



*Leaders at the Core of Better Communities*

## 2011 Annual Awards Program

### Program Excellence Awards Nomination Form

**Deadline for Nominations: March 11, 2011**

Complete this form (sections 1 and 2) and submit with your descriptive narrative.

#### SECTION 1: Information About the Nominated Program

Program Excellence Award Category (*select only one*):

- ☐ Community Health and Safety
- ☐ Community Partnership
- ☐ Community Sustainability
- ☒ Strategic Leadership and Governance

Name of program being nominated: Land Development Process Improvements

Jurisdiction(s) where program originated: Town of Leesburg

Jurisdiction population(s): 42,616

Please indicate the month and year in which the program you are nominating was fully implemented. (Note: All Program Excellence Award nominations must have been fully implemented by or before January 31, 2010, to be eligible. The start date should not include the initial planning phase.)

Month: July Year: 2008

Name(s) and title(s) of individual(s) who should receive recognition for this award at the ICMA Annual Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, September 2011. (Each individual listed MUST be an ICMA member to be recognized.):

Name: John Wells

Title: Town Manager Jurisdiction: Town of Leesburg

Name: Kaj Dentler

Title: Deputy Town Manager Jurisdiction: Town of Leesburg

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Jurisdiction: \_\_\_\_\_

## SECTION 2: Information About the Nominator / Primary Contact

|                  |                               |                 |                         |
|------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Name of contact: | <u>Betsy Fields</u>           |                 |                         |
| Title:           | <u>Communications Manager</u> | Jurisdiction:   | <u>Town of Leesburg</u> |
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## **Town of Leesburg, Virginia Land Development Process Improvements**

**A Broken System.** For years, the Town of Leesburg's land development process suffered from a reputation as overly complicated, lengthy and unpredictable. Public perception was that with every new submission of plans, Town staff would find new corrections to be made and that the whole process consisted of endless rounds of plan submissions, review by staff, and revisions by the applicant in response to staff comments, followed by resubmission. Applicants complained that staff comments were difficult to decipher and that comments from the various Town departments were frequently in conflict. For their part, staff expressed frustration with a system that seemed to reward applicants who worked outside the established review process to get projects approved. The situation reached crisis when the owner of an incoming business announced that he was cancelling the project due to the length of the overall approval process.

**Diagnosing the Problem.** Following this announcement, Town staff responded with a plan to overhaul the entire development process. Major issues that emerged included:

- ♦ The review process was disjointed. Staff from the various departments reviewed applications and submitted comments directly to the applicants without coordinating with other departments. Applicants did not have a single point of contact responsible for keeping the application on track.
- ♦ Multiple database programs were in use by the different departments for tracking the same applications. There was no single source for complete and accurate information about the status of applications.
- ♦ Town staff did not feel "ownership" of the development projects. The perception was that they saw their job as reviewing sets of plans, not as approving projects that would ultimately contribute to the Town's built environment.

- ♦ A communication gap existed between the project owners and the staff. Most often, staff worked directly with an applicant's consulting engineer, not the project owner.

However, the chief complaint from applicants was the length of the overall approval process. Most often, their proposed solution was quicker turn-around of application submissions by Town staff. However, analysis of the process revealed that the focus on review deadlines was misplaced. The key to reducing the overall approval time, Town staff proposed, lay not in reducing review time of each submission, but in reducing the total number of submissions. Under the existing system, the average number of submissions for each application was more than five. The goal of the new review process: three or fewer.

**A Whole New System.** Rather than “tweaking” the existing system, the Town completely reorganized the entire land development process. The reorganization began in December 2007, with a commitment to completing it within six months. Furthermore, the reorganization involved no new funding or positions. In order to help break down the internal barriers between departments, every staff member involved with the land development process, from department directors to administrative assistants, was involved with implementing at least one of the three major steps in the reorganization:

I. Creation of a new Department of Plan Review. The new department pulled the staff responsible for reviewing site plans from the Department of Engineering & Public Works and the Department of Planning, Zoning & Development into a single department. The new department is organized into two review teams, each comprised of a mix of planners and engineers. In order to provide applicants with a single point of contact for their applications, one of the two team leads is designated as Project Manager for each application. The Project

Managers are responsible for coordinating the submission of referral comments, scheduling meetings with applicants, and responding to applicant inquiries.

2. Land Management Information System (LMIS) Implementation. The need for a comprehensive, town-wide application tracking database program, eliminating the duplicate systems currently in place, was one of the highest priorities. The Town opted to use Loudoun County's Land Management Information System (LMIS) for several reasons. First, because the Town of Leesburg is a subjurisdiction of Loudoun County, the information technology systems of the two organizations are already linked. LMIS integrates the County's real estate assessment data, GIS layers, and permit information, all essential elements for the land development process. Secondly, LMIS was already being used by some Town staff. Having in-house experience with the system greatly reduced the timeframe for implementation and training. Finally, LMIS was available immediately and it was free.

3. Creation of a Central Plan Intake Division. Central Plan Intake (CPI) standardized the acceptance process for all types of land development applications (Rezoning, Special Exception, Site Plan, Subdivision, etc.) and permits. CPI staff ensures that each application is complete before acceptance, logs the information about each application properly into LMIS and routes applications to the Project Managers for assignment to reviewers. Central Plan Intake also serves as the keeper of the LMIS data entry standards and is the main liaison with Loudoun County for any issues, needed changes or upgrades to LMIS.

**Emphasis on Communication.** A hallmark of the Town's new land development process is improved communications, internal and external, throughout the process.

Direct Communication with Project Owners. The Town no longer assumes that project owners are getting information from their consulting engineers on the status of their

applications. Notices of submission receipt and copies of comment letters are sent directly to the project owners. In addition, project owners are invited to attend all meetings about their applications. In fact, if an application's third submission involves more than minor corrections, the project owner is required to attend the next meeting with staff to discuss the comments.

Consolidated Comments. Referral comments from all departments are now consolidated into a single document and any conflicts between departments are resolved before the comment letter is sent to the applicant. For second submissions, the comment letter tracks previous comments, creating a "paper trail" for both staff and the applicant. Additionally, staff make greater distinctions between required and suggested changes to plans, reducing confusion by applicants on minimum approval standards.

Meetings, Meetings, Meetings. Recognizing that written comments can be misinterpreted, the process now includes multiple face-to-face meetings with applicants and staff. Meetings occur prior to each submission and after the comment letter has been received. The goal of each meeting is to reach agreement on how applicants will address comments and to resolve issues on the spot.

**Process Transparency.** As the Town staff worked on improving the land development process, it became apparent that the lack of publicly available information was another major issue that the Town needed to address. By making information about the status of applications available to everyone involved in the process – staff, applicants, elected officials and the general public – the entire development process would become more transparent.

In order to create this transparency, Town staff enhanced an existing report, the monthly Development Activity Report. The report tracks development projects through each step of the entire development process: rezoning or special exception (if needed), site plan,

construction, and issuance of occupancy permit. The projects are color-coded according to status and contains maps that identify the location of each project and its status, providing an “at a glance” snapshot of development projects in the pipeline. The report is included in the Town Manager’s monthly report to the Town Council and is posted, and archived, on the Town’s website.

**Sure Signs of Success.** Leesburg Town staff met the stated goal of reorganizing the entire land development process by July 2008, using only existing funding and existing positions. The overall goal of the redesigned land development process was clearer, shorter and predictable application approval timelines. Of the site plan applications submitted since July 2008, 100% have been approved in three or fewer submissions – up from 70% for applications submitted prior to then. However, metrics alone do not fully measure success. The surest sign of success has been the return of the project that started the whole process. Wolf Furniture’s cancellation of the construction of a new furniture showroom in October 2007 was the catalyst for the process reorganization. In January 2011, Wolf Furniture began meeting with Town staff to discuss resubmission of their plans. In those meetings, owner Doug Wolf expressed optimism that the Town’s new process will allow him to achieve his company’s goals. Wolf Furniture’s new plans were submitted in March 2011.

**Conclusion.** When faced with the failure of its land development process, the Town of Leesburg staff challenged themselves to create a better system, one that is responsive to the customers’ needs. Staff broke down internal barriers, looked at the process as a whole rather than their individual pieces and focused on the end result: new development that contributes to the distinctive and authentic sense of place that defines the Town.