Local Voices and Technology…

To Blog, or Not to Blog, That Is the Question!

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Innovations in technology during the past decade have revolutionized how we communicate. Fax machines are no longer the standard means of transmitting documents. Officials at meetings are utilizing their Ipads to access reports instead of looking at paper copies. We now have continuous access via our smart phones to email, text messages, internet, Facebook, Twitter, and an ever increasing number of blogs. Our office is mobile; it travels with you wherever so you are never unconnected.

The question often asked of planners and government officials is why aren't you blogging? Why aren't you using the latest technology to communicate with your public? Why haven't we jumped on the bandwagon utilizing the latest technology fad?

The simple answer is that some of the new communication technologies we now take for granted every day, have limitations and don't work well for planning purposes. Emails, texts and tweets cannot replace the value of a face to face conversation in a committee meeting. These conversations are the core of planning and land use policy discussions. Emails can't always convey the right tone needed in a message. Text messages and tweets don't always contain complete sentences with correct grammar. Then there is the question of how do you share email discussions with the public, who has a vested interested in board and committee discussions?

The more complex answer is really, what is the best technology format for planners and government officials to utilize in sharing with the public the complex land use policy discussion that take place on a day to day to basis? This article proposes a series of questions to help guide planners through the decision making process to help you decide if it is beneficial to blog or not to blog. This article does not detail the steps needed to implement the blog technologically since technology is always evolving. This article does provide a process to justify why you have chosen or not, to utilize new technologies to supplement your core face-to-face land use policy discussions.

The guide questions below are based upon experience with the 2006 Comprehensive Plan Task Force assigned to edit *Blacksburg, 2046*, the comprehensive plan for the Town of Blacksburg. The old version of the Town's comprehensive plan was over 600 pages. The Task Force edited the plan in half to just over 300 pages, yet still detailing key land use policies. To make this challenge feasible in a year and a half while coordinating fifteen different committee member schedules, additional meetings were required. The Task Force decided to meet electronically via a blog. Staff posted draft chapters for review on the blog that was accessible via a link to the Town's main webpage. The blog was closed to public comment, but the public could read all drafts, comments and edits posted by committee members.

In generating the comp plan task force, all the questions asked below were all

raised, discussed and answered. These are the questions you need to ask yourself if it is worthwhile to blog or not to blog.

Technology. What program or system is the best available to utilize? Is it a blog or is it via Facebook? How much does it cost or is it free? How intuitive is the program to use? If it's not easy to access via a link and password and then simple to learn how to use, there is a good chance it won't be used successfully. How is it interfaced with your website? Can your IT personnel on staff implement and maintain the blog? Or do you need to hire a consultant and is a consultant in the budget? Or does your consultant wind up being your technology savvy teenager?

Staff Time. Who is going to monitor the blog on a day to day basis? Who has access to post information and updates to the blog? How are you going to regulate the blog for misuse? Who is responsible for deleting information? How are you going to market and publicize the blog to the public? How are you going to remind the committee of when new posts are made and how long they have to make comments?

Attorney Time. Have you verified with your attorney about the implications of blogging with regards to the Freedom of Information Act? What is the state retention requirements for keeping all records associated with the review of a development application or comprehensive plan update? How does this impact the life of the blog after the plan is adopted? Does it need to be maintained for example, for five years as currently required by Virginia State Code? Is this possible?

Committee Time. Who is going to use it? Do they want to? Can they all access the blog or do you have technology challenged committee members who still demand paper copies be printed for them? If they can access the blog, will they? Do you have an active involved committee, who want to contribute, or do you have a committee who complains about never getting anything accomplished, yet the committee members don't do anything but show up to a meeting unprepared? How long do committee members need to respond to blog posts? Does this fit within the overall project schedule?

Public Involvement. Will citizens follow a blog of editing details? Yes, meeting via a blog allows the citizens to stay informed about policy development easily at one's own pace while allowing time for contemplative questions and thoughts. But do your citizens care about that level of detail and are demanding this level of interaction? And paraphrasing Otto von Bismarck, laws are like sausage, citizens may not want to see them being made.

Public Access. Can the public post comments, making the blog interactive, or is just for following an on-line discussion? If the blog is interactive, will you have that one known citizen complainer venting on the blog about everything else but the topic under discussion? And for the technology challenged public who have no or limited access to the internet, or limited experience with blogging, how will you equitably provide information to keep them informed of discussions?

Final Product. How will the blogging help improve the final report or update to the Comprehensive Plan? Are there specific questions you want

answered or gathered public input on? How will the information be collected, synthesized, distributed to committee members for analysis and potential incorporation into the plan? Is there time in your review schedule?

Blogging to gain public input can be a very successful communication mechanism, but the blog must be useful to your project to make blogging a success. Blogging to just blog won't make your project a success. The Town of Blacksburg made blogging work during the last Comprehensive plan update. As a result, the Town received a state-wide communication award for "looking outside the box in a cost efficient manner" to manage internal and external communications.

Karen Drake, AICP, is known for her innovative approaches to comprehensive planning and the use of technology. The Comprehensive Planner for the Town of Blacksburg, Virginia, started her professional career not in planning but on cruise ships that frequented places like Antarctica. She has a BA in Communications from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and an MA in Environment Planning/Geography from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Prior to wandering up into the mountains of western Virginia, Karen was a senior planner with James City County, Virginia (the county surrounding Colonial Williamsburg). In addition to traipsing around exotic places like Tasmania (see left), she also has a fondness for tasmanian devils (a result of her experiences in Tasmania) and drive-in theaters (or at least the local variation). She is less fond of some of her current activities, most notably helping to dry out family homes following a couple of bouts with hurricanes.