

How Wise Is Your Crowd?

by Gwendolyn Hallsmith

When planning commissioners think of a crowd, one image that comes to mind is the angry mob at a public hearing on a zoning change or a development proposal. One after the other, they come to the microphone and rail against land use controls, city officials, developers – you name it.

So when a concept like the “wisdom of the crowd” suggests that we need to rely even more on public input to develop a master plan or a new zoning ordinance, the initial reaction may well be deep skepticism. Yet, is it possible to tap into the knowledge of a large and diverse group of people?

Back in 2004, James Surowiecki wrote a book called *The Wisdom of Crowds*, where he described ways of drawing on our collective wisdom. He identified four key factors that distinguish wise crowds from, presumably, foolish ones. They include diversity, independence, decentralization, and some type of mechanism to collect, organize, and distill all the different opinions,

Diversity means that many different voices are heard – the crowd represents a true cross-section of the public. Independence means that the people involved are not unduly influenced by each other. Decentralization means that the group is not managed by some sort of hierarchical requirement – it’s hard for a new boot camp recruit to openly express a different opinion than their military higher-ups.

But how do you collect and compile diverse opinions? In some cases it can be quite simple – Surowiecki cites one example where someone tallied the average guesses of people at a county fair and found that it was more accurate in terms of judging the weight of an ox than either individual or expert estimates. However, it can also be complex, such as the elaborate public outreach campaign the City

of Calgary did to attract over 18,000 people to be part of their long-range plan.

Taking Surowiecki’s four key factors as a starting point, I’d add several other elements to help create a “wise” crowd: (1) recruiting people from different walks of life; (2) good group process activities; (3) effective conflict management; and (4) ways to ensure that the process isn’t skewed by special interests or a particular ideological bias.

One approach I’ve found effective is



called the “concentric circle” stakeholder recruitment method. It starts with a small focus group that represents a cross-section of the community. Each person invites other people they know to participate in a preliminary community meeting. At that meeting, each of the participants is asked who is missing from the group, and this second group of people is also invited to the next meeting. This can continue for a few meetings, to help ensure that those participating include a broad spectrum of the community – more than the “usual suspects.”

Once you have all the stakeholders at the table, the real challenge begins. Diverse voices mean very different worldviews. A banker may have a hard time listening or speaking honestly in front of the local environmental activist. The head of the Chamber of Commerce and the local union representatives may

have a hard time agreeing on a common purpose. Even though they all may be speaking in English, they don’t necessarily speak the same language when it comes to policy debates.

To enable the group to have the kind of dialogue that elicits the wisdom of the crowd, you need to help them share a language about the project, train them in different group process skills, and help them understand how to hold and resolve conflict without it becoming destructive.

When it works, the results can be inspiring. The City of Burlington, Vermont, drew on an extraordinarily diverse range of participants in drafting its Legacy Action Plan, a long-range sustainability plan for the city. About the same time – but on a much broader scale – the Earth Charter Commission (a group chartered by the Rio Earth Summit) finished its work engaging the widest set of stakeholders ever to develop a document that would provide a set of shared ethics for international governance.

Drawing on the wisdom of the crowd often takes patience, skill, and perseverance, but the results can be worth the effort. ♦

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We’ve posted links to the Calgary and Burlington planning efforts, and to resources that explain various group process techniques. Go to: www.plannersweb.com/tools-to-use.html.