

Descriptive Narrative: Smart Charlotte 2050

Problem assessment, the challenge or need that prompted the local government to develop the program:

Once operational and implemented the Charlotte County Comprehensive Plan was found wanting. One of the universal criticisms of any planning process is that it is too often accomplished 'behind closed doors.' Staff found a need to engage the public, but hearings and charrettes have limited impact in addressing this concern, and many residents continue to feel that their concerns are not heard or addressed by those drafting or approving plans. Staff conducted an assessment of the problem, and determined that the review process needed to be rethought. When the County realized that the existing comprehensive plan lacked a supportable vision for future growth, it was decided to entirely renovate the plan, starting with a new vision. In order to create a brand new and viable vision, the County knew that a high degree of public input would be essential. That led to an extensive review of the Plan using what has been termed the Smart Charlotte 2050 plan process.

Program Implementation and Costs:

Implementation of the Plan is an ongoing State requirement to maintain a comprehensive plan for the County. The County has budgeted \$395,000.00 in consulting fees just for the review of the Plan. However, implementation of the Plan is also the primary task of the County's Planning department, with an annual budget of approximately \$900,000.00.

To implement the public interaction portion of the review staff worked with consultants to develop a website and the overall review of the plan; and formed a public-private

partnership to craft a subarea plan for a portion of the County. Staff, consultants, and public-private partners conducted a series of public meetings, presentations, and charrettes. However, the interaction with the public was most successful through the use of the website. Anyone with internet access can access the website which explains the plan, took in public comment, and provided meeting dates. Comments were, after review by staff for content, made publically viewable, leading to further interaction between County staff, citizens and other stakeholders. Staff also offered written response to how each comment is used to ensure that citizens know that each of their comments was seriously considered.

Tangible results or measurable outcomes of program:

The first tangible result of the Smart Charlotte 2050 process is the revolutionary software package that helped form the plan and the second is the Plan itself which incorporates the six principles of Smart Growth. The drafting of the Smart Charlotte 2050 Plan was facilitated through the use of a website that uses new software that is versatile, easy to configure, and allows uploads of any document for review and comment. Document indexing, hyperlink capabilities, and inline definitions ensure citizen reviewers are given the background they need to provide informed input. Charlotte County's experience resulted in a comprehensive plan based on over 700 substantive online comments.

It was the goal of attaining a high degree of citizen consensus and support that provided the impetus for the County to develop a public participation software, and then to make it available to others for free. Now the County will provide a free open source public participation software package, accessible to organizations large and small, allowing for

a completely new approach to the development of comprehensive plans and other government regulations. Since group meetings must practically focus on only a few topics, this revolutionary software provides a quality and quantity of comments that group meetings cannot. The software ties the almost universal accessibility of the internet with a very strong public education component, making any government regulation and rulemaking accessible to almost anyone at any level of subject matter knowledge.

The software also improves the public view of the process. It is a powerful interactive website that improves public engagement in the development of public regulations in a way that traditional public meetings can never match. By allowing everyone to have a say, while having the option to maintain anonymity, the process ensured the best ideas were integrated into the plan. Based on public comments made at the public hearing of the Smart Charlotte 2050 plan, Charlotte County has never had a regulatory process that resulted in such a widespread collaboration and approval.

Charlotte County is making this software available for free for use by any agency wishing to improve public participation in formation of comprehensive plans and any other government regulation. By providing the software for free, any community will have the opportunity to not only improve public input, but to also reduce the cost of the process. The County too will see such savings. Nearly the entire County is rural or suburban in nature, with one of the oldest populations in the nation demographically speaking, making community meetings as costly as they are ineffective compared to this new approach. By reaching out to people in their own homes, the County was able

to overcome many of the barriers to public involvement that traditional approaches posed.

The Plan itself is a vision that integrates the concepts of Smart Growth at every level, affecting every citizen in the County. From the process to the form that the process produces, the Plan values long-range, regional considerations over a short-term focus by covering a vast range of topics from sustainability to creating walkable communities to enhancing our waterfronts. Among its goals are to promote: the small town character, infill development, mobility/transportation options, a quality education system, natural resource protection, and responsive governance. The Smart Charlotte 2050 vision extends beyond the typical 20 year horizon. The result is a process that provides leadership in integrating the public in a democratic approach to create a plan that is truly smart.

Lessons learned during planning, implementation, and analysis of the program:

The primary lessons were the need and the approaches to get the community more involved in the process. In order to facilitate the creation of the vision and the policies to implement that vision, the idea to invent an interactive, easily accessible and usable, web-based system was conceived. The software package that was created takes public participation far beyond the limited confines of public hearings. The *Smart Charlotte 2050* plan was developed using this new software and the collaboration between public and private entities was extremely helpful to the planners drafting the plan, the citizens who involved themselves in the drafting, and the governing body that needs to approve it. The result has been a far more transparent process to develop a plan with far more public involvement.