INvolving the public in park planning

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An Evaluation of the City of Raleigh’s Park Master Planning Processes

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Involving the Public in Park Planning  
AN EVALUATION OF THE CITY OF RALEIGH’S PARK MASTER PLANNING PROCESSES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Park Master Plan is a conceptual design document that generally describes and guides the future management and development of a park property. Its preparation is intended to be a public process to ensure that the needs of the public are met while preserving the ecological function and environmental quality of the site. All parks should have an adopted, relatively recent Master Plan when intended for park development.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the City of Raleigh’s park master planning processes to determine how, to what degree, and to what end citizens participate in decisions regarding the scope and character of future park sites. The study was designed specifically to assess:

1. How, to what degree, and in what form the opinions, needs, and desires of citizens were included in final park designs that resulted from both processes. This will provide information about the inclusiveness of the planning process.

2. How well citizens understood the process and how their opinions, needs, and desires were factored into the final design. This will lead to deductions about the transparency of the planning process.

This study reviews two planning processes: the formalized and committee-driven Resolution Master Planning Process (Resolution Process) and the less formal Community Meeting Master Planning Process (Community Meeting Process). Public involvement in the planning of the following four parks was examined:

- Forest Ridge Park (Resolution Process)
- Horseshoe Farm Park (Resolution Process)
- Leesville Park (Community Meeting Process)
- Timberlake Park (Community Meeting Process)

Focus group interviews and internet surveys were used to gather data from the following groups:

- Raleigh Parks Department Staff
- Raleigh Parks Recreation and Greenway Advisory Board members
- Park planning committees
- Citizens attending park planning meetings
- Park planning consultants
Outcomes

We evaluated the Community Meeting Process and the Resolution Process with respect to whether and to what degree the processes have the potential to improve the quality, legitimacy, and capacity of park planning decisions.

Quality refers to decisions that (1) identify the values, interests, and concerns of all who are interested in or affected by the planning decision; (2) use the best available knowledge relevant to the above tasks, and (3) incorporate new information, methods, and concerns that arise over time.

Legitimacy refers to a process that is seen by the public as fair and competent and that follows governing laws and regulations.

Capacity refers to participants, including Department staff and consultants, (1) becoming better informed and more skilled at effective participation; (2) becoming better able to engage the best available knowledge and information about diverse values, interests, and concerns; and (3) developing a more widely shared understanding of the issues and decision challenges and a “reservoir of communication skills, mediation skills, and mutual trust.”

Both processes produced quality planning from the perspective of the public involved. Both processes identified the values, interests, and concerns of all who were interested in or might be affected by the planning decision. Both processes integrated the concerns and issues considered important by the public into the analyses and reflected those concerns and issues in the final plan. And third, both processes generated decisions based on and consistent with the best available information, and new information was added in the process as needed. Each of these dimensions of quality planning was met to varying degrees in each of the four park planning processes.

Process legitimacy was the most problematic of all three practice outcomes for both planning processes. The problems stem from how the processes were conducted rather than the type or form of process used. Both the Community Meeting Process and the Resolution Process created issues of legitimacy, but for different reasons. Both processes are capable of being designed and conducted in ways that participants feel are acceptable and that conform to standards of sound analysis and decision making.

The issues that most troubled the Community Meeting Process were lack of community-wide participation and transparency. Without wide representation at community meetings, the core team is compelled to act in the interests of an unrepresented constituency and introduce program elements that local meeting participants may not desire. When locally unwanted program elements remain in the final master plan without visible public support, neighboring residents begin to question the authenticity of the process. This issue posed significant problems for the Leesville planning process in the context of the proposed dog park. It was less of a problem in the Timberlake process, but many residents were not happy to see a half-court basketball venue remain in the final plan.

The Resolution Process was not shadowed by matters of transparency, rather, problems stemmed from issues of leadership and process management. These problems were present almost entirely in the Horseshoe Farm planning process, but the Forest Ridge process was not immune from them either. The difficulties experienced by the Horseshoe Farm committee leaders in being able to facilitate deliberations of the committee in a neutral and impartial manner had a profound effect on the outcome of the committee process. Without solid facilitative leadership, the committee was unable to work together to identify valid information to neither guide their analysis, nor find options or solutions that met the common needs of all members. The fact that the
resolution process has no procedure or guideline for training its committee chairs to facilitate committee discussion is a significant shortcoming.

**Both processes, when done well, can create capacity for future decisions.** However, The Resolution Process, by the very nature of its superior participation intensity, presents more opportunities for civic development than does the Community Meeting Process. When conducted according to the core principles of public participation, the Resolution Process can effectively engage the public and department staff in becoming better informed and more skilled at effective participation, better able to share the best knowledge and information about diverse values, interests, and concerns, and develop a shared understanding of the issues and decision challenges. To enable this to happen, the Resolution Process needs to be better planned, organized and conducted.

**General Recommendations**

1. **ADHERE TO CORE PRINCIPLES**
   Early in the report we describe five core values of public participation which we used as a standard for evaluating the Department’s public participation processes. These principles are to: (a) promote full participation, (b) make the process transparent, (c) promote mutual understanding among participants and the agency, (d) strive for inclusive solutions, and (e) share responsibility for decisions. When the Parks Department adheres to these principles in its planning and decision making processes, then the quality, legitimacy, and capacity of park plans will likely be improved.

2. **MANAGE PROCESSES EFFECTIVELY**
   When the Parks and Recreation Department engages in public participation, it should do so with specific management objectives that improve its outcomes. These objectives are: (a) make the purpose clear, (b) commit to the process, (c) provide adequate capacity and resources, (d) time processes in relation to decisions, (e) focus on implementation, and (f) commit to learning.

3. **DEVELOP A BROAD PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT POLICY**
   The Parks and Recreation Department should augment its current documentation of master planning process (Resolution (2003)-735) with a comprehensive public involvement policy that defines the roles and responsibilities of staff positions implementing all the Department’s public participation processes, expands and then defines the purposes and circumstances for which public involvement will be used, and outlines and defines the procedures to be followed.

4. **ENGAGE CITIZENS IN COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING AND SYSTEM INTEGRATION PLANNING**
   The Department should organize extensive public participation in the update of the comprehensive plan to get direction and support for park designations system wide. For parkland currently owned but as yet unplanned and new lands purchased for park development, the System Integration Planning process should be used as a mechanism for citizens to participate in decisions about park classification and purpose.

5. **ESTABLISH CLEAR DEFINITIONS OF APPROPRIATE PARK ELEMENTS AND PROGRAMS**
   The Department, through deliberation and approval by the Parks, Recreation and Greenway Advisory Board, should clearly identify and communicate general programs and activities that are consistent with the
comprehensive park plan and SIP. Programs and activities should be appropriate for the park site given its park type and site characteristics, including the introduction of special facilities such as dog parks and high intensity use areas. These intentions should be made very clear in setting up the master planning process for each park.

6. DECOUPLE PLANNING FOR CONTROVERSIAL ELEMENTS FROM PLANNING FOR THE PARK
Dog parks, high intensity use facilities, special facilities, and adventure elements engender controversy and conflict during the development of a park master plan. Discussion and deliberation about these individual park elements robs precious time from the discussion of other important issues and can hijack the park plan as citizens stake out positions for and against inclusion of these elements in the park. Instead, the Department should organize citizen deliberation processes to develop design and siting criteria for these elements systemwide, apart from the individual park master plans.

7. GATHER DATA ON POTENTIAL PARK USES AND USERS BEFORE ENGAGING IN PLANNING
The Department should use survey instruments to gather data on user preferences and key issues affecting park use early in the planning process to provide critical information when it is most needed. Data also should be collected on pressing issues related to the park and its surroundings to help shape public participation processes. User preference surveys should be designed so responses from neighboring residents, citizens residing in the planning area, and citizens outside the planning area can be analyzed separately.

8. IMPROVE COMMUNICATION MECHANISMS INCLUDING USE OF THE INTERNET
Information flow in a public participation process should be multi-way and timely. An effective communication mechanism should enable information to flow from the Department to the public, from the public to the Department, and from public to public. Organize and streamline the Department's existing web links so that information about park master planning can be easily located and associated with related links. Collect contact information from all attendees at public meetings. Create and maintain electronic mailing lists to communicate news about Parks and Recreation planning activities. Keep citizens posted with meeting summaries, community input data, and other planning-related information. Post information on the Department website in a timely fashion and send out email alerts and reminders to help people find it. Conduct online evaluations or surveys following the completion of citizen involvement processes to determine the effectiveness of achieving project goals with respect to public participation, project management, and project implementation.

9. USE CONSULTANTS WITH PROVEN PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SKILLS
Hire planning consultants with strong facilitation training and skills who understand how to guide collaborative decision processes and can manage conflict when it arises.

10. EVALUATE EVERY PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS
The Department should put in place a rigorous evaluation methodology to help track progress, learn from its successes and failures, and make improvements. This includes evaluating overall public participation programs as well as specific practices and activities. The department should use process and substantive criteria to assess: (1) process design, (2) project management, and (3) outcome measures.

11. MAINTAIN PROCESS FLEXIBILITY
Use process formats that fit the context and circumstances of the site and the people that will interact with it. Within each format, various practices, tools and techniques can be applied and tailored to the specific
circumstances of an issue or the stakeholders involved, drawing on elements or practices to suit the context and incorporating different participatory modes at different project stages. Practices include working groups, panels, field trips, voting, consensus-seeking, visioning, and so on. The Department has experience in using two basic formats, the Community Meeting Process – an unbounded feedback and consultation process, and the Resolution Process - a bounded, participant-intense process. We recommend that the Department continue to use and adapt these two process formats. Department staff, PRGAB members and interested citizens are familiar with them and they have proven potential to be successful when applied correctly and appropriately. We also recommend that the Department establish a set of criteria for selecting the process most appropriate to the circumstances and stakeholders.

Recommendations Specific to the Community Meeting Process

1. DIVERSIFY MEETING PROMOTION METHODS TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION
We recommend that the Department advertise and promote meetings through wider direct mailings, postings in parks and recreation centers, and signs posted on roads adjacent to the park site. Notifications of planning meetings should be issued using subdivision or neighborhood boundaries rather than an arbitrary radius.

2. BE CLEAR UP FRONT ABOUT PROGRAM CONSTRAINTS AND PRIORITY PROGRAM ELEMENTS
Citizens can participate more effectively when they know what the constraints and expectations are for their participation. If, through the SIP and comprehensive planning processes, there are constraints on program elements that are appropriate for the site, or priority program elements that have already been identified for the site, make this clear at the beginning of every meeting.

3. ADD COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO THE CORE TEAM
We recommend expanding the core team to include two to four community members. A possible condition for serving on the core team is that community members serve as communication links to the neighborhoods they belong to. Parks Department staff and consultants should assist the citizen core team members in preparing communication materials such as summaries of core team meetings and community meetings, small-format draft plans and other handouts, and links to web sites. Citizen Advisory Council members could be good candidates for core team membership depending on the park’s location.

4. PROVIDE HANDOUTS OF THE PLANNING PROCESS
The Department should provide meeting participants with attractive, easy to read fact sheets that clearly describe the park master planning process. The fact sheets should include information about how the process works (i.e., number of meetings, what is accomplished at each meeting), the dates of each meeting, how citizens can participate, how citizen comments and suggestions are handled, and contact information for the Parks and Recreation Department and PRGAB members.

5. ESTABLISH COMMUNICATION LINKS WITH MEETING PARTICIPANTS
Keep track of meeting attendees who express an interest in being kept informed. The Department should gather names, addresses, and email addresses from all community meeting participants and use this to establish a consistent and timely communication mechanism to keep participants informed of the planning process, implementation decisions, construction schedules, and park openings.
6. PROVIDE CLEAR AND TIMELY MEETING SUMMARIES
Summaries of all core team meetings and community meetings should be created within days of the meetings and distributed widely.

7. INCREASE THE VENUES THROUGH WHICH PEOPLE CAN PARTICIPATE
Increase the opportunities for citizens to participate in plan formulation and review. Maps, plans, and other information can be made available for people to view and comment at open houses and on kiosks at recreation events, in recreation centers, and on-line.

Recommendations Specific to the Resolution Process

1. IMPROVE CRITERIA FOR COMMITTEE SELECTION
Balanced representation on the planning committee is the linchpin to legitimacy of the Resolution Process. The Department should develop criteria for selecting committee members that relate to the issues specific to the park site, the neighborhoods and communities that surround the site, and potential elements that may be included in the final plan. We suggest using a stakeholder matrix (see Appendix 4) as a tool for identifying committee members. We also recommend amending the committee application form to capture information about key interests and expertise of the applicant relative to the park site and its development, and connections to groups or organizations with a vested interest in the park site and its development. We also suggest relaxing the rule in Resolution (2003)-735 that sets the number of committee members to 15 so that the committee makeup can be representative of key interests without violating the resolution.

2. DEVELOP A PROCESS CHARTER AND GROUND RULES
Make process understandable and transparent by creating a process charter that defines the process protocols and gives a group a framework to follow. The charter should be specific and appropriate to each park planning process. A draft of a charter should be presented to the committee for amendment and approval. In addition, the committee should be free to amend the charter at any time during the planning process so that it remains relevant and applicable to circumstances that arise.

3. ENCOURAGE OPENNESS OF DESIGN
Development and approval of a group charter provides the opportunity for participants to have control over the process itself. A process design developed collaboratively by Parks staff, the consultant, and committee members will yield benefits, particularly in terms of legitimacy.

4. USE A CONSENSUS DECISION RULE
Consensus is the decision rule that allows collaborative problem solving to work. It is a method that enables a group of people to reach agreement. Consensus prevents domination by the majority and allows trust-building and the sharing of information, especially under conditions of conflict. Consider adopting an ‘agreement gradient’ that allows groups to settle on issues at differing levels of agreement, and even allows people to opt out of certain parts of a larger agreement.

5. USE A NEUTRAL FACILITATOR
We recommend limiting the process role of the PRGAB members and vesting the process guidance role with a facilitator. This will enable the PRGAB members to continue to serve as chair and co-chair and have an active
role in the deliberations without being perceived by other committee members as manipulating the process. A facilitator can help committee members through the planning process toward agreed-upon objectives in a manner that encourages participation, ownership and creativity from all involved. Ideally, the facilitator should be part of the planning consultant team.

6. TRAIN THE COMMITTEE IN PRINCIPLED NEGOTIATION
We recommend that the consultant team provide a brief training in the basics of principled negotiation at the first committee meeting. We also recommend providing to every committee member a copy of the book, Getting to Yes, Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In (By Roger Fisher, William Ury, Bruce Patton, Houghton Mifflin Books, 1991).