Playing Around with Civic Engagement Strategies in the Triad

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In the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*, Kevin Costner plays the owner of a failing farm, who hears a voice repeatedly whisper, “If you build it, he will come” as he walks through his cornfield. Costner eventually learns “it” is a baseball field and that the “he” is the long-deceased Shoeless Joe Jackson and seven other equally dead baseball players banned from the sport in the 1919 “Chicago Black Sox” scandal. Costner plows down the cornfield, the players arrive, and his farm is supposedly saved by the hundreds of people seen approaching in cars to watch the game at the end of the film.

But urban planning is not *Field of Dreams*. Planners and leaders should understand that when it comes to public meetings, even “If you build it,” it is unlikely the public “will come” to save the farm, or show up to share their thoughts about how growth should occur on or around it.

Who can blame them? Traditional civic forums in which public input is gathered can be boring, especially for highly involved and engaged citizens who have heard so much of the information in prior meetings. For the less informed, the forums can be mindboggling. Ubiquitous PowerPoint presentations by the planning staff or their consultants are so packed full of information that members of the public trying to take it in feel like they are drinking from a fire hose. Not surprisingly, few attendees actually respond to the information presented, and public input is often limited to those people who arrive with a personal agenda already in hand, and whose passion can easily hijack a meeting.

These concerns were at the forefront when the Piedmont Together project, an initiative funded by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development to develop a regional master plan for strong, sustainable communities in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina, hired Ryan-Harris LLC to create a public input process for the project. Piedmont Together Project Manager Mark Kirstner charged Ryan-Harris with developing a fun, educational and inclusive process that would deliver a consistent type of feedback from 13 geographically dispersed civic forums led by local facilitators who each had very different levels of planning knowledge and experience.

*Rummyland* was the first of many community engagement exercises undertaken during the Piedmont Together process, and was the focus of the first round of civic forums. The card-like game was designed to give even the most reticent participants a voice in the conversation about the regions’ strengths and challenges. Almost 300 people played *Rummyland*.

Seated around tables of six, each participant-player was given a stack of nine cards. On one side of the card was the traditional image of a green playing card. On the other side were representative images of local strengths pre-determined by the project staff. Participants were instructed to fan out the cards in their hands, then choose and lay down on the “game” table what they believed to be the three cards that illustrated the most significant strengths in the region. If four or more players laid down the same card, that table had a “rummy” of consensus and could record that community strength on a sheet of green paper and hang it on a community wall. If there was not agreement at the table, as represented by four or more of the same cards, players were asked to discuss their card choices and attempt to reach a four card consensus, or forfeit the opportunity to post their thoughts on the community wall. This first round was limited to just 15 minutes.

Stacks of red playing cards with illustrative images of the region’s challenges were then distributed to the players, and they were asked to play a second 15-minute round of *Rummyland*, identify and/or reach four card consensuses, and write/post their findings on red sheets of paper on the community wall. All the players were then invited to the community wall, where the facilitators assisted them in looking for areas of consensus across all of the six-person table games. The facilitators also invited additional strengths and challenges to be posted by participants on white sheets of paper to ensure that individual voices were also recorded.

*Rummyland* set a fun, relaxed tone and bracketed the public conversation around topics to which the project team was seeking input. Facilitators reported back
on a standardized form the information posted on the community walls, as well as the tone and direction of the table conversations.

Later in the project, the information gained in these and later forums served as the foundation for Possible Piedmonts, which consists of three scenarios written by Ryan-Harris in response to the question, “What will living in the region look like in the future?” All set in 2020, each scenario described the lives of three generations of the same Piedmont family and the opportunities and challenges they faced, given the community choices made and public policies enacted in the present day. Possible Piedmonts was also inspired by Crossroads Charlotte’s Imagine Our Tomorrow a component of a community building initiative in which four stories were written to illustrate four plausible futures relative to access, equity, inclusion and trust in the social, political, economic and cultural life of the city.1

Possible Piedmonts’ Mother Mary scenario focused on the life of a local family’s matriarch and her life as a struggling and isolated farm owner, a probable story if existing trends in growth remained the same. The Stormin’ ‘Norman and Cookin’ ‘Caroline narrative described the life of Mary’s veteran son and his immigrant wife striving to build a life in the Piedmont with improved access to transportation and healthcare, but an overall lack of investment in education and limited job opportunities. The Tech Twins scenario focused on the lives of Mary’s adult grandchildren and the many choices and opportunities they had in the Piedmont because of the adoption of sustainable policies and the political will to fund them. Joint work group meeting participants were asked to respond to each of the scenarios and suggest strategies to move away from those they deemed to be less desirable, and towards the ones describing a better future.

To further expand community engagement beyond the civic forums, Ryan-Harris also developed a number of hands-on outreach activities. Food For Thought was designed to take advantage of the captive audience at bars, restaurants and coffee shops, while patrons were waiting for their orders to be served. Inspired by the information-rich, playful paper placemats set before restaurant diners to keep them occupied at mealtimes, and illustrator Marion Deuchars’ book Let’s Make Some Great Placemat Art,2 Food for Thought’s disposable paper placemats contained word games and multiple-choice questions where local diners could learn about the Piedmont Togetherness project and rank strategies for addressing the region’s strengths and challenges. Just under 100 placemats were collected.

Bright Ideas was designed for use at events where many people are gathered at informal, leisurely settings like festivals, farmers markets, food truck rallies, and school or church events. Candy Chang’s contemplative experience Confessions inspired this initiative, where she invited gallery visitors to anonymously submit their secrets on wooden plaques to be posted over time like on a Shinto Shrine prayer wall. Triad Piedmont residents were asked to anonymously respond to the prompt, “What’s your bright idea?” and post their ideas about guiding future growth in the region on a portable tack board. To gently steer the participants’ comments, five different categories were suggested on the tack board: jobs, housing, transportation, healthy communities, and places and spaces. Project team members accompanied the Bright Ideas board and encouraged people to take part by handing out light bulbs.

For many people, Food for Thought and Bright Ideas offered both an introduction to the Piedmont Togetherness project and a first-time opportunity to participate in the community planning process. Along with Rummyland and Possible Piedmonts, these civic engagement exercises garnered input from over 500 Triad citizens, and much of it is being used to inform the Regional Master Plan for the Piedmont Togetherness project.

An important aspect of these civic engagement exercises is that they were inspired by popular culture and works of contemporary art. In asking for public comment, planners are competing for people’s precious leisure time. If we are to win that contest, we must draw from all of our experiences, be emboldened to play around with civic engagement strategies, and borrow from other professions.

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Endnotes:

1 Crossroads Charlotte’s Imagine Our Tomorrow project can be found at http://www.crossroadscharlotte.org/imagine/

2 For more information about artist Marion Deuchars and examples from her books, see http://www.letsmakesomegretart.com/

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