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## Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: “Big Rocks” in the Chapel Hill Comprehensive Planning Process

By CED Program Interns & Students

Article: <https://ced.sog.unc.edu/%e2%80%9cbig-rocks%e2%80%9d-in-the-chapel-hill-comprehensive-planning-process/>

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School of Government faculty member Margaret Henderson suggested a “big rock” metaphor that has stuck with the theme groups. Margaret had a glass jar half filled with sand sitting in the middle of a table surrounded by rocks of a variety of sizes, shapes, and colors. In order to fit all of the rocks into the glass jar, a volunteer had to empty out the sand, and then place all of the big rocks in before she could fill in the rest of the jar with sand. In Margaret’s metaphor, the glass jar was time, into which all of the issues, or rocks, had to fit in the course of the planning process. The primary point is that identifying and including the important topics is necessary to avoid becoming lost in smaller issues and never addressing the larger ones.

For the Chapel Hill 2020 comprehensive plan, the big rocks have become items that might not have been raised in earlier meetings. At the first reporting out session, two big rocks that came to the forefront were demographics and the town’s fiscal condition. The process leaders took the initiative to bring these big rocks into the jar by having American Planning Association President Mitch Silver make a presentation to the group on the changing demographics of America and the region and having Town Manager Roger Stancil make a presentation on the town’s fiscal condition. The theme groups actively use the big rock metaphor to check themselves and make sure that any topics that need consideration get added to their list.

The process Chapel Hill is using, with a combination of working sessions and reporting out sessions, is designed to be comprehensive and to take into account as many perspectives as possible.

For more information, visit the Chapel Hill 2020 website and blog.