

Executive Summary

As it becomes increasingly important to not only garner public support for development initiatives, but to engage the citizenry in neighborhood planning processes, facilitation is becoming a skill that is highly desired among planners. Facilitation is a technique used for a variety of reasons, be it resolving tension between disputing parties or finding creative solutions to identified problems which can be achieved by using techniques such as visioning, mapping or role-playing (just to name a few). Each strategy works to engage the stakeholders to garner multiple perspectives. A facilitator's role is to remain neutral while guiding dialogue and conversations among a group of people to foster constructive communication. Facilitators are able to accomplish this by creating an open, safe environment in which everyone feels comfortable to participate and engage in the process. The facilitator is able to clarify ideas, highlighting commonalities among participants, providing information and encouraging collaboration. In the case of neighborhood planning, and planning processes in general, there is constant debate as to what role, if any, planners should play in the facilitation of such processes. There is understandable concern that planners who are city employees may not be able to act as facilitators when seeking citizen participation because of concerns regarding neutrality. In other words, can a planner who is acting as a facilitator remain neutral and not be seen as representing the city's interest? This paper looks at what facilitation is according to the literature, what the role of planners is within the facilitation process and concludes by examining four cities in which various types of facilitation occurred within the planning process.

Facilitation and the Role of Planners

Facilitation is more than a contemporary buzz word found in the planning lexicon; it is a dynamic process linked with current planning practices, specifically in programs that require high levels of citizen participation such as neighborhood and community development. Planning concerns itself with the scientific, aesthetic and orderly disposition of land and resources and the location of facilities, buildings and services over a given territory; however, because it is multidisciplinary encompassing knowledge-based activity with roots in engineering, law, architecture, public health, geography, ecology, economics and social sciences it becomes increasingly difficult to negotiate its denizens without professional assistance. As a result, when attempting to engage citizens in these processes, planners, because they have “know-how” coupled with planning tools, now exercise an important strategic and integrative role. In collaborative processes, from the conceptualization and pre-development stage to realization of capital projects and construction activity, planners combine design and analysis skills and form linkages between various stakeholders and agendas.

Not all facilitation is the same, and methods tend to vary based on desired results. Possessing strong problem solving, consensus finding and team building skills, ideally today’s planner is able to act as an impartial party and assist a group or individuals by guiding and redirecting constructive conversations. By providing a venue for effective communication through facilitation, process models such as dialogue have the potential to uncover tensions between groups, individuals’ concerns, program benefits, in addition to a number of emotional elements experienced by all involved. Because development increasingly desires partnership consensus amongst stakeholders through cooperation and consideration of all elements, it has the

potential to weight the odds in favor of success. This expanded, more comprehensive view of involvement (from motivating constituencies to care to increase stakeholders' participation and cooperation) represents an important service. Through the process of facilitation, planners act as agents to mediate cultural concerns as well as coordinate, streamline and strengthen the impact of support for an endeavor.

Facilitation is a vital tool where the focus is directed towards moderating and redirecting discussions that occur with multiple stakeholders. The goal remains to improve communication and maximize team member contributions. The role of the facilitator is to monitor the quality of dialogue, ask clarifying questions and relate participant's ideas to one and others to illustrate commonalities. Without a facilitator, if there is a dispute or escalating tension between parties, the entire conversation may come to a halt. Facilitation is active engagement. Rather than simply allowing the group to self-direct by assuming a "referee" type role, facilitation fuels productive interaction by actively engaging participants, challenging assumptions, identifying conflicting views and building consensus. The assumption is the literature will uphold that planners can act as facilitators; validating the approach which fosters communication and therefore brings benefits to host communities.

As Creighton writes, the role of the facilitator "is to create a climate of mutual respect and psychological safety that makes it possible for people to consider creative new solutions and move from preconceived positions" (169). Facilitation does not dictate process; it ensures process effectiveness. The facilitator is able to suggest or propose various ways in which to address identified issues, but it is not the facilitator who possesses the ability or authority to make the decisions for the group (Creighton, 169). Interaction is not the end-all be-all, the focus

is organizational objective and the buy-in required to achieve it. Throughout the entire facilitation process, the facilitator must consider certain questions such as is the conversation productive, have new ideas been generated, are the objectives being met, are agreements being reached, is there tension, et cetera.

Facilitation supports and makes possible discovery, provides necessary guidance, and helps create a learning team. Rather than refraining from making suggestions specific techniques are offered to help participants find solutions. Keeping the objective in focus in a collaborative manner, facilitation draws out ideas by encouraging innovative and creative thinking. Several techniques are utilized by facilitators to engage the participants and encourage this communication including charettes, visioning, mapping surveys, brainstorming sessions, role-play, and so forth. In community planning and development efforts, “regardless of the planning structure or who does the planning, the role and structure of citizen participation are major considerations and in many cases determine the success or failure of the planning process” (Rauhe & Lyons, 2000).

What role does the planner play?

Planners walk a fine line when engaging with public; “they need both calculative and communicative skills, in their roles as investigators and analysts and as facilitators and knowledge intermediaries, respectively” (Malbert, 187). According to Rauhe and Lyons there are two general categories of planners: 1) “in-house” planners who are part of the local planning system and 2) outside planning consultants who are brought in when planning staff is nonexistent or lacks necessary expertise.

The dynamics of the planner’s role are particularly intriguing when acting as a facilitator, for example in the city neighborhood planning process, the position is “in-house.” Quite

literally, the planner is put in-between a rock and a hard place. When the planner works for the city, inherently it is the city that is represented. Yet, in the process of facilitation, the planner is expected to be an unbiased participant who helps to guide the dialogue; acting as facilitators, planners are supposed to remain neutral. It is the planner's job to ensure that all voices are heard and validated. However, the planner still works for the city and is mindful of the goals of that city – whether it be to increase density in specific areas or reconfigure land-use and zoning. Because the city is a key stakeholder, specifically in neighborhood planning, to avoid potential conflicting interests, it may be in the best interest of the neighborhood planning process to engage a different city official as a facilitator. Another option is to hire an outside planning consultant who has a potential advantage when dealing with intra-community conflict, because of being perceived as a neutral third party (Fulton, 1989; Rauhe and Lyons, 2000). However, this avenue is not an intrinsically stress free option. When an outsider is brought into play, there may be some level of distrust amongst the group because the person is viewed as an unfamiliar person, in addition to which there may be possible baggage associated with failed past facilitation attempts. Due to our societal conditioning, another area for concern, conversely, is that the community may view the outsider as more of an expert and leader, rather than a facilitator (Rauhe & Lyons, 2000).

Whether “in-house” or an “outsider,” the goal for planners is to facilitate an atmosphere of cooperation in every aspect of the planning process. The challenge is to give participants freedom to imagine creative possibilities while at the same time “providing nonjudgmental feedback as to the technical appropriateness and practicality of their suggestions” (Rauhe & Lyons, 2000). To help citizens realize their priorities, concerns and solutions; planners must be willing to share their knowledge of the planning process rather than simply gathering input and

completing the planning process by themselves. Facilitation involves educating the public in problem-solving techniques and each approach attempted at facilitating citizen participation must be molded to the needs of the community. As the process comes to a close, and the relationship is ended between change agent and the client, in this case the planner and the neighborhood association, Lippitt believes part of the anxiety can be eased by adding a replacement agent to provide stability and continued leadership and involvement in the process (Rauhe & Lyons, 2000).

Case studies

Reviewing a selection of neighborhood plans and planning processes from different geographic regions, it is evident that each area utilized different models and techniques to realize specific set goals. In several municipalities, after the said city has identified specific neighborhoods, the staff became involved in the neighborhood planning process with residents through facilitation. In other cities, public participation was not considered thus creating resentment which was directed towards the redevelopment effort, the city and the planning process.

Menominee, Michigan

The city of Menominee, Michigan in the 1990's was in a situation of economic decline. In an attempt to address the problem a revitalization effort was mounted by the city, the local Downtown Development Authority (DDA) worked in conjunction with several developers. The plan was full of good intentions but because of the lack of community input and citizen participation in the planning process, tension arose between the community and the DDA. A significant segment of the community did not understand the reasons for the changes occurring in the downtown area of the city. All was not lost. Reacting, the landscape architecture and

urban planning program of major state university recognized this as an opportunity to lead by educating citizens in technical aspects of community planning and development. The university found that in order for plans to gain acceptance amongst the citizens, it was imperative that planning groups include and rally multiple stakeholders, specifically “building the capacity of the participants to implement their plans and to repeat the process in the future” (Rauhe & Lyons, 2000). In this case, acting as facilitators, it was not city employees or official city planners that engaged the public, but rather members of the university who took the role of “change agents” establishing clear ideas and priorities of the community through visioning sessions. Because the public’s involvement was an important aspect in the process there was a broad-base of support for the agenda.

Tallahassee, Florida

In the northwest state capital city, the Floridian city staff of the Tallahassee-Leon Planning Department and the Neighborhood Community Services Department provided assistance by demystifying the process of neighborhood planning for its citizens. Facilitation occurred when a neighborhood was ready to move beyond gathering community background data and demographics to envisioning the future of the community. At this stage, the city staff presented a methodology to determine goals and objectives for the neighborhoods: meeting, facilitation and consensus building. In an effort to build a cohesive vision for the neighborhood, facilitators utilized techniques such as brainstorming, prioritization exercises and breakout groups to address the concerns of the participants. In Tallahassee, ultimately it is up to the assigned neighborhood planner to draft the neighborhood plan based on the recommendations of the various participants and stakeholders.

Seattle, Washington

In Seattle, engaging citizens through neighborhood planning efforts was the strategy utilized to implement the comprehensive plan. Under the umbrella of the Neighborhood Planning Office (NPO), early on in the neighborhood planning process city staff became involved and engaged in facilitation. The first phase of the process has city-staff conducting and facilitating day-long workshops, forums and hearings to engage various stakeholders. The largest city in the state of Washington and an important manufacturing, transportation and trade center in the Pacific Northwest, Seattle looked at a basic unit of organization and created the Neighborhood Planning Office (NPO) to oversee the district planning process and serve as a contact to various local organizations within the city. Additionally, employees of the NPO acted as facilitators and mediators between the City of Seattle, its various neighborhood organizations/associations and the stakeholders within the community. Moreover, project managers of the NPO were also assigned to facilitate the resolution of conflicts and encourage collaboration among participants. Through dialogue techniques and this facilitation, neighborhood development was guided by local priorities as established by the neighborhood planning office.

Austin, Texas

Here in Austin, neighborhood planners act as facilitators from the beginning phases of the process – attempting to remain neutral while at the same time representing the city as city employees. In the East Cesar Chavez area, the neighborhood planning process is propelled by residents who have voluntarily taken an active role, with the City of Austin playing more of the role of a resource. Despite the guiding principle, there has been tension between neighborhood associations and the planners designated to provide assistance. In the combined area of Central Austin, community residents felt the city staff/planners facilitating meetings were not qualified

to assist. In the East Riverside Oltorf Combined (EROOC) area, distrust was bred as residents and stakeholders within the community began to feel the goals of the city being forced upon them – specifically in terms of zoning and land use issues. In each of these situations the planner, an Austin city employee was utilized to facilitate meetings and the initial phases of the neighborhood planning process. As a facilitator, their role was to remain neutral; however, according to some involved in the process, this goal was not achieved. In cases such as Austin, where the planner is forced to wear multiple hats, it seems that it would be in the best interest of the neighborhood planning process to hire an outside agency or individual to act as facilitators or perhaps the Seattle solution of a specific agency designed for the function and not to forget the Michigan response: a greater effort to educate the public early on.

In conclusion, facilitation is a crucial aspect of the planning process, especially when a broad-base of support is expected and desired but implementation is complex. According to Lippitt, “the proper role for the planning professional is that of “change agent”, acting as a collaborative consultant and facilitator,” but how it is affected remains problematic (Rauhe & Lyons, 2000). In endeavors where city planners act as facilitators there is the possibility of tension between the said staff and stakeholders involved in the process. This is due in most part to concern that the planner-facilitator is unable to act as a neutral party because of their role as an employee of the city. While the planner-facilitator may have vast amounts of knowledge to share, some suggestions may be met with criticism because engaged participants may fear that the proposed solutions cater more to the city’s needs than the needs of the neighborhood. On the other hand, as noted by Rauhe and Lyons, effective change cannot always occur with an outside “expert”.

That said, the planning community has realized the importance of civic participation in planning efforts not only to develop plans, but also in the why and how decisions are made in the planning process. Whether the role of the facilitative planner is clearly defined or not, “it is evident that there is also a need for complementary planners with a new and different kind of competence based on communicative rationality in roles as facilitators, intermediaries, negotiators and mediators” (Malbert,188). While it has been difficult for traditional planners to adapt to new functions in the planning process which now includes facilitation; it is a necessary to adapt not only to improve organization, increase citizen participation but to realize all objectives effectively and efficiently.

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