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Response: Up with Collaboration   [Participation with a View]

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Up with Collaboration

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Randy Hester's call for a new approach to citizen participation strikes a responsive chord in those of us who have been frustrated by the subversion of advocacy planning. I, too, have seen misguided middle-class radicalism undermine broader community objectives in many places, including my home town of Chapel Hill, N.C.

Like Randy, I argued for more inclusive citizen participation in local planning in the 1960s and 1970s. My 1972 dissertation called for a collaborative paradigm that shared community decision making in order to facilitate innovation in design and planning. I initiated a popular course at the University of North Carolina on the theory and techniques of public involvement. But by 1985 my graduate students had convinced me to switch the focus of my course from participatory planning to development dispute resolution.

What had happened? Not only had the dominant view of governments as benign (if paternalistic) stewards of the public interest been shattered by the civil rights, environmental and anti-war movements, but also the middle class had been mobilized and learned all too well the techniques of advocacy planning. Instead of awakening an apathetic public to its community planning responsibilities or empowering those not being heard, local planners found themselves struggling to create enough consensus to gain approvals for comprehensive plans and to add enough community value to development projects to overcome stalemates.

I agree with Randy that structural reform of our governance system, at both regional and neighborhood levels, could be useful, but I do not expect it to happen soon. My prescription for dealing with the dilemmas of contemporary participation is less grand: focus on collaborative planning. Substitute consensus-building with affected stakeholders for divisive and adversarial advocacy tactics.

Design is a constructive act that speaks to positive human emotions and needs-creating versus tearing down, cooperating versus competing, rationality versus ranting. Opening the design process to include people directly affected by a proposal can be a powerful lever for generating trust, credibility and consensus.

This can be difficult for professionals used to creative autonomy. But the fates of two 1990s mixed-use neo-traditional development proposals in the Chapel Hill area highlight the power of collaborative planning. One, University Station, was planned without involving residents of adjacent low-density subdivisions. County planners supported it as an antidote to rural sprawl. However, the proposal became mired in mean-spirited opposition over issues like density and traffic. Despite efforts to add buffers and reduce density, the neighbors had hardened their opposition and plan was replaced with a large-lot subdivision.

The other, Southern Village, was proposed in an area where residents, adjacent property owners and Chapel Hill planners had already hammered out an areawide land-use plan. The mixed-use proposal, which fit neatly into the plan, was approved without significant opposition and is well along in development.[2] The residents' involvement in the areawide planning process gave them ownership in the overall plan—enough to overcome Chapel Hill's no-growth syndrome.

Initially, participatory planners looked for answers to dilemmas of conflict and consensus in new theories of governance, innovation diffusion and social psychological exchange theory. The actual answers may be much closer to home, in the common-sense sharing of community form decisions with stakeholders through open, collaborative design and planning processes.

Notes

1. David R. Godschalk, "Negotiating Intergovernmental Development Policy Conflicts: Practice-based Guidelines," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 58:3 (1992), 368-378.

2. J. Earnhardt, "New Urbanism in Practice," *Carolina Planning* 22:2 (1997), 20-27.