc. This can include brand new improvements such as a new street, trail or structure, or it could be a major improvement to an existing resource, or the removal or demolition of an unwanted element. Participants are asked to mark-up the map to show these desired changes using red markers to indicate "change".

For both of these steps, participants are asked to add written notes to the map to explain subtleties or details that might not be self-evident by simply showing the place graphically. These can include such things as historic designation, change in condition of the feature, recent or expected change in ownership, whether a red mark-up means "expand" or "demolish", etc.

Potential variations include adding to the palette of choices, such as distinguishing between expanding, reducing, or removing a feature, instead of simply "changing" it;

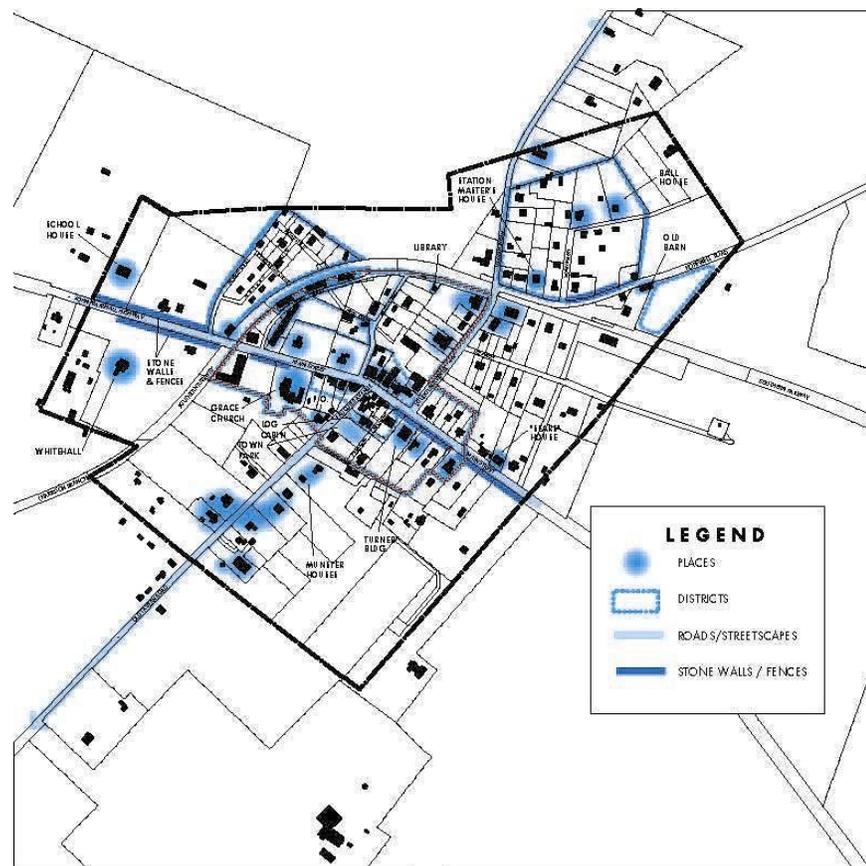
although keep in mind that the primary focus of the exercise is to identify those features which people want to preserve as a foundational bedrock of the community's physical form.

## Conclusions

The Treasured Places exercise is simple, quick, fun, and effective. It helps get people talking and listening to each other, putting down their ideas in simple notes and graphics, and engaging in thinking and deliberating about the forces and implications of future change in their community. It provides good information about citizen values and opinions, early in the planning process. While it doesn't represent a statistically valid sample of opinion, if the participants are relatively diverse, the input received from this exercise is very helpful to planners, and can also provide an excellent information resource "for the record."

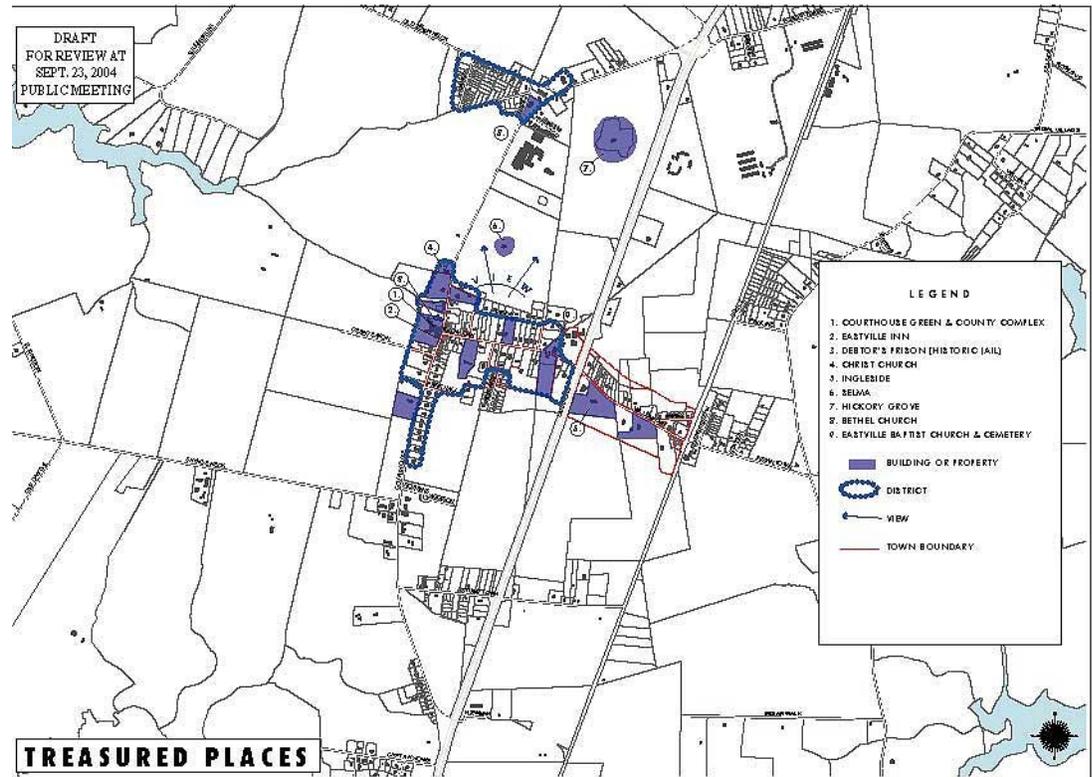
**Note:** *The author thanks Vladimir Gavrilovic, AICP, of Renaissance Planning Group, for his leadership and collaboration in many "treasured places" exercises for public clients.*

**Following are two examples of "treasured places" maps created by citizens in public work sessions.**



*graphic courtesy of Vlad Gavrilovic, AICP*

*Treasured Places Map - Town of The Plains, Virginia  
(derived from maps created by citizens at public work session  
in 2004)*



*graphic courtesy of Vlad Gavrilovic, AICP*

*Treasured Places Map - Town of Eastville, Virginia  
(derived from maps created by citizens at public work session  
in 2004)*



*photo courtesy of Vlad Gavrilovic, AICP*

*Citizens Working on "Treasured Places" Exercise in Eastville*