

City of Lynchburg Civic Engagement

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America's most famous Urbanist, Jane Jacobs, once said, "Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody." Jacobs touches on a point that we often forget as planners: the only way we can create spaces and places that touch every citizen is by engaging all citizens. No matter how experienced or educated, every planner is limited to their own life experience and perceptions.

We are shaped by our own experiences inside public spaces, the neighborhoods we grew up in, and the type of human interaction that adds value and resonates within us. An individual's utopia rarely looks like anyone else's – much less a whole community. When plans are made in a silo according to best practice and statistical evidence, but absent from the input of people who bring the city to life, we miss the chance to create a space that brings joy to all types of citizens.

After many months of planning and revisions, the City of Lynchburg adopted its new zoning ordinance in the Spring of 2016. While the existing Ordinance had been revised periodically, a comprehensive rewrite had not been completed since 1978. The city was a much different place in the 70's. Disco, bell bottoms and suburban sprawl were the norm. The city had doubled in size from annexation and a suburban style ordinance was adopted to fill the space.

With a renewed interest in Downtown/Neighborhood revitalization, walkability, bicycling and a growing population, it was obvious that the existing Ordinance was not fulfilling the Vision of the City's Comprehensive Plan. In 2012, the city embarked on a four year journey of completing a diagnostic of existing ordinances and plans, updating the Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance.

Throughout the process of drafting and revising the comprehensive plan, our planning staff learned a great deal about the process of citizen engagement. We learned what worked and brought citizens to the table, and more importantly, what didn't work and needed to be adjusted.

Here's what we learned and what our process entails:

First: Observe the problem in the wild. We needed to see how a parcel or area was being used before we made a decision about it. It would have been errant for us to decide on the future use of an area without observing it in its natural state.

Second: Perform in-depth research. Garnering background knowledge about a neighborhood or area gave us the cultural context we needed to make decisions.

Third: Develop a public process. After the first two steps, we had an idea of how the public may approach the areas based on their history. Engaging our citizens at every turn was critical to creating a plan that served everyone's needs, not just own ideas of what it should look like.

Fourth: Build a coalition. This is critical. Without cheerleaders and public support of your project and process, it won't get far during public hearings.

Fifth: Document lessons. Beginning with the end in mind, we committed to documenting our takeaways and lessons during this process. The next time we revise the comprehensive plan or zoning ordinance, we will know what went wrong, how to adjust it, and implement the things we know went well.

Last: Repeat. This process of civic engagement helped us to create a plan that was a community driven, citizen focused document designed to serve the needs of our residents.

At the core of every city lives a dynamic mix of ideas, culture, and individuality. As city planners, the peak of our success is when we create a system that allows these characteristics to thrive organically. The marks of our success are when we see a citizen using a newly laid sidewalk, a family playing together in a park that was designed by the community, or someone sitting beneath a newly constructed bus shelter, protected from the rain. Although it is always more difficult and much messier, bringing members of the public into the planning process makes the end product richer, more inclusive and more “right” than what we could create on our own.



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