



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Addressing the Challenges of Outreach and Reporting in the Chapel Hill 2020 Comprehensive Planning Process

By CED Program Interns & Students

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The Chapel Hill 2020 Comprehensive Planning Process is now well under way. One of the most important – and most ambitious – goals of this process is to follow a model of participatory democracy, that is, to maximize community participation in creating the new Comprehensive Plan. Towards this end, the Town of Chapel Hill set a target of touching 10,000 people through Chapel Hill 2020. Outreach and reporting, then, will be critical to the success of the Town's comprehensive planning efforts.

First, it is important to present an update of what has happened so far with Chapel Hill 2020 in order to provide some context on the issues of outreach and reporting. The planning process was initiated during a kick-off meeting at Chapel Hill East High School on September 27, where 378 stakeholders from the community participated in small focus groups in order to discuss their visions for the future of Chapel Hill. This event was followed by a second meeting in which participants prioritized themes (Cultural Vibrancy, Community Prosperity, Town & Gown Relations, Downtown Development, Public Safety and Diversity, Transportation and Sustainability) which should be addressed by the Comprehensive Plan and voted on vision statements to guide the planning process. This information was collected via an electronic voting system provided by the UNC School of Government, and over the coming months, it will be used by working groups of residents as they participate in planning meetings organized around the prioritized themes. For each theme, five working meetings and five 'Reporting Out' sessions have been scheduled. Since only a limited number of residents can be reasonably expected to participate in these meetings, however, achieving the goal of touching 10,000 people through the planning process will require innovative outreach and reporting strategies.

Recently, Community-Campus Partnership interns have been working alongside Town of Chapel Hill staff to address the challenges surrounding outreach and reporting. As for outreach, Town planners are well aware that not all residents are able to participate in planning meetings. Some may be precluded from participation, for example, due to physical disability, lack of English language proficiency, lack of transportation options or lack of time. Therefore, we have identified a number of ways to include the voices of these individuals in the planning process. One strategy that we will pursue is a massive survey effort, in partnership with local non-profit organizations. For example, Meals on Wheels will help to distribute surveys to the homebound population, and the Latino Center and Church World Service (a Durham-based refugee resettlement agency) will assist us in reaching non-English speaking individuals. In addition, residents who cannot attend meetings for logistical reasons will be encouraged to participate via mail surveys, internet surveys and blog posts. Chapel Hill 2020 Open House events will be held periodically on weekends in high-traffic locations (such as shopping malls and community centers) in different neighborhoods in order to enhance our outreach capabilities. Finally, "party packs" – packets of discussion guides and surveys – will be made available, so that residents can host their neighbors for "planning parties." In short, the Community-Campus Partnership and Town staff are well aware of the challenges associated with reaching out to 10,000 individuals, and we are continuing to come up with innovative strategies to address them.

Regarding the reporting effort, it is critical that information about decisions reached during the themed planning meetings will be available to community members in an easily accessible format. To meet this objective, town staff and I will attend each working meeting of the themed groups and compile notes about major points of discussion as well as decisions that are reached. These notes will then be rewritten as a colorful, easy-to-read report and posted to the internet within three days. In addition, the Town has scheduled Reporting Out sessions after each batch of working meetings. These sessions



will present updates from all of the working meetings as well as relevant data produced by Town Staff and the three resident-led committees (the Outreach, Research and Coordinating Committees). Thus, community members can stay up-to-date on the planning process, either by attending the meeting or reading summaries of Reporting Out sessions on the Town website or in the local news media.

Outreach and reporting are indeed challenging aspect of participatory planning processes. At the Community-Campus Partnership, we are working closely with the Town of Chapel Hill to reach creative solutions to these issues. You can follow along with us on the Chapel Hill 2020 blog (<http://2020buzz.wordpress.com/>), and if you have any suggestions for how we can improve our efforts, please leave a comment below.