

Chapter 3

Public Participation in the Planning Process

The public brought a wide range of issues to the attention of the Planning Team throughout the planning process. Public participation in the planning process afforded the Planning Team an opportunity to consult with the real experts of the community while tapping into their daily experiences of living and working in Madison County.

This chapter presents and describes the public participation tools used as part of the planning process. The “Existing Conditions and Trends” for each focus topic presented in the forthcoming Community Profile Chapter (4) reflects the findings and information gathered through using these tools.

Introductory Workshops

During December 1997, the Madison County Extension Office, with support from the Madison County Farm Bureau, Madison County Planning Commission, and the Madison County Soil and Water Conservation District, conducted three educational workshops. These sessions were designed to enable Madison County citizens to:

- Gain an understanding of the comprehensive planning process.
- Learn the difference between planning and zoning.
- Gain an understanding of property rights.
- Learn their role in planning land use for Madison County.

Community Needs Survey

From the outset of the planning process, the Planning Team set out to assess community needs, quality of life, and the perceptions of existing services and facilities. A ‘Community Needs Survey’ was created and hand-delivered to 15,200 households in the unincorporated areas of Madison County.

The first half of the survey (15 questions) asked respondents to rate their levels of satisfaction with community services from 1 (‘highly satisfied’) to 5 (‘highly dissatisfied’). General agreements or disagreements were then grouped according to whether they became Clear Strengths, Strengths, Clear Weaknesses, Weaknesses, or a Moderate/Balanced response. The remainder of the survey (15 questions) was directed at gathering general attitudes and opinions on topics such as how and where future development should occur, the type of housing most needed, and the best use of available land. Survey topics and collected data were used during the first series of public workshops and focus group meetings to validate the data and generate discussion.

Selected comments from the public include:

“We need more recreation for our children and teens so they do not have to leave town for entertainment.”

“Planning is poor in the areas south of I-69. We need to slow down growth.”

“We need an environmental clean-up tax to be charged to businesses so we can have the means to clean up polluted environments when a business leaves.”

Visual Preference Survey™

The Visual Preference Survey™, a public participation technique developed by A. Neessen Associates Inc., provided an innovative alternative for gathering public opinions and perceptions. Based on the response to the question “Would you like to see this in your community?” participants ranked images of various development scenarios according to a numeric scale. The Planning Team then used the results to determine acceptable development scenarios for landscape character, streetscapes, and residential development.

Conservatively developed agricultural landscapes, such as those that existed presently in the rural areas in the County, were consistently rated highest. Medium-density, clustered residential developments were favored over low-density sprawling roadside developments. Commercial nodes located at intersections were preferred to typical roadside strip development. Small-lot subdivisions with common open space that preserve farmland were preferred to those without open space. The Visual Preference Survey was administered at the Madison County 4-H Fair for six consecutive nights, and again at a series of public workshops held throughout the County.

“Industry should be limited to specific areas and incentives should be given for the rehabilitation of vacant buildings.”

4-H Fair Outreach

The Madison County 4-H Fair, held in mid-July 1999 in Alexandria, served as another means of informing county citizens on the progress and benefits of the comprehensive planning process. The Planning Team designed and staffed a booth containing presentation panels that displayed the land use and demographic data collected. In addition, the presence of the team provided citizens with the opportunity to participate in the Community Needs and Visual Preference Surveys.

“I would like to see more conservation of land for wetlands and wildlife.”

Meeting with the public at the Fair provided an opportunity for the first informal meeting of the citizens and, consequently, encouraged the community to participate in the planning process over the next ten months. Staff personally invited visitors to upcoming workshops, enabled community input through surveys, and most importantly, listened to the community members’ growing concerns over growth and their goals for the future.

Focus Group Meetings

Focus Groups were assembled, consisting of community leaders with expertise in agriculture, natural resources, housing, economic development, community services, public safety, and transportation. Special sessions and presentations with concerned public interest groups such as the Madison County Development Task Force, the Lions Club, and local realtors were included in these meetings. Meetings were used to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of existing services and facilities. These sessions also provided an opportunity to discuss strategies for more effective and efficient land development while meeting the needs of current and future County residents.

“Set aside more land for greenways and wildlife habitats.”

Public Workshops

Public Workshop Forums were held in five different locations throughout the County, allowing for the greatest number of people to participate. Meetings took place at the Alexandria Community Center, Anderson Public Library, Elwood Huntington Bank, Lapel Public Library, and Pendleton Public Library. Typical workshops ran for two hours, but in many cases, the dialogue between the Planning Team and interested members of the public continued well after the meetings had officially ended. The citizens of Madison County were notified of the meeting times and locations through a variety of media. The Planning Team distributed flyers during the 4-H Fair outreach and at the public workshops to inform the public of the upcoming meetings. Prior to each meeting, local papers and radio stations published and broadcast the meeting schedules, the content of previous meetings, and the previous community feedback.

Workshop 1: ‘Identifying Community Issues.’ The Planning Team held brainstorming sessions with participants to elaborate on the ideas and issues expressed by respondents in the Community Needs Survey. These sessions gave the planning team an opportunity to present the planning process and the community profile, and the overall expectations in terms of public participation, the content of the planning document, and the eventual implementation of plan ideas. (Held first week of August 1998; 72 citizens participating)

Workshop 2: ‘Defining Goals and Objectives.’ This workshop featured interactive sessions consisting of brief presentations of the information collected by the Planning Team. Discussion followed, focusing on modifying several community issues in order to form goals and policy statements, as well as a listing of strategies and actions required to reach those goals. (Held last week of August 1998; 58 citizens participating)

Workshop 3: ‘Developing A Land Use Concept Map.’ This workshop featured interactive sessions that encouraged participants to assist the Planning Team in creating a series of maps illustrating the location of development in Madison County. Participants identified areas where development should or should not occur, and areas that needed to be protected from development. The intent of the exercise was to design a concept land use map that complemented the issues and policies discussed, and formed a basis for the proposed land use map. This series of workshops brought the Planning Team closer to the public and fostered a considerable amount of discussion between all those that attended the meetings. Although a consensus was reached on most development strategies, these workshops were also exercises in compromise, urging participants to consider the common good when making decisions. Maps from the five different locations were then consolidated and community comments were summarized. (Held last week of September 1998; 82 citizens participating).

“We need better shopping opportunities and more ways to get there ... foot trails and bicycle paths. Let’s not rely on the automobile so much.”

“We need major companies to come to Madison County to create a better job market.”

“Keep it farmland. No new business.”

Workshop 4: ‘Redefining Goals and Objectives and Presenting the Compiled Land Use Concept Map.’ These presentation sessions were held in two parts. First, the refined goals and objectives were presented, along with the associated planning tools to accomplish the task. Those participating were able to reach a consensus on most of the strategies and tools presented. It was also decided at these meetings that additional information was necessary; therefore, an educational seminar was proposed for a later date. Finally, the Concept Land Use Map (**Map E-1-22**), based on the maps created at the previous series of meetings, was presented and discussed. Since there was very little opposition at these meetings, it was also determined that the concept map was ready to become the proposed land use map, with only minor changes made. (Held last week of November/first week of December 1998; 86 citizens participating)

“We do not like to see farmlands and woodlots developed into residences and then listen to the city-folk complain that all the wildlife is gone.”

Educational Seminars

An educational seminar was held on February 24, 1999. Lending an outside perspective, the Madison County Extension Office sponsored this seminar to provide Madison County leadership, citizens, and the Planning Team an opportunity to initiate detailed discussions of agricultural land preservation methods. The meeting also served to convey the most recent recommendations of the Governor’s Task Force for Agricultural Land Preservation. A total of forty-three people participated, and most had been active participants in the planning process.

Four additional seminars, relating to the Natural Resources component, were held in June 1999. Speakers and participants discussed topics such as sewage disposal, water quality, wellhead protection, erosion control, drainage, and flood plain management. Approximately 20 to 45 persons attended each seminar. It is anticipated that a series of similar seminars will continue beyond the adoption of this plan as a means of carrying out the education and communications recommendations embodied in this planning process.

“Is just anybody allowed to develop a subdivision? It sure seems like it with all these poorly-planned new subdivisions that often destroy agricultural land.”

Follow-Up Sessions

Municipal follow-up sessions occurred during March and April 1999. The Planning Team met with representatives from each incorporated area, including elected officials and the utilities staff. A meeting was also held with the Fall Creek Regional Waste District. The purpose of the meetings was to determine the local development policies and capabilities in regards to supporting additional urban growth surrounding them. As a result, urban service boundaries for municipalities were drawn and were integrated into the Land Use and Growth Management Plan (Section E).

Additional sessions were planned after the adoption of the Profiles (Section A) and Policies (Section B) to further discuss and revise Implementation Strategies (Section C), Land Use and Growth Management Plan (Section E), and Transportation Plan (Section D).