

Smart Growth BC EARLY AND ONGOING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY

Approved by the Smart Growth BC Board

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"People are more invested in a community plan if they feel that they were part of the development process." Sara Bunge, resident, Oliver BC

"While most developers now accept that citizen participation is an essential aspect of the approval process, good developers know that community input often results in a better project." Michael Geller, President and CEO, SFU Community Trust



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Smart Growth BC Policy on Early and Ongoing Community Engagement

1.0 INTRODUCTION

A fundamental tenet of smart growth is that citizens and stakeholders are assets to be engaged in planning for the future of their communities.

Citizens are the best experts about the places they live and how those places might best grow and progress. Their informed participation can vastly improve development processes, and ultimately, the communities in which we work, learn, and live.

Therefore, a true smart growth vision must be established through meaningful engagement of the people who will feel the long-term social, environmental, and economic implications. Every community that strives for smart growth needs to have a community vision that has been developed through a high quality process of citizen engagement. Furthermore, efforts towards smart growth must also provide for ongoing engagement in a meaningful way.

In many communities, rhetoric about smart growth has not led to real change in the fundamental assumptions about the value of citizens. Participation is treated as a mere legislated requirement. Dysfunctional processes are used repeatedly, and the smart growth label is applied to projects or plans that were not created with high quality community engagement. As a result, citizens are fighting back: twenty hour public hearings and court challenges of land use decisions are becoming ever more common.

Fortunately, enlightened local governments and developers are embracing the idea that citizens are assets. This policy outlines the tangible benefits for citizens, local government, and the development community when good faith partnerships are a central part of land development. This policy presents the vision of Smart Growth BC for community engagement, along with recommendations for all actors to create a positive climate for citizen input.

2.0 BENEFITS OF EARLY AND ONGOING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A simple moral argument can be made that citizens should have a say about what occurs in their communities. Land use and planning decisions have an enormous impact upon housing choices, transportation, household expenses, health, and many other fundamental issues. Further, the results of land use decisions remain in place for decades or more. With such far-reaching implications, our democratic system demands that people are given a meaningful voice in these decisions.

But early and ongoing citizen engagement has a host of practical benefits for government, developers, and the community as a whole, including the following:

2.1 Creating Better Plans and Better Communities

The most important justification for community engagement is simple: the outcomes are better. Neighbourhoods and projects contribute to a sustainable future, and the overall community is healthy and robust.

Planners, architects, engineers, other professionals and elected officials can bring important expertise and information to the table. Yet there is even more to be learned from citizens and stakeholders.

Citizens are the best experts about the places they live. They can report on site-specific conditions, historical context (which is important, especially if past trade-offs occurred), and can ensure that the plan or policy is context-specific. The rigours of their input will test the merits of proposals. Further, by bringing in a range of stakeholders into the

process, the outcome will not be based on the interests or concerns of a single interest, but rather, the interest of the community as a whole.

Concrete examples, throughout BC and beyond, are showing that a community vision, Official Community Plan, site design or any other land use decision is more robust and innovative when citizens are given meaningful opportunities for input.¹

2.2 Saving Time and Money

Ensuring effective citizen involvement in a planning or development process may add time. This may seem like a costly luxury, especially given the direct costs such as meeting facilities, development of surveys, and so on. However, an informed and active citizenry has value in and of itself, which many local governments consider to be a justification for the cost of engagement. And the long-run cost savings more than outweigh the direct costs.

Consider a conventional development and / or planning process, in which a developer or local government spends significant time and money to draft a development proposal or community plan. More often than not, citizens are asked to review these proposals or plans at a public hearing, where the now well-developed idea appears to be a “fait accompli.” As a result, the community sees the plan as something imposed on them from afar for the benefit of others, rather than something that builds on the strengths of the existing community. Citizens are often forced to become antagonistic, and the developer becomes subject to revised plans, costly changes, and various delays.

By contrast, projects that have engaged and responded to citizen input from the start of planning often enjoy smooth - and less costly - public approval.² Citizen contributions are already reflected in the proposal, and a spirit of partnership prevails. As a result, many savvy developers will fund the costs of citizen engagement, recognizing both the savings and the strong proposal they will enjoy as a result.

2.3 Enabling Effective, Proactive Citizens

True smart growth embraces citizen engagement and facilitates a proactive approach to land use planning. The community is able to use their experience, skills and other resources to give shape or direction to projects and plans in an effective, positive way.

Local governments and developers are sometimes concerned that community involvement processes will be co-opted by “NIMBY” interests.³ In reality, effective engagement has several benefits that can overcome these perceived concerns.

First, community engagement generates a proactive smart growth vision, and ensures that projects take community concerns into account. As planning gains momentum and policy improves, proponents of smart growth projects and plans are identified and created.

Sharing accurate, appropriate and specific information is an integral part of an effective engagement process. Particularly for planning and development processes, methods such as visualizations tools (drawings, 3D models, etc.) should be used to create a shared and clear understanding. This enables citizens to provide constructive, informed input, which leads to a better outcome.

¹ See http://www.smartgrowth.bc.ca/index.cfm?Group_ID=3382 for examples

² For example, the developers of the Dockside Green project in Victoria, BC, received unanimous approval from City Council and a standing ovation from the public at their final approval; see http://www.docksidegreen.ca/dockside_green/news/index.php for more

³ The term NIMBY, or Not in My Backyard, was coined to describe citizens and groups that oppose any development in their neighbourhood.

Meanwhile, effective processes provide a collaborative environment. Citizens can proactively identify and oppose projects that truly would be detrimental to the smart growth future of their community.

2.4 Building Certainty and Trust

A community that embraces smart growth will have a vision in place for itself, based on the expertise and aspirations of an informed citizenry. Clear and well-defined smart growth visions, from the regional to the site-specific, provide certainty for the community, local government, and developers.

Developers and landowners like certainty – the assurance that they are investing in a place with a predictable development climate. If a community has a vision in place and a clear set of guidelines or rules, a developer will know what to expect and what to provide. This means that his or her development application will be more suitable the first time around, avoiding costly delays and revisions.

Local governments have the lead role in facilitating and enacting community visions; as such, they also benefit from defined smart growth plans. Drawing the community vision into planning provides a clear set of expectations about community amenities and character, and creates a firm foundation for negotiations with developers. Decisions can be made with the assurance that they will lead toward, rather than away from, a smart growth future. Further, elected officials and staff will also be able to gauge whether a development application will be acceptable to the electorate.

And citizens also benefit from certainty. When a smart growth vision is adopted and respected, citizens know that development decisions will be consistent with local goals and desires. Citizens can make investment and lifestyle decisions based on the certainty of a plan or policy.

Over the long term, successful engagement builds trust between the community, local government and developers. As successive developments come forward, the community will increasingly trust that the engagement will be done in an effective way. The certainty of good faith engagement improves the process each time, saving time and money in the long run.

2.5 Sharing Responsibility

Politicians, developers and landowners may be uncomfortable with the idea of sharing control or influence with citizens. However, a share of control corresponds to a share in responsibility. When citizens are involved in the creation of a vision or plan, they share the responsibility for its contents.

Further, community engagement is a two-way education process – local governments are responsible for keeping the overall vision for the community, and individuals are responsible for assisting their local government. Citizens who participate can learn about the broader community needs within which their own neighbourhood's needs fit and make informed choices that strengthen the well being of the whole community.

2.6 Motivating Action

When citizens have a meaningful role in planning decisions that affect them, they are able to support the outcomes and feel a sense of “ownership.” Given this support, local governments are more likely to act in accordance with the smart growth vision. Long after a developer leaves town or an elected official steps down, there will be a legacy of ongoing citizen participation and activism. Plans will no longer gather dust on a shelf, but will spur real action with broad support.

2.7 Creating Enthusiastic Participation

Often, citizen apathy is cited as a rationale for avoiding citizen engagement. Yet the very lack of meaningful opportunities and processes for citizen input contributes directly to such apathy. When citizens' voices are heard - by providing high quality engagement and respecting the input - citizens will be able to trust and value the process. Using excellent information, and being fully transparent about the ways that input will be used, will convince participants that the process is worthy of their time.

3.0 SMART GROWTH BC'S VISION FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Smart Growth BC envisions a future in which all communities foster meaningful and enduring opportunities for citizen participation in land use planning and decision-making, and in which citizens take advantage of those opportunities in an informed and constructive way.

4.0 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

There is no "one size fits all" approach to community engagement. The techniques - visioning, surveys, workshops, design charrettes, or innumerable other options - must be designed to fit the context and the project.⁴

However, common principles do underlie successful community engagement strategies. To put early and ongoing citizen engagement into practice, Smart Growth BC supports a number of actions by local and senior governments, developers, and citizens.

Local (including regional) governments should:

- take the lead role and responsibility for ensuring meaningful engagement occurs in land use planning process and projects
- create and act on an effective community engagement policy
- make and honour a real commitment to meaningful citizen input, including but not limited to processes to create a smart growth community vision
- evaluate current methods for engaging citizens to ensure they are effective, and strive to constantly improve these processes
- evaluate staff (for purposes of hiring, compensation, and promotion) on the effectiveness of the engagement they conduct
- dedicate funding to community engagement
- create open channels for continuous participation on a day-to-day basis (outside of statutorily-mandated public hearings)
- promote citizen education to help ensure that community members are well-informed, and provide accurate information
- utilize effective communication and visualization tools to engage citizens in meaningful dialogue
- be clear about the parameters of engagement and the ways that input will be used
- commit to using the outcomes from these ongoing processes as integral input to decision-making
- be accountable to the public on the ways the input was incorporated (or not) into the plan, process or project
- make development and planning decisions in accordance with policies founded on community input, including the following hierarchy:
 - a Regional Growth Strategy which guides the overall vision for the region

⁴ See http://www.smartgrowth.bc.ca/index.cfm?Group_ID=3382 for examples

- an Official Community Plan that is consistent with the goals of the RGS and guides the overall vision for the community
 - neighbourhood plans that fit within and further develop the OCP
 - development projects which are consistent with local neighbourhood plans
- ensure that developers work in a good faith partnership with the community
- support and assist with start-up funding of neighbourhood associations
- identify all the necessary stakeholders (including youth, ethnic populations, low-income families and others who may find it hard to participate in conventional processes) and design a process that will effectively engage everyone

Senior governments should:

- encourage community participation in all processes that impact on land use and development
- when providing funding to provincial and local governments, require meaningful citizen engagement as a condition for funding

Developers should:

- consider citizens as assets who have knowledge, perspective and ideas that can improve a project and approval process
- engage the community before beginning the planning or development process, and continue the engagement throughout the process
- commit to using the outcomes from these ongoing processes as integral input to decision-making

Citizens should:

- encourage local governments to value early and ongoing citizen engagement
- become informed about the planning process and key research on smart growth issues
- participate with an open mind, in proactive and constructive ways
- take a community-wide perspective on land use issues
- look for ways to ensure that fellow citizens can also get involved