

17.6 Participation in Planning

Public participation is at the core of every planning process. Citizens have the right to help shape the future of their city, and the planning process is one of the primary means of doing so. Additionally, plans developed without adequate input fail to inspire the deep support needed for the hard work of implementation.

Raleigh's Comprehensive Plan accordingly places a high value on public input, both in the creation of the plan and in its ongoing implementation. Public participation does not end with Plan adoption, but continues in the hundreds of meetings and decisions that will take place as the Plan guides the future development of Raleigh.

Authentic Participation (from the American Planning Associations's "Sustaining Places")

The American Planning Association's Sustaining Places initiative is a multiyear effort to define the role of planning in addressing issues related to sustainability. The initiative focuses on comprehensive plans, but its recommendations are relevant to all planning activities. A key element involves what the initiative calls "Authentic Participation." An excerpt is below.

Ensure that the planning process actively involves all segments of the community in analyzing issues, generating visions, developing plans, and monitoring outcomes.

Public participation in planning is a mainstay of democratic governance and decision making. By actively involving the whole community in making and implementing plans, the government fulfills its responsibilities to keep all citizens informed and to offer them the opportunity to influence those actions that affect them. In the past, public participation processes did not necessarily reach all segments of the community and may have been viewed by public agencies more as a requirement to meet (for example, by conducting public hearings) than as an opportunity to garner meaningful input. This means that authentic participation processes

may have to overcome the perception that what participants say will not be respected. Authentic participation programs go beyond the minimum legal requirements to connect with citizens through innovative communication and outreach channels, such as creative use of the Internet and interactive workshops in locations where people work and live. The comprehensive planning process is an ideal vehicle for opening all stages of plan making to the public, from early issue analysis to finalizing and implementing the plan.

Best practices in support of the Authentic Participation process include the following:

- *Engage stakeholders at all stages of the planning process.*
- *Seek diverse participation in the planning process.*
- *Promote leadership development in disadvantaged communities through the planning process.*
- *Develop alternative scenarios of the future.*
- *Provide ongoing and understandable information for all participants.*
- *Use a variety of communications channels to inform and involve the community.*
- *Continue to engage the public after the comprehensive plan is adopted.*

Barriers to Participation

While the importance of public input is widely recognized, identifying the ideal planning process has been an elusive goal. Traditionally, the public input process has focused heavily on in-person meetings and workshops. While these meetings, typically held during a weekday evening, can be a valuable means of gathering input and should remain a key component of the input process, they are not without serious drawbacks. While meetings, in theory, may be accessible to all, in practice they often screen out large segments of the public.

The first issue is time commitment. Busy parents, those working two jobs, service workers on the evening shift, college students cramming for the exam—these and others may have difficulty freeing up a couple of hours during an evening to participate in a planning workshop. The issue is compounded by the fact that effective participation often requires attendance at multiple public workshops and meetings at different phases of the project, and the adoption process adds multiple additional meetings. Where one meeting might pose a hurdle, a year or more of meetings can be a wall. The planning process should not be a test of endurance, where the person willing and able to attend a long series of planning and adoption meetings enjoys, *de facto*, greater weight in the process than the working mom who managed to fit in one meeting (or online survey) into her schedule.

The format of many planning meetings also favors certain groups over others, particularly those who are regular participants in civic affairs. People with limited mobility, limited English speakers, those who are uncomfortable speaking in groups, and people not well versed in the language of planning all are less likely to participate in this way.



In addition to filtering out specific groups, the high barriers to participation tend to filter out categories of opinion. For many planning decisions, the benefits may be diffuse and further in the future, while the perceived detriments may be more localized and immediate. Those who see some mild personal or public benefit to a project or plan are less likely to invest their time in support of it. Those who perceive an immediate threat are more likely to deeply engage. The beneficiaries, even if greater in number, are often outvoted by those objecting to a change.

Finally, many citizens do not participate because they do not have confidence that their input will matter. While not all suggestions can be incorporated and not all ideas are equal, a minimum expectation for someone participating in a planning process should be that their thoughts are documented, retained, and, where possible, receive a specific response. That response should be in the form of an explanation of how the input shaped, or did not shape, the final product.

Solutions: Making Input Easier

The problems described above should concern anyone interested in truly democratic and equitable planning. Planning departments, including Raleigh's, have increasingly recognized the limitations of traditional methods and have worked to mitigate these with a range of strategies.

Planners have created an expanded toolkit for engagement, including “pop-up” events aimed at bringing the meeting to the people, rather than requiring people to come to the meeting. Other techniques and tools, such as making more information available online and using surveys (both in-person and online), have expanded the conversation further, bringing new participants into the process. Even traditional meetings can be made more accessible by choosing convenient locations; providing on-site childcare for families and translators for persons of low English proficiency; purging presentations and meeting materials of obtuse and technical language; using clear visuals; and using facilitation techniques and electronic polling to overcome the tendency of louder voices to dominate the conversation.

However, more work is needed, and technology is making new solutions available. In an age where we entrust our financial transactions and our public personas to web sites and social media apps, there are no obvious obstacles to shifting much of the planning conversation online as well. There is no particular reason why a resident must attend an in-person meeting to have her or his voice heard, and there is no reason why online input should be devalued in relation to in-person input.

While technical challenges remain, the future will be one where meaningful participation in the planning process is not contingent on the ability to attend a series of meetings. If votes are taken in person, they should be taken online as well. If meetings take place in person, they should be available, in real time and with the ability to participate, online as well.



My preference for the Six Forks Corridor is:

Option A - New Streetscape includes:

- Consistent four-lane section through corridor
- Narrower median with small trees and shrubs
- Separated bicycle lanes
- Wide sidewalks
- Consolidated and enhanced bus stop amenities
- Does not provide additional car traffic capacity
- Requires 5.85 acres of right-of-way acquisition

Option B - Original Recommendation includes:

- Consistent six-lane section through corridor
- Wide median with large trees
- Separated bicycle lanes
- Wide sidewalks
- Consolidated and enhanced bus stop amenities
- Provides additional car traffic capacity
- Requires 11.06 acres of right-of-way acquisition

The second major means of making the planning process more accessible and democratic is less about technical advancements and more about how input is perceived. Human nature tends to give more weight to the person in the room than to an abstract tally on an online survey. However, the luxury of being able to attend a meeting in person should not translate into a louder voice in the process. It is incumbent upon all public servants to ensure that all input is treated with respect and given equal weight in the planning process.

These solutions can be summarized in a guarantee to ensure that Raleigh's citizens enjoy three essential rights:

- ***The right to participate.*** Participation in the planning process will be accessible to all residents, regardless of physical ability, age, English fluency, ability to attend all meetings in person, and any other factor that presents a barrier to participating in decisions about the future of Raleigh.
- ***The right to understand.*** Information about the planning process and alternatives must be presented plainly and understandably. Once input is provided, citizens have a right to an explanation of how it was considered and whether and how it affected the outcome.
- ***The right to an equal voice.*** Input is equally valued regardless of how it is provided, whether it is in the form of attendance at an in-person meeting, an online meeting, a survey, or other means.

Finally, with rights come responsibilities. In this case, those participating in the public input process have the responsibility to give thought to alternative perspectives and to consider the effects of decisions on the city and region as a whole and in the long term.

The Plan's establishment of these rights will make Raleigh a leader in creating a truly authentic and meaningful planning process and, more importantly, create a more engaged citizenry and a more just city.

Policy IM 6.1 Access to Participation

Design and implement planning processes that are accessible to the greatest possible number of citizens, regardless of whether they are able to attend meetings in person.



Policy IM 6.2 Authentic Participation

In every planning process, carefully document the input received and report back to the community with a summary of major themes and an explanation of how the input was incorporated into the final plan.



Policy IM 6.3 Equality of Input

Give equal weight in the planning process to public input regardless of the form in which it is provided.



Action IM 6.1. Input Study

Study methods for broadening participation in all planning processes, including a focus on online participation. Develop a best practices manual containing a toolkit and templates for participation.