

Central Austin Combined
Neighborhood Planning Story

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for

Dr. Patricia Wilson
Participatory Methods in Community Planning

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Central Austin Combined Neighborhood Planning reference map; source: City of Austin.

Neighborhood Planning in Central Austin emerged on the heels of a highly contentious zoning dispute over a new residential development, the Villas on Guadalupe, that had divided neighborhoods and left a "residue of mistrust"⁵ between the city, developers, and residents. The City of Austin hoped that Neighborhood Planning would prevent such conflicts, but many neighborhoods saw Neighborhood Planning as nothing more than the next battle. This is the story of the Central Austin Combined Neighborhood Planning process, a story that hinges on diverse participation and open collaboration. The CAC neighborhood planning area comprises the University Area Partners ("UAP") developer organization as well as seven different neighborhood associations representing areas surrounding the University of Texas to the west and north (see map, above).

Today, many regard the Central Austin Combined Neighborhood Plan ("CACNP") as an exemplary Neighborhood Planning process. Notably, this process began on rocky ground, and the divergent participants in this eventually commended Plan had overcome a tension-filled beginning. This suggests that no planning

processes must be doomed to failure. Diverse stakeholders can indeed successfully collaborate to reach creative solutions addressing the interests of all parties.

Challenges and Transitions

In 2002, the City passed a resolution mandating a cooperative planning process among the Central Austin Combined neighborhoods, instead of creating seven separate Neighborhood Plans. Residents warily approached this resolution. The neighbors "...didn't trust the planners, and we didn't trust the process...",⁵ and felt that they were "thrown into this mix, particularly by one City Council member because we were having so much problems with the Villas on Guadalupe."³ The City Council "...went in there and said 'OK neighborhood, you go work with UAP [University Area Partners], and we don't want to see another fight like this again.'"⁶ "There were people who had been through the Villas fight who felt extremely angry and felt really beat up."⁵ Established groups "were talking at each other, not to each other."⁶

As Neighborhood Planning began for the Central Austin Combined neighborhoods, distrust and suspicion thus characterized the relationship between residents, the city, and developers as embodied in UAP. All seemed headed for a serious showdown. On its part, the city viewed the resolution as a way to steer the neighborhoods towards cooperation with each other and with the city, and away from the problems and contention that surrounded the Villas. In an attempt to avoid a repeat of that debacle, representatives of all 7 neighborhoods formed an umbrella organization, known as the Central Austin Neighborhood Policy Action Committee ("CANPAC"), which later expanded to include UAP representatives. CANPAC's efforts would prove to play an invaluable role in the eventual success of this Neighborhood Plan.

In addition to large-scale concerns about the planning process and the role of the city, there was some initial doubt about the qualification of the individual planners assigned to the Central Austin Combined area. Interviewees expressed a desire for better professional mediation training for planners, and displayed varying degrees of empathy for the staff. On one extreme, the view expressed was "I know those jobs aren't well paid and maybe they don't attract the smartest people in the world...The staff we had met with up to that point were all very young, very new, obviously inexperienced. It was just kind of like they were there, they seemed to us as place-fillers of some kind."³ Others recognized that the Neighborhood Planning Department was understaffed,

overworked, and “only human,”² and that many of the difficulties also arose from residents’ negative attitudes.

I think, in your field, a couple of things that would be really useful would be training in public management and mediation. Anybody trying to do neighborhood planning, community planning, when you’re working with groups. And how to deal with angry people, with people that are rude and impolite. It’s never easy.⁵

Residents feel that planners with mediation training are armed with the “personal gravitas that it would take to deal with the City, or with [neighborhoods].”⁵

Negative pre-conceptions and distrust also surfaced among different groups of neighborhood stakeholders. Legitimacy questions arose, drawing on a distinction between residents and business and property owners.¹ Neighbors sometimes “don’t perceive [business owners] as part of the community, even though the person who runs that business, that’s their livelihood, and they are every bit as much a part of the neighborhood.”⁶ In the beginning, the widely held view was that due to entrenched positions among the number of antagonistic groups (homeowners, renters, landlords, developers, and the city staff), “these groups...the interests are too diverse, it’s not going to work.”⁵

The initial planning meetings were as difficult as expected, but before long things started to turn around. This upswing was due to a common realization that the many stakeholder groups had a basis for a shared vision, a vision uncovered after the process became more diversely inclusive. “I think the best thing that ended up happening was that we started trying to be inclusive of, not just neighborhoods, but of some of the business and developer types”² and discovering that “these are people, we can speak the same language.”³

We started working with them and it was not as bad as we thought it would be. And then eventually, we bit the bullet and Mike McHone was invited in. I can remember being at a neighborhood meeting which actually broke up the whole thing.¹

I think the breakthrough moment really happened when we had our vision and goals meeting...we took representatives from UAP, a couple homeowners, a couple renters and a student renters and we put them in a room and said you’re going to go in there and you’re going to write a vision, you have an hour to do it. They started talking to each other and when they came out of that room you could see that something had changed.⁶

Suddenly, the tense, negative atmosphere began to change. “We worked it out, we worked together, we found solutions for practically everything.”³ “[What] seemed to me happened is some of those fractious people got tired of being fractious and they just went away, which meant that they stopped participating in

these workshops.”³ Residents note that “being able to see the perspective of the UAP was a turning point,”⁵ and “We realized what they wanted was the same as what we wanted.”³ The visioning process itself helped dissolve the preexisting separation between stakeholder groups. “It was kind of magical. Who would have ever thought that we could have worked something out or become sort of friends and had mutual respect for each other? I mean, that's kind of amazing.”³ Equally important was the fact that everyone felt represented in the resulting vision. Process became very important: “I think at the end, if you listen to the tapes, you’ll find us all thanking the staff because we had all worked so closely together.”¹

Another potential roadblock to the process rested in a common neighborhood view that the city had a specific agenda regarding density, evident before the Neighborhood Planning process began. “The city had an agenda with density, and I think we were suspicious of them.”¹ “...what the city wanted us to do, which was to find a way to increase density...”² The perceived desire to “cram density, more people down our throats”³ went hand in hand with a “...complete lack of trust in the city process, because at that point, it was still new, it was evolving, it was diffuse, unidentifiable, amorphous.”⁵

CACNP participants quickly learned that a willingness to suggest and consider novel, creative solutions would be crucial to building a Plan that would meet the needs and interests of all residents, business owners, developers, and the larger city. As one participant describes, the need to move forward fed the need for collaboration: “Saying ‘no’ doesn’t really work too well.”² One standout example in the CACNP is its treatment of density and building height. Instead of refusing to accept any growth in the neighborhood, stakeholders deliberated and discussed where best to absorb density, and developed a University Neighborhood Overlay (“UNO”) combined with a Neighborhood Conservation Combining District and a height map stepping down building heights as one moves away from an intense core into older single-family neighborhoods. All interviewees emphasized that this creative solution was instrumental to CACNP’s success. “We weren’t saying ‘No’ and then getting turned down, we had solutions to offer.”² “We didn’t just want to fight, we wanted to find solutions.”³ “We earned credibility with Council by being willing to compromise and being as creative as possible about trying to find solutions to problems.”⁵

The short history of Neighborhood Planning makes it difficult to elucidate best practices, but one theme arose from both staff and neighborhood interviewees for trying to address larger citywide issues as

efficiently as possible: the need to take a bigger picture view of how individual Neighborhood Plans combine to impact the city as a whole, the need to streamline meetings, and the need to explicitly articulate any vision or goals the Plans will be expected to meet.

“There aren’t many best practices because not many people do what we do here. If I could wave a magic wand I’d like to see people think more holistically and see that no neighborhood is an island unto itself, that they are always a part of something bigger. I think sometimes this is the biggest stumbling block in our process.”⁶

Planners feel that combining planning areas is a more efficient use of staff and time, and “We just decided to consolidate the process... group areas together, and using those economies have larger scale meetings and get more planning done per volume of time.”⁶ With time, the neighbors too saw the benefits: “A larger geography does work, and is important... you are able to do broader things... We’re so balkanized in this city, and the broader our planning areas are, the better.”⁵ “It was always the Central Austin neighborhood, by then the city had decided that to take it neighborhood by neighborhood would take entirely too long, and all of us had all the same kinds of problems.”¹

All interviewees noted the UNO, the height map, and the Neighborhood Conservation Combining District as unique solutions for this community composed of everything from historic homes to new student housing. These “added tools to the neighborhood planning toolbox” allowed the stakeholders to accommodate inevitable growth and change in a way that suited the community character and design. Crucially, these tools would not have been feasible with a smaller geography. Because the CAC planning area stretched across several neighborhoods, “[we] were able to do broader things, like decide where density should go.”⁵ From the City’s perspective, including more areas in a single plan helps residents “see the larger picture...no neighborhood is an island unto itself...this is [something] that affects everyone.”⁶ However, there is also the possibility that focus on a larger planning area can be used to place density in underprivileged or underrepresented districts. Density “dumping” is the other side of the increased efficiencies gained from working with larger planning areas.

Further regarding the cumulative benefits of CANPAC, having all 7 neighborhoods plus UAP represented on the committee was “a show of power and of common concern,”⁵ demonstrating to property owners and Council that a broader population was affected and united on decisions. CANPAC met with

individual owners one at a time, to present architectural drawings and other representations of what zoning changes would mean for their properties “on the ground.” These meetings helped to correct misperceptions and respond to upset stakeholders. Meetings with staff, even before the plan began, developed lasting relationships.^{3,5,6} Meeting with Council to present the Plan and discuss issues before final decisions were made allowed CANPAC to identify problem areas to be addressed, limiting delays during Plan approval.^{2,3,5} The neighborhoods used their connections with well-known City figures, such as developers, lawyers, and other individuals with pre-existing Council relationships, to draw upon these individuals to help facilitate meetings.^{5,6}

Eventually, CANPAC’s ongoing hard work earned the neighborhood credibility with and support from City Council, and helped stem a potential roadblock that emerged to fight the plan in the final stages of the process.^{3,5} In 2004, “two months before the plan was to go before the City Council, a new organization formed: the West Campus neighborhood organization.”⁴ This group created new tension in a planning area that had already overcome so much misunderstanding and distrust, and the latecomers were neither appreciated nor well respected. In fact, such naysayers were looked upon with disgrace. One wonders, what benefit might they have derived from earlier involvement? This organization represented development interests that expected competition to arise from the UNO ordinance, as newer, bigger multi-family residential developments might draw renters away from the older, pre-existing rental buildings. Despite the last-minute dispute, Council overwhelmingly voted to approve the Plan. Interviewees believe this was due in no small part to the long-term efforts of CANPAC and the respect and confidence that had garnered from Council.

Since adoption, the ever-changing identity of the plan has been somewhat of a surprise. Participants began the process hoping to create an ‘end all, be all’, a static document that would invariably guide future decisions. The reality they discovered was that, “It’s more of a living document than we anticipated, and it’s taking more maintenance than we expected.”² “People think when you finish a plan that you’re through, but you’re never through.”¹ Residents may distrust the City because of what is seen as “failing to enforce its own rules,” allowing developments to occur against what is specified in Plans.^{1,2,3,5} “We all wonder, a couple of Councils from now, will they uphold these plans?”¹

Planners recognize successful instances of regaining trust when the City has closed “a loophole in the code” that previously allowed developments to circumvent certain provisions.⁶ Also, when staff head off and manage any potentially misguided expectations about what may be included in a plan, stakeholders have realistic expectations about the finality, legal status, and permanence of plans once adopted. This builds trust that the staff “are there to help.”⁶ Residents understand that zoning may change and variances may be granted, so they may move forward to create goals and visions that may guide any future changes. CAC neighborhoods have responded to the flexibility of Plans during enforcement by continuing to lobby City leaders and Council members to complete desired projects and respect plan Goals during permit applications and zoning decisions.^{2,3} The neighborhood also meets to complete neighborhood cleanups and other Plan projects they have control over on their own.²

On another scale of neighborhood education, the CAC planning area was able to afford to hire its own consultants and had volunteer architects and residents with planning knowledge to provide explanations of zoning outcomes in visual terms. Offering the opportunity to “see” what an ordinance would mean helped alleviate property owners’ concerns. “Unless you show them what it is, they don’t understand it.”⁶ Interviewees expressed a wish for city staff to provide more technical assistance in helping residents understand planning lingo, terminology, and concepts. One remarked regarding the city:

They're planning for us, but they consider us the enemy because they know more than we do. And sometimes they do, but sometimes you need to educate your populace. There are lots of educated people out there and there are lots of people who can learn things and lots of neighbors who can actually have valuable...input. There are also a lot of cuckoos, too. It's sort of sifting through the sands.³

Unless neighborhoods truly understand what is being discussed, they cannot fully participate. The Central Austin Combined Neighborhood Planning Area, and especially its CANPAC group, proved that well-educated stakeholders are an enormous asset in a participatory planning process.

Process Milestones and Significant Dates

This section recaps the chronology in which these emotional accounts, process breakthroughs, and planning odysseys took place. A graphic timeline of these dates is provided in the attached appendices.

Austin City Council initiated this planning process in response to the Villas on Guadalupe zoning dispute in the spring of 2002. On April 11th, city council formed the combined planning area and directed neighborhood planning staff and the various neighborhood factions to work toward consensus on a vision for the area in order to avoid similar fights in the future. The organized and proactive neighborhood associations formed CANPAC shortly thereafter and began meeting with neighborhood planning staff well before the official neighborhood planning process had even gotten underway.

The planning process officially began on December 7th, 2002. After getting started, the process moved relatively quickly into the visioning stage, starting January 14th, 2003, and led to adoption of a shared vision statement at the March 4th meeting of that same year. While the exact dates are unclear, the Future Land Use Map stage of the process was completed by early August. The process then transitioned into determining specific zoning, which was complete on January 10th, 2004. Finally, the plan spent four months in the approval process before ultimately being almost entirely approved at the July 29th City Council hearing.

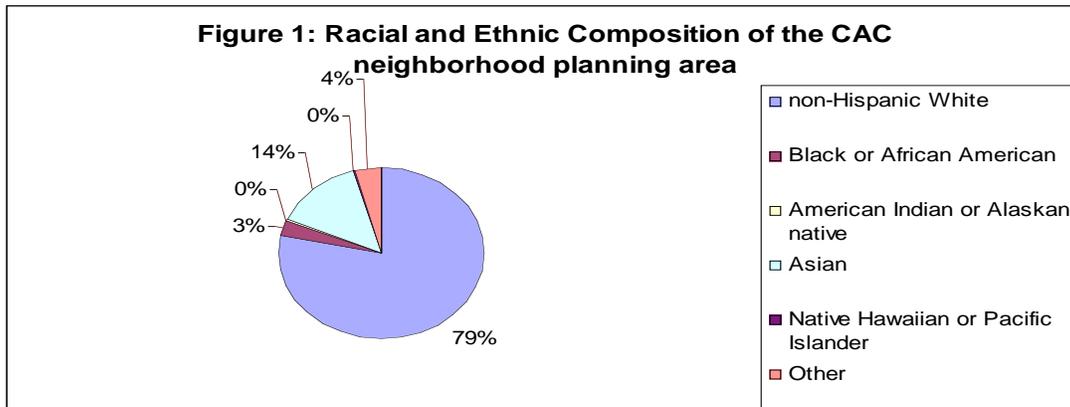
Participation in the CACNP Process

UT-CRP student Sarah Slovak researched and prepared a white paper on participation rates in the Central Austin Combined NP process. This section of the report draws exclusively from her research. Slovak obtained survey response data and meeting attendance numbers, when available, from both the NP document and City staff. Analysis of this information is limited by the fact that the data itself is limited. Initial and final surveys were conducted, but response rate numbers were only recorded for the initial survey. Attendance was only recorded for 6 out of the 14 major public meetings. Still, we see from the data that are available that: 1) the majority of planning meeting participants were residents in 2 of the 7 sub-area neighborhoods; 2) renter participation was low compared to homeowners; 3) participation was highest at the beginning and end of the process; and 4) total participation compared to total area population was low (Slovak, 2006, March 3).

Demographics and Participation

According to the 2000 Census, the Central Austin Combined Neighborhood Planning Area population was 25,633 individuals (US Census, 2000, SF-1). The NP document records the total population for the combined planning area as 21,040 individuals. The two largest racial and ethnic groups in these

neighborhoods are non-Hispanic Whites (79% of the population) and Asians (14% of the population). A complete breakdown of racial composition is shown in Figure 1.



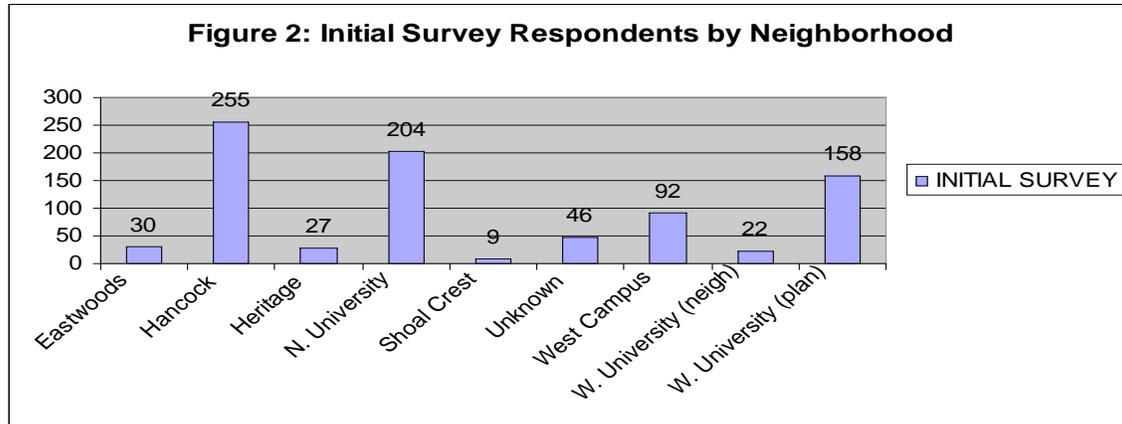
Source: U.S. Census 2000, SF1 P003

There is no record of meeting participants' or survey respondents' race or ethnicity. Ethnicity would indeed be a contentious, deterring, and perhaps even impossible piece of information to record, but it would be illustrative to know whether participation among racial and ethnic groups truly represented the proportions in the demographics of the neighborhood planning area as a whole.

Owner and Renter Participation

There are 9,615 households in the CAC, 84% of which are renter-occupied, and 16% of which are owner-occupied. Comparatively, in the City of Austin as a whole, only 55% of the housing is renter-occupied (US Census 2000, SF-1 H004). The high number of renters in the CAC is largely due to its close proximity to the University of Texas and the vast number of students who rent in these neighborhoods. This likely plays a significant role in planning participation levels across the CAC at large.

The first participatory tool used for the CAC was an initial survey, mailed to approximately 8,726 people in the neighborhood (including property owners, renters, and business owners) in October of 2002. While only 843 people, or 9.7% of neighborhood residents, responded, this was considered a "favorable" response when compared to previous initial surveys mailed in other neighborhoods in Austin (CAC Neighborhood Plan, 2004). Response rates for each sub-area neighborhood are shown in Figure 2.



Source: Central Austin Combined Neighborhood Plan Initial Survey Results (Appendix A)

The majority of the survey respondents (55%) came from two neighborhoods, Hancock and North University. These two neighborhoods are known for being very active in the City, and they tend to be the area in the CAC where more homeowners reside.

According to the Neighborhood Plan, a final survey was sent in December of 2003 to all residents of the combined planning area. No total response rate or breakdown of responses was recorded. The NP notes only that, "...73% of [final] survey respondents supported the plan, and 56% were satisfied or very satisfied with the planning process" (Central Austin Combined Neighborhood Plan, August 2004).

Early and Late Participation

Fourteen major meetings and workshops occurred in addition to other meetings the neighborhood planning staff held throughout the process with smaller focus groups. Both the initial (12/7/02) and final (1/10/04) workshops were in high attendance; attendance at other meetings throughout the process was far lower. Figure 3 records available meeting participation rates for the CAC Neighborhood Planning area.

Meeting Date	Number Attending	Participation Rate
12.7.02	150	0.70%
1.11.03	82	0.40%
3.4.03	73	0.30%
3.11.03	u	
4.8.03	u	

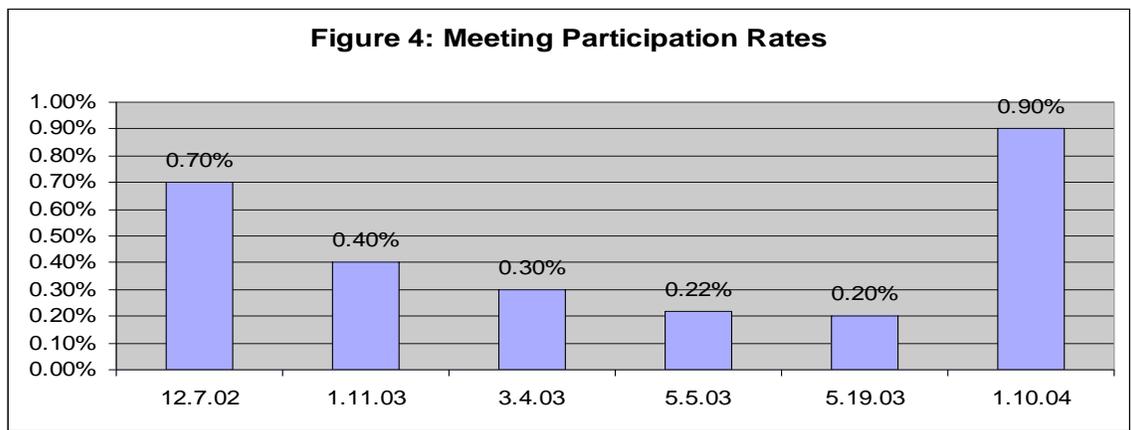
5.5.03	46	0.22%
5.19.03	41	0.20%
6.5.03	u	
6.24.03	u	
8.4.03	u	
8.5.03	u	
8.6.03	u	
10.16.03	u	
1.10.04	200	0.90%
*Attendance data not available for all meetings.		
U=unknown		

Source: Central Austin Combined Neighborhood Plan, 2004.

This variation in attendance indicates that people displayed interested in the planning process at the beginning and at the final meeting, but the majority of residents were simply not available or chose not to participate throughout the entire planning process.

Participation Compared to Total Population

Slovak calculated participation rates for the CACNP by dividing the attendance at each meeting recorded in the NP document by the total adult population of the neighborhood (20,382 persons over age 18).



This graph emphasizes the point that attendance was highest at the initial and final meetings, and that participation compared to total population was extremely low throughout. This raises concerns about how well the residents who participated in the Neighborhood Planning process represent the interests of area residents as a whole.

Interviewees' Comments on Participation

Statistical significance of the neighborhood planning surveys would require a much higher response rate (anywhere from 30-50%). Yet, that is not to say that the participation in the neighborhood was poor. While an ideal situation would produce more diverse and engaged participants, what occurred is a start in the right direction. Another major factor that should be considered is the quality of participation rate data. The accuracy of meeting attendance records (or lack thereof), quality and interpretation of survey responses, and consideration of external factors in the neighborhood need to all be considered, yet cannot be quantified.

Still, these quantitative observations match well with our interviewees' perceptions. One interviewee noted, "We wished there had been more [renter participation]. That's a continual battle, trying to get more renters to participate throughout as part of the immediate community."² Regarding declining participation over time, others remarked on the perhaps excessive length and quantity of meetings, leading people to decide to stay home instead of spend their free weeknights at a planning workshop.^{2,6} All interviewees recall an upswing in attendance in the final stages of plan preparation, especially at Council hearings with "holdout" property owners appearing to protest zoning changes, an effort to derail the process that failed in light of the extensive work of the CANPAC committee and support from the Council and neighborhoods generally for the proposed zoning and land use actions, and the carefully crafted UNO creative solution to density and height.

Key Lessons

The story of the Central Austin Combined neighborhood planning process does not end with the narrative formed by the stakeholders interviewed for this document. A review of key lessons suggested by the experiences related here serves not only as a point of departure for future improvements to the process, but also as a summary of the experiences of those involved.

Lessons Learned: Central Austin Combined Neighborhood Plan

- A Neighborhood Planning committee representing all areas and stakeholders/groups in the planning area helped turn conflict into collaboration.
- Having representatives from every region of the Neighborhood Planning Area meet with affected property owners to discuss on-the-ground effects of zoning changes created understanding to avoid conflicts later on.
- Holding regular meetings with City staff and meetings with Council members prior to final hearings served as a reminder of the importance of neighborhood planning.
- All stakeholders – residents, property owners, businesses, and developers – worked together to understand each others’ perspectives and develop a common vision.
- When neighborhood stakeholders remain involved after plan completion, they can assist in tracking, lobbying for, and even effecting implementation.
- When neighborhoods seek creative solutions to complicated problems, rather than defend the status quo, more gets accomplished.
- Training in how to deal with sometimes angry, impolite people help neighborhood planners as well as other stakeholders serve as facilitators.
- The City rebuilds and maintains trust that Plans will be enforced.
- Staff hold sessions to be clear on the limitations of what a plan can address and the circumstances under which zoning and other changes might occur.
- Where the City has larger-scale goals – such as accommodating density, affordable housing, or transportation – making those clear to neighborhoods helps them knowledgeably approach the issues and develop appropriate solutions. Using larger Neighborhood Planning Areas allows plans to address broader problems.
- Neighborhoods benefit from continual training on planning procedures, terminology, and tools so they may act as informed participants. Technical assistance to produce maps, drawings, and other descriptions of alternatives help residents visualize different options.
- Allowing for and providing a variety of planning tools allows neighborhoods to tailor plans to their particular circumstances.

Final Thoughts

Some of the most lauded aspects of the CACNP may not be generalizable to other plans. The density tools in particular may only have been applicable within the unique circumstances in the University area. Much of the neighbors’ successful activities, like ongoing lobbying and hired consultants, were likely possible only due to this population’s higher-than-average incomes, education, and level of organization going into the plan.

Still, CACNP succeeded in embracing broad representation, collaborating on CANPAC, developing creative solutions to meet all interests, and focusing on shared visions. These successes are translatable to all neighborhood planning processes.

The planning process in CAC neighborhood indeed reflects a distinct geographic and demographic identity. However, our group acknowledges all areas possess distinct qualities in varying aspects. A diversity of variables are at play in public participatory processes. Among these variables, for CAC, we observe an emergence of powerful relationships. In exploring these relationships, we foresee potential for future change. Much of our exploration as a group is motivated by the following ideal. By learning about a planning process in depth, from multiple perspectives, perhaps we can discern what process elements are most empowering for those involved and which are detrimental. It is our hope that people may be enabled and empowered in their planning processes by perusing our work and extracting lessons most applicable for their communities.

Interviewees/References

Each interviewee is referred to throughout the text by superscript numbers corresponding to the numbers below. Included below are brief descriptions of each interviewee. Because of assurances made to each person that he or she could speak freely and candidly, the names are not included here.

(1) Rents a house in the planning area. Works at the Law Library at UT. Active participant in the neighborhood planning process all the way through.

(2) Has lived in and owned a West University house on Pearl Street since he was a student at UT. Early founder of the Shoal Creek Neighborhood Association.

(3) Member of the North University Neighborhood Association (NUNA). Active in the planning process.

(4) Real Estate Broker. Property owner in the West Campus Area. Member of UAP. Leader in the Villas development.

(5) Realtor, homeowner, and Eastwoods Neighborhood Association member. Active in planning since her time in Hyde Park. Member of CANPAC.

(6) Six-year tenure with the neighborhood planning department. One of four city staff members who worked on the Central Austin Combined Neighborhood Plan.

