



PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROGRAM

Introduction

Public input is one of the most important parts in the process of developing comprehensive plans. The goal of Cobb County is to ensure that the Comprehensive Plan reflects the full range of community values and desires. This is done by ensuring a diverse range of stakeholders and by establishing a variety of meeting types in an effort to gather public input. If staff is effective in receiving meaningful input from the community, we will be increasing our chances that the eventual plan is implemented because the public will have a vested interest in seeing the plan through to completion.

This section of the Comprehensive Plan will include three main areas that will layout the foundation of our public input strategy. First we will establish a diverse steering committee that will be made up of stakeholders from various elements of the community. These individual interests will be mentioned to highlight our efforts at having an inclusive process. The second topic area is a listing of the public participation techniques that will be utilized throughout this process. This includes the type of advertising and public input devices that will be used to interact with the community during the creation of the plan. Finally, this section will conclude with a schedule/timeline that will detail the specific actions that will complete the Community Agenda.



Stakeholders/Steering Committee

One of the avenues staff will utilize to generate a diversity of opinions from the public is to establish a Steering Committee. The purpose of the Steering Committee is to assist in the development of the plan document by having a number of people from different backgrounds and specialties working together to guide this process. The Steering Committee will be comprised of stakeholders, otherwise described as a variety of individuals from throughout the community including members of public, private, and non-profit sectors all of whom were active in the community.

The specific role of the Steering Committee will be to assist staff in identifying issues and opportunities, policies, and implementation items that would meet the needs of the different constituencies in the community. In addition, the Steering Committee will act as community liaisons to the community and various interest groups by keeping them informed about the process and distributing information about the contents of the plan document.

The Steering Committee will provide further insight to staff in an effort to gain an increased understanding about the opinions and positions of the various interest groups and neighborhoods throughout the county. The committee should also provide valuable information that we will use to supplement other forms of input gained from public meetings. The Steering Committee contains representatives from the following groups:

- Elected Officials
- Planning Commissioners
- Historic Preservation Commission
- Public Safety
- Cobb County Department of Transportation
- Cobb County Parks and Recreation



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- Cobb County Water Systems
 - Cobb County Community Development
 - City of Acworth
 - City of Kennesaw
 - City of Marietta
 - City of Smyrna
 - City of Powder Springs
 - City of Austell
 - Atlanta Regional Commission
 - East Cobb Civic Association
 - Cobb County Land Trust
 - People Looking After Neighborhoods (PLAN)
 - Northeast Cobb Homeowners Group
 - North Cobb Homeowners Group
 - Southwest Austell Neighbors (SWAN)
 - Mableton Improvement Coalition
 - Developers
 - Cobb County Chamber of Commerce
 - Canton Road Business Association
 - Town Center Community Improvement District
 - Cumberland Community Improvement District
 - Historic Mableton
 - Cobb County School System
 - Kennesaw State University
 - Chattahoochee Technical College
 - Southern Polytechnic University
 - South Cobb Development Authority
 - Cobb County Civic Coalition
 - General Contractor



Participation Techniques

In order to make the Public Participation Program successful, we must encourage citizens to become active in the planning process. The plan will better reflect the community's preferences if we are able to gather input from a wide range of stakeholders and with various interests. The intent is to interact with the community from the beginning of the process as a means to build public support and trust throughout the process. In general, there are three effective types of participation techniques that can be used: *public education*, *public input*, and *public interaction*.

Public Education

Public education is the process where training, instruction, and information is presented to the public as a means of expanding knowledge and understanding about the community. This is important because Cobb County is in the process of planning for a diverse community with various needs. There are over 600,000 people in Cobb County and not every person agrees how their own community should develop in the future. The process of education can therefore help to bring the community together in the process of creating a shared and common vision, especially when combined with the other participation techniques. To accomplish this, we have identified a variety of techniques that promote interaction and dialogue between all individuals and entities involved in the comprehensive planning process. Everyone from citizens to elected officials to planning professionals will play a role in the implementation of the participation techniques described below:

Branding

County Staff will work with the stakeholder-comprised Comprehensive Planning Steering Committee to develop a branding campaign aimed at promoting comprehensive planning-related events to the general public. The Steering Committee consists of individuals with a variety of professional backgrounds, including marketing and advertising. Considering our financial resources are limited, Cobb County will strive



to devise only the most-cost effective measures necessary to accomplish our goals and objectives.

Media Blitz

The following participation techniques describe the various media options we will use to implement the aforementioned branding campaign:

Kick-off/Public Information Meetings

A public information meeting will be held to notify the public about the process of amending the Comprehensive Plan. This meeting will contain general information about the Comprehensive Plan including: general overview of the comprehensive planning process, information about upcoming meetings, sign-up sheets and an opportunity for local level feedback based upon some initial surveying that will take place. The sign-in sheets will be used to keep people informed about upcoming events pertaining to the planning process.

Kiosks/Public Displays

To make the Public Participation Program the most successful, Cobb County needs to make the program more 'visible'. This means taking advantage of locations where people 'pass through' or congregate on a regular basis, such as a library, courthouse, or some other government building (such as the Cobb Government Service Annexes located throughout the County). Upon identifying such locations, we will set up kiosks consisting of photos, maps and printed information related to the planning process (i.e.: times and locations for upcoming meetings and/or events related to the planning process). The idea is to place the kiosks in prominent, highly-visible locations, designed to draw people to them through the utilization of photos and mapping technology.

Newspaper/Publication Advertisements

Newspaper advertisements are among the most common forms of announcing meetings and special events to the public. Despite the advent of the Internet as a means of



distributing and obtaining information, as well as increasing use of television advertising, newspaper ads continue to be popular due to their relatively inexpensive cost. Also, many newspapers are available via the Internet, which greatly broadens the scope of people they reach.

Television

Cobb County is fortunate to have a County-run public access channel, TV23. This station provides live broadcasts, preprogrammed material, and web feeds to people that live within the jurisdictional limits of Cobb County. The comprehensive planning efforts will attempt to utilize this type of media to educate the public about the comprehensive planning process and advertise upcoming public meetings. This will provide another vehicle to promote the process and increase public involvement. It is anticipated that this medium will be used throughout the entire planning process.

Public Input

Public input is the process of receiving contributions from the community within the process of forming the comprehensive plan. The observations from the public will help in the comprehensive plan decision making process. Public input can be gathered from numerous sources including meetings, hearings, surveys, and stakeholder committees. The following is a listing of techniques we will utilize to gather public input:

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a technique used to allow for the free flow of ideas. This will be used primarily with the Steering Committee as Cobb County identifies issues and action items. The brainstorming technique can be used as a methodology for mitigating conflicts and facilitating decision making/consensus building. Brainstorming techniques may also be included as part of the community charettes.



Internet/Websites

Use of the Internet will provide the plan development process with a mechanism to communicate and interact directly with a diverse segment of the community. This would include updating the public about upcoming meetings, distribution of surveys and questionnaires, and it will provide a format for direct communication through message boards. An internet website would facilitate the collection of surveys while allowing for easier assessment of the data due to its digital format (note: surveys and questionnaires will also be available in ‘hard copy’ format). Cobb County would also like to create an on-line message board that citizens could subscribe to and utilize as a ‘think tank’ to help generate new ideas that would be beneficial to the planning process. This would also be one of our strongest resources for distributing information on public meetings and other events relative to the comprehensive planning process.

Opinion Polls/Surveys

One common, effective tool used to gather public opinion is the use of surveys. Surveys can be distributed in a variety of ways, enabling them to reach a variety of people, based on geographic location or other socioeconomic/demographic criteria. A major portion of the Public Participation Program is focused on gathering information from the public using such surveys. While there likely will be traditional ‘text’ surveys incorporated into the process, Cobb County intends to heavily utilize digital, web-based surveys in an effort to reach a larger segment of the community.

One difficulty in using surveys is making sure they are accessible to a variety of people. Work schedules, language barriers, lack of in-home telephone service and inaccurate addresses to consistently receive mail are just a few of the obstacles faced when administering surveys. Due to this, Cobb County intends to concentrate surveying efforts using the web-based platform and surveys at the various public meetings/workshops that will be used throughout the process.



Visual Preference Surveys

One specific type of survey that should be mentioned as its own participation technique is the visual preference survey (VPS). A VPS uses images of various development styles, urban design, or other visual depictions of various land use developments in an effort to gain an understanding about what the community wants from in their built environment. The VPS images help those being surveyed visualize the shape, form and scale of development they would like to see in their communities. A majority of the images used in the VPS should be gathered from within the community or neighboring areas where community members can identify the use or uses in question. This helps to assure the public that these development types are common in the area.

Public Interaction

Public interaction is the use of techniques that allows for the active communication and interface with the public in a way that will influence decision making. Public interaction is really the space where public education and public input combine within a single event in an effort to gain information on community desires. Public interaction involves the use of the following techniques:

Public Workshops

Public workshops are a type of public meeting where exhibits and presentations are provided to those in attendance. General discussion of the presented topics will take place between the community and staff in order to explain issues and well as obtain feedback about the information presented. This type of meeting will be conducive to generating small group discussions with the community. Surveys and opinion polls will be used to gather additional information from the participants at these meetings.



Public Meetings

Public meetings will serve as a type of participation technique that will be incorporated to meet the legislative requirements of mandated state minimum planning standards. In these cases, the Comprehensive Plan will be discussed as part of a regularly scheduled monthly session with the Board of Commissioners. These meetings allow for public discussion, but are not generally conducive to quality public interaction. This type of meeting will only be used in instances where the draft document and final document are in preparation for submittal to the regional and state bodies for review.

Charettes

Charettes are an important vehicle that can be used to directly involve the public in the comprehensive planning process. This is an interactive meeting where information is provided, questions/answers are discussed, and finally the participants are broken-up into smaller working groups in an effort to tackle a particular issue or opportunity. The Charette process will be used by Cobb County in our efforts to locate “Character Areas” throughout the jurisdiction. This will allow the public to have direct involvement in the vision for the future of their local areas. The Charette meetings will be held toward the beginning of the public involvement process in an effort to ensure that the public has a direct voice in the foundation of the comprehensive plan.



Community Agenda Schedule

The Community Agenda schedule is the county planning staff's intention for incorporating public input into the comprehensive planning process. The items listed below are the order and the process that will be followed, although the exact dates and times are subject to change.

As noted in the chart, the public education efforts and website will be used throughout the planning process. Brainstorming will occur prior to each public meeting with the Steering Committee to ensure that we are displaying and presenting appropriate information. The kick-off meeting will be the opening meeting where we will inform the public about the process, generate some preliminary surveys about issues facing the community, and administer the first visual preference survey (VPS). The second public meeting will be the Charette, which will include discussions about the Character Areas and another VPS in an effort to educate the community while gathering the necessary input to understand the community's desires. The workshop will include discussions and surveys concerning the goals and implementation items that will be included in the Comprehensive Plan update. The final series of public meetings will be the Planning Commission and the Board of Commissioners meetings that are required by local and state statutes in order to introduce the new document to the appointed and elected officials in movement towards eventual approval of the final document.

