

Neighborhood Plans: Compact Plans with Expansive Outcomes

The neighborhood, made up of places to work, live and play, has always had a profound impact on the community of which it is a part. Deterioration of neighborhoods negatively affect nearby areas, and ultimately the City as a whole. But in the same way, reinvigorated neighborhoods can result in the rebirth of an entire community. Although these enclaves may not always be clearly defined by physical features such as roads or landmarks, they provide a sense of place and ownership to those who benefit from the physical, economic and social aspects of the area. Some of the predominant defining aspects of a “neighborhood unit” include schools, parks, commercial areas, types of housing, and a minimal walking radius. These aspects combine to create the identity of the neighborhood and define its sense of place.

New Urbanism and the continuing promotion of Neo-Traditional Planning have resulted in the trend towards strengthening the neighborhood unit. The strength of these movements has resulted in the neighborhood becoming a dominating factor within many municipal planning departments and planning consulting firms. Urban planners have aided in the resurgence of grass roots planning, where the community is once again a partner with government in trying to enhance the attributes of the neighborhood through a focused planning effort: a Neighborhood Plan.

Neighborhood Analysis

The strength of a successful Neighborhood Plan lies in the unique political, social and economic issues which characterize the neighborhood. Therefore, it is imperative that the planner research the make-up of the people, the politics and the problems found within the neighborhood, while allowing the Plan to evolve freely within this framework. This research, along with numerous informal information sessions within the community, should provide a moderately reliable portrayal of the existing features and problems found within the neighborhood. Such data should include but not be limited to the following categories:

1. Demographics
2. Land Use and Zoning
3. Housing
4. Crime and Code Compliance
5. Visual and Historic Features
6. Results of a Residential/Business Survey.

Preparing a Neighborhood Plan

Turning the neighborhood analysis into a Plan commonly begins as a miniature master planning process, developing goals, objectives and policies, and determining funding strategies. The process should start by convening a steering committee of neighborhood representatives to provide input for the plan's content and to review drafts of the document. The representatives are often members of the Neighborhood, School, Merchants, or Religious Association or a member of a Block Association. In many instances, neighborhoods are too large to consider as a single planning area, or are made up of smaller sub areas, creating the need to consider a specialized plan of study. Therefore, when establishing the steering committee, a representative from each subarea should be recruited to sit on the steering committee.

The next step is to identify strengths and weaknesses within the neighborhood, and potential goals of the residents. This could begin with a local survey conducted during the neighborhood analysis phase. The survey would ask the neighborhood's residents and businesses to name particular issues that they would like to see addressed, and provide an opinion about how these issues should be prioritized. A formal neighborhood-wide meeting then would be scheduled once issues and goals have been identified. The gathering affords both the neighborhood and the planner the opportunity to initiate an open dialogue to further define the neighborhood's problems, and prioritize and refine goals for the area. Based upon these problems and goals, the planner can begin to formulate conceptual solutions for the neighborhood. Several examples of identifiable neighborhood improvement issues include structural improvements (infill, historic preservation, commercial upgrades, etc.), code enforcement, new/repaired sidewalks (walkable communities), landscaping along streets and in parks, and natural feature preservation.

Following goal setting, the next step in the process is to create a detailed narrative about the future of the neighborhood, along with objectives and policies that will guide future decisions. The Neighborhood Plan's objectives and policies should be reflective of those found within the overall community's Master Plan. However, if the community's views and character have changed since the adoption of the Master Plan, consideration should be given to amending a portion of, or completely revising, the community's Master Plan. Coordination between the documents ensures that funding sources are more readily available, and possibly already identified in the community Master Plan.

Adoption and Implementation

Adoption of the Neighborhood Plan is complete once a majority of residents and business owners approves the Plan. This is usually accomplished through periodic meetings with the neighborhood at large. Although not all municipalities formally adopt neighborhood plans by the community's Council/Board or Commission, should any portion of the Plan require implementation by a government agency, it is imperative that the Plan be formally adopted. In most cases, implementing the Plan is the responsibility of multiple organizations, typically from one of the following three categories:

- Neighborhood residents - for such action items as home improvements and neighborhood beautification projects (may include Neighborhood Association, Citizen District Councils, Block Associations, etc.)
- Joint effort by the neighborhood and the public or private sector - for such action items as publicizing municipal programs or mini-studies on a particular issue (may include same neighborhood residents groups)
- Full responsibility on the municipality - for action items such as street and sidewalk improvements

No matter who bears the burden of implementation, it is the responsibility of the Neighborhood Association to monitor the progress of the Plan's implementation, including supporting the municipality in their attempts to fund studies or improvements.

Several of our clients have successfully completed the neighborhood planning process, and have demonstrated the importance of the neighborhood within the fabric of the community. Some of these community plans include Bay City's Citizen District Council, Northville's Neighborhood Association, and Ann Arbor's Sub-Area Plans.

Summary

Like any planning effort, neighborhood planning can be challenging. But the resulting benefits outweigh its demands. Some of the benefits include:

- Empowering citizens with information and resources
- Providing special funding opportunities
- Shortening implementation period (1-5 years)
- Issues are "close to home".

Although not mandated by many of the communities in Michigan, neighborhood planning brings the field of urban and regional planning to a level understood and appreciated by those most directly impacted - its residents. It affords citizens the ability to realize local goals within the confines of political realities. Neighborhood planning is in fact more than just land use. It is a process to build a community.

Sources

A Guide to Neighborhood Planning, American Planning Association, Report No. 342,

Neighborhood-Based Planning, 5 Case Studies, American Planning Association, Report No. 455, Planning Advisory Service

Guidelines for Preparing Urban Plans, American Planning Association