Why are Land Use and Community Design Essential to a Sustainable Community?

Land use and community design are the foundation for a municipality’s sustainable development. This encompasses constant attention through the lens of sustainability to the location and type of housing, shopping, libraries, schools, open space, recreation, jobs, water and sewer lines and local transportation systems, efficient use of resources, conservative patterns of consumption, social equity, community prosperity, preservation of green space and civic and historic places that define the community character, and reduction of the community’s CO2 footprint. These land use and community design decisions made by citizens and their elected leaders will define the sustainability of the municipality.

In short, sustainability requires a plan. Good planning helps create communities that offer better choices for where and how people live. Planning helps community members envision the direction their community should grow and will help them find the right balance of new development and essential services, protection of the environment, and innovative change.

The first step is to involve all interests in the municipality to create a broad vision for the community’s future. This vision is then made more specific in the comprehensive plan which reflects analysis of data affecting the community, establishes goals, suggests policies, and lays out a strategy for achieving the goals.

Sustainability is a process. The need to use the lens of sustainability in all decisions and to be flexible and innovative in the face of change will be the mark of a community that uses its resources in a way that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

SUSTAINABILITY CASE STUDY: Multi-Municipal Planning

The municipalities of the City of Greensburg, Hempfield Township, South Greensburg Borough and Southwest Greensburg Borough joined together to produce a multi-municipal plan for the purpose of guiding future development in a coordinated fashion and protecting the quality of life enjoyed by the area residents through increased municipal cooperation. The planning process accomplished several important goals including:

- Providing relevant, up-to-date information on the physical, social, and economic features of the planning area
- Fostering consensus on a shared vision for growth and future land uses, including development, redevelopment and conservation of land
- Offering recommendations and strategies to achieve community goals
- Creating a rationale for developing or updating land use tools such as ordinances by laying out community development objectives
- Addressing all elements required by the Pennsylvania Municipalities Code

Greensburg is the urban core of the area serving as the Westmoreland County seat and the commercial, arts, and cultural district for the area. Hempfield surrounds the other three municipalities and contains a mix of agricultural, residential, commercial and industrial land uses.

Public participation was an important part of the planning process. Community meetings, focus groups, a community survey and a workshop by school students were used to elicit issues and ideas. Community priorities that emerged included:

- Support for small, locally owned businesses
- Greater diversity of job opportunities

- Increased cooperation among local governments
- Guide development to places with existing infrastructure
- Preserve open space from development

The title given to the plan was, “A Plan for Our Community”. This reflected the understanding that grew during the planning process that everyone in the planning area was “in it together” and the vitality of the area was dependent on the health of the individual municipalities. People may live in South Greensburg, shop in Greensburg and go to church in Hempfield. Thus the entire area was “Our Community”.

Actions identified in the plan to strengthen “Our Community” included:

- Compatible land use management through consistent zoning ordinances
- Diverse and affordable housing choices
- A variety of park and recreation opportunities available to all citizens
- A safe and well planned public transit system
- High quality employment opportunities
- Efficiently managed government services

There were some disagreements during the process but they were worked out with good will and discussion. This was facilitated by the strength of commitment by the four municipalities to the cooperative effort. This commitment offers the best promise for the success of the plan.

The success achieved by these four diverse municipalities offers the major lesson that any set of municipalities can create a multi-municipal comprehensive plan.
Including stakeholders (users and beneficiaries) in the community planning process will yield good ideas and help assure implementation because those affected have been involved in the process. An aggressive outreach program is necessary to ensure that all interests are consulted. Public meetings are not enough. Going into schools, houses of worship, elderly housing, and job sites among others is necessary to ensure inclusion. Specifically the process should be transparent, should identify options and should analyze the options' pros and cons. Special attention needs to be paid to ensure that the decision is equitable – beneficiaries should bear the costs and no group or area is unfairly impacted. In addition, municipalities should be guided by the following:

- Municipalities, except for counties, are not required to have a comprehensive plan or implementing ordinances. However, if they choose to prepare a plan and enact ordinances their actions are prescribed by the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC).
- The MPC provides substantial authority to municipal officials to manage development in their community. In addition to preparing a comprehensive plan and enacting implementing ordinances as noted above, municipalities may adopt regulations governing planned residential development and traditional neighborhood development. Both of these approaches can increase density, direct development to existing places served by existing infrastructure and encourage mixed use that can reduce auto dependency and the community’s CO2 footprint. Municipalities that participate in a multi-municipal comprehensive plan may enter into an intergovernmental cooperative agreement to coordinate transportation needs, facilitate the development of affordable housing, prevent conversion of agricultural land, ensure efficient utilization of existing water and sewer systems, encourage innovations in residential, commercial and industrial development, and designate growth areas and rural resource areas in which development will be discouraged. In addition, participating municipalities are authorized in the MPC Section 1106 to adopt a Specific Plan for any nonresidential portion of the area. The Specific Plan can be a detailed prescription of how the area is to be developed, thus ensuring that the municipalities’ goals are met.
- Sustainability is implemented by encouraging development in existing places already served by infrastructure and community facilities. This can be approached through infill, brownfield development or redevelopment of blighted or vacant areas. In residential and mixed use areas extra care is necessary to ensure that housing within the financial reach of all is provided. At the same time sprawl into greenfields should be discouraged by not providing subsidies or extending redundant roads and water and sewer lines which require public funds to build, manage, maintain and, ultimately replace.
- Land use management ordinances should promote buildings that can be certified by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) process. Such buildings will be healthy for their occupants, will require less energy, and will be less expensive to operate over time. Any building using government subsidies should be required to be LEED certifiable.
- Several community design techniques embodied in zoning and subdivision/land development ordinances should be used to strengthen the sense of community among residents. Examples include minimal setbacks for houses and front porches thereby enhancing the opportunities for neighborhood conversation and public safety by increasing the number of “eyes on the street.” The list also includes narrow residential streets to reduce traffic speed with alleys providing access to garages for auto storage, sidewalks throughout with street trees to enhance the pedestrian experience, pedestrian friendly commercial areas with ample sidewalk widths, zero building setbacks, benches, and auto and truck access in the rear of the stores. Design should be in accordance with LEED-Neighborhood Development standards.
- The zoning and other ordinances should be evaluated to remove any barriers to sustainability. For example, wind turbines and solar panels should not be prohibited by height or other restrictions. Some municipalities are supporting self-reliance by permitting not only kitchen gardens but chickens (but not roosters) in residential neighborhoods.
The East Liberty neighborhood of Pittsburgh was once one of the region’s most vibrant communities. By the 1960’s, however, the effects of economic decline and suburban outmigration were being experienced. In a well-intentioned but misguided response, the area was redeveloped as an Urban Renewal Project. Additionally, commercial and transportation strategies emphasized suburban mall-style development (characterized by large stores with sprawling parking lots) that was easily accessible by automobile. These “revitalization” efforts proved unsuccessful, and resulted in a concentration of poverty, community isolation, and a poorly accessible business district.

In 1996, East Liberty Development, Inc. (ELDI), the local Community Development Corporation, undertook a new strategy for reversing decades of decline. ELDI began the process of creating a comprehensive community plan. During this process, ELDI worked to: solicit input from community residents and other vital stakeholders in East Liberty’s future, recognize community strengths and weaknesses, and identify market opportunities. In 1999, the East Liberty Community Plan, A Vision for East Liberty, was released. The plan enumerates community goals for improving the long-term sustainability of the community, and provides a detailed neighborhood-by-neighborhood strategy for accomplishing them.

In the subsequent years, ELDI has made significant progress toward its objectives. It has replaced the concentrated, high-rise public housing with community-integrated mixed income housing units without displacing residents. It has worked to stabilize the housing stock through the property rehabilitation, and has created supportive housing opportunities for at-risk residents. It has made strides toward creating a revitalized, walkable business corridor. ELDI has also assisted locally-owned small businesses through its Small Business Loan Fund, Small Business Advisory Committee, and Entrepreneurial Networking Socials.

While progress has been made, there is more work to be done. ELDI is now in the process of updating A Vision for East Liberty; which is expected to be released before fall 2009.

Challenges

- When ELDI began the planning process in 1996, it was combating mixed perceptions, mistrust among segments of the population, and disinformation. The organization overcame this by direct and frequent engagement of the community, then translating the results of this engagement into action.
- ELDI had to balance the concerns of long-time residents with the need to attract new residents.
- Any population is likely to have a segment that is satisfied with the status quo and/or resistant to new ideas. Organizations must be able to counter these perceptions and mobilize residents in support of new initiatives where appropriate.
- Finally, years of decline had created a negative perception of East Liberty throughout the region. In order to bring in new residents and encourage outside investment, ELDI had to work to re-brand the community as a quality place to live and do business.

Success Factors

- ELDI was able to benefit from engaged and organized residents who wanted to improve their community.
- Despite its many challenges, East Liberty had opportunities for growth. It is vital to correctly catalogue those opportunities and identify areas/initiatives that will bring the best return on investment. Therefore, ELDI’s ability to commission an in-depth market study was crucial to planning efforts.
- ELDI was able to access low-cost strategic investment capital through various funding sources.
- By engaging local officials throughout the planning process, ELDI was able to gain allies who would work to implement development according to the plan. Additionally, the newly formed community capital that arose from civic engagement made it easier to organize in favor of the plan.

Case courtesy of East Liberty Development, Inc.

How is this Essential Linked to Other Sustainable Community Essentials?

The livability of a community is a major attraction for economic development investment. Company leaders want to know that their employees will be satisfied with the amenities of the area. An appreciation of diversity and the assurance of equitable treatment for all citizens are measured by the municipality’s ability to provide for the public safety, health and welfare as evidenced by an adequate and well trained public safety staff, a sound housing stock and access by all to high quality community facilities and services. Conservation of the natural environmental assets and historic and civic landmarks is a function of the land use management program and community design process. These actions are a reflection of the concern for a community’s heritage and what it hopes to pass on to future generations.
Achieving and maintaining a sustainable community requires action on the part of citizens and visionary leadership by municipal officials. Identifying whether these actions are taken - by measuring progress against the goals established in the comprehensive plan - is fairly simple. More difficult is determining the quality of the actions and maintaining the momentum. Consistent with the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code, some specific benchmarks include:

- A written policy committing the municipality to a transparent decision making process that ensures citizen input. Because design is inherently subjective, the success of the community design process should be measured on how well the finished product – building or facility – meets the needs of the users. A local policy can be informed by the state’s Keystone Principles and the Principles of Sustainability used by organizations committed to a sustainable future.

- Prior to the preparation of a comprehensive plan, principles of sustainability should be adopted and used to measure current conditions and the decisions that must be made to create the desired future. Conscious attention to integrating such principles into the plan is necessary to ensure that the outcome will be sustainable. In addition these sustainability principles should be used annually to track the plan’s implementation.

- The comprehensive plan should contain the plan elements listed throughout this resource sheet. The municipality should adopt the comprehensive plan as a guide to its future actions. Creation of a multi-municipal plan can give the municipality more control over its future by negotiating where various uses are best located in the wider sub-region.

- Implementation of the comprehensive plan through the adoption of consistent ordinances such as zoning, subdivision/land development, the official map, and operating and capital budgets.

- Retention of staff capacity to oversee the plans and ordinances that constitute the land use management program. If the municipality does not wish to retain its own planning staff it may wish to share with its neighbors or contract with its county to provide such services. In any case, final decisions rest with the elected governing body as described in the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code.

- The comprehensive plan must be updated every ten years according to the MPC. However, the municipality should review it annually in a public meeting to measure progress and to update it.

- Sustainability principles can be used to set annual goals. Indicators that track action – and sustainability – can be used as part of staff performance reviews and to shape operating and capital budgets. Also the constant use of principles and indicators of sustainability are powerful tools to maintain fiscal discipline in the budgeting process.

- Elected officials should monitor the actions of appointed agencies such as the Zoning Hearing Board, Planning Commission (if they choose to have one) and any authorities created by the municipality to ensure that their actions are consistent with the comprehensive plan.

- A balanced transportation system requires attention to transit, bicycling and walking as well as cars and trucks. Non-motorized and lighted trails linking destination buildings and parks can encourage this type of use. Traffic calming in the residential neighborhoods and in the core along with street furniture, trees and lighting can also improve the pedestrian experience.

- The sustainability of development projects can be measured by LEED for Neighborhood Development certification standards.

- Adopt architectural and site design guidelines to ensure development, redevelopment, or restoration respects natural and architectural qualities.

To view this and all 14 Sustainable Community Essentials Resource Sheets visit: www.sustainablecommunityessentials.org. This website is interactive and allows comments and revisions to continuously improve the materials. Please share your expertise by visiting and becoming a content contributor.