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1-25-14
submitted by Don
Buch

City of Alexandria, Virginia
City Council Meeting of Saturday, January 25, 2014

Docket Item #6: Public Hearing and Adoption of a Resolution
To Establish the Civic Engagement Principles and Handbook as City Policy.

Comments of Donald N. Buch, Livermore Lane, Alexandria

(Note: The italicized comments were not part of my verbal comments, given limited time.)

While I acknowledge the work that went into the handbook, it appears to me to have focused on the wrong issue. We don't need a tutorial on mechanics; there are plenty of existing books about basic project management. There is nothing about our version that makes it unique to Alexandria or relates it to our specific challenges. That said, I do acknowledge that the nine Principles of Civic Engagement might well be a helpful continuing reference.

I would suggest that our primary concern should be the tenor of how we interact and respect, or don't respect, one another. Our challenges are attitudinal, not mechanical. This is a project for the psychology department, not the engineering department.

(One might have hoped that we would all learn from the Beauregard Small Area Plan experience. That began with the City's consultants from Baltimore paying regular visits to the West End to explain what they were going to do and how much we were going to like it. After we obtained in excess of 350 signatures expressing resident concern about our lack of active involvement, that process changed dramatically – to Planning & Zoning's credit. But what did we learn from that?)

It is noteworthy that, despite the topic (civic engagement), we have a project designed by the City with minimal community involvement. As I recall, the 10-member steering committee was comprised all but exclusively of City staff. They defined the task, then selected the consultants without community involvement and then told the community when and where to turn up. As for the suggestion that there was some groundswell of community interest in and support for this process, I'm told attendance at the four scheduled meetings declined from 165 at the first meeting to 60 at the fourth and last meeting.

But let me return to what I would suggest is the core issue: to the extent we do have civic engagement it is far too frequently not civil engagement; people go away feeling annoyed and irritated and as though their views are not respected or honestly considered, if heard at all. Just reflect upon many of the issues that have come up over the last several months: lights on the tennis courts, bike lanes, the Carr hotel project, the proposed sports complex at Hensley Park, the revised TMP plans, eminent domain, to name a few. I don't think many of us can take much pride in the manner of "civic engagement" that occurred around any of those. Yet we spent 16 months and \$100,000 (excluding staff time which I gather is not tracked), developing a glossy book that fails to address these very real challenges. Have we learned anything about communicating better or about changing attitudes and approaches and the tenor of our discussions? I think not.

(It feels as though the City bought a \$75,000 template and then tried to fit our challenges into a pre-set framework. The work product is generic – there is little, if anything, specific to Alexandria. Concepts such as "transparency", "mutual accountability", "early involvement", "inclusiveness and equity" sound appealing but what tangible, specific actions are we taking to actually implement change?)

I believe the catalyst for this effort was continuing concern about the planning process in our City. Yet I look at the Eisenhower West Small Area Plan which you approved last May. Eight months later we still have no steering committee. However, City staff have apparently gone forward and prepared RFPs for the traffic study and for the primary planning consultant with no community involvement whatsoever.



I believe we have an urgent need to clarify who does what through the planning process and where and how the community plays a role. At present it seems that every step and decision in the process is open to revision – sometimes major revision – by each successive player in the SUP or DSUP process.

(Is it really the Planning Commission's role to dictate how many rooms Carr may fit in its building and to insist Carr make their financial projections publicly available? Is it really Council's role to suggest a developer [800 Slater's Lane] remove the 5th floor of his project, or add an additional vehicle entrance to the property, or perhaps change the color of the bricks he was intending to use? We all have a right to know and clearly understand when, how and by whom planning decisions should get made and exactly where the community fits in.)

Finally...as this process continues, I would plead with you to keep it simple. While I look forward to imminent, meaningful change in our attitudes I am extremely concerned about the extent of the bureaucracy it appears the City would like to build around this topic. If our initial 2015 budget discussions are any indication we have neither the funds nor staff time to make of this more than it needs to be.



The Nine Principles of Civic Engagement

Respect

Inclusiveness and equity

Early involvement

Easy participation

Meaningful engagement

Mutual accountability

Transparency

Sustained collaboration

Evaluation

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submitted by
Michael Hobbs

Statement of Michael E. Hobbs
for the City Council
January 25, 2014

Docket #6 – Civic Engagement

Thank you, Mayor Euille and members of the Council. I am Michael Hobbs, residing at 419 Cameron Street.

You heard a great deal of discussion this morning about process, particularly in regard to the King Street Bike Lanes proposal. Who decides? Who decides “who decides”? What process does the decision maker employ to gather the facts necessary to support a sound decision, and the opinions of advocates and opponents necessary to inform a sound public policy? If a party is aggrieved by the initial decision, what recourse do they have, what avenue for appeal?

The process to date on the bike lanes issue has not been pleasant for those involved in it. One can’t help being amused, perhaps, by the observation that those who agreed with the Director’s announced decision described the process as “exemplary”; those who disagreed found it much less so.

It is a truism to suggest that “you can’t please everyone.” But that does not mean you should not even try.

To reach a policy conclusion that is sound, effective, well understood and broadly supported, it is absolutely necessary that the process that leads to that conclusion be fair, open, objective and honest. Your goal—your standard of measurement—ought perhaps to be that at the end of the day, all parties who were involved can honestly say, “I may have agreed or disagreed with the result, but regardless of that, I believe that my opinion was honestly heard, genuinely respected, and thoughtfully considered. I regret the result, but I respect the process.”

If such public respect for the integrity of the process is lacking, then the policy result, no matter its intrinsic merit, will not rest on a solid foundation of public understanding and respect for the result.

A sound public process, however, is necessary, but not alone sufficient, to such a result. The lawyers talk about “procedural” and “substantive” due process. If your process seems impeccable on its face, but if it seems in fact or in appearance that you reached a foregone conclusion—that you had already decided, essentially, where you were going to come out, before the “public process” even began—that may be the worst result. It may then seem to many that your “public process” was a charade—window dressing, that in effect awarded those members of the public who participated in that process no respect at all.

In that respect, I believe that your proposed “civic engagement” policy and handbook are a useful first step—useful and perhaps necessary, but not alone sufficient, to assure the degree of

public confidence in and respect for the City's public policy decisions to which we should all aspire.

Four years ago, the Federation of Civic Associations urged that "the guiding principle governing public participation in Alexandria should be that

It shall be the policy of the City of Alexandria that significant public policies will be adopted, and significant governmental actions taken, only after (1) the nature of the proposed policy or action has been fully disclosed, (2) the public has had full and fair opportunity to learn of the proposed action, and to comment on it, and (3) the decision-making body has had sufficient opportunity fairly to consider and reflect on such comment, before acting.

The draft resolution stating the City's policy that you are considering today goes well beyond that statement, but includes very similar language on what I believe to be that central point.

I urge you to adopt this statement of policy—not simply as an easy expression in favor of apple pie and motherhood, but as a solemn declaration that Council recognizes and intends that all agencies of our city government, starting with the Council itself, will be bound by and accountable for the effective implementation of that policy.

Thank you for your consideration.

6
1-25-14

submitted by
Poul Hertel

Regarding; What's Next Alexandria

To; The Mayor and Members of the Alexandria City Council

Cc; Jackie Henderson, City Clerk

Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

I would very much appreciate your consideration to include the following language, either as overarching element or as part of the transparency chapter.

"The public process can be a forum for rational discussion and debate. Therefore, information, which is generally assumed to be data that is of potential value in decision-making, must be treated with the utmost of respect. Papers, documents and testimony presented to the City will sometimes cause an internal City review. In such cases, the review and or critique must be shared with the people or group that triggered the review. This will help to invigorate the public sphere by setting in motion a critical process of public communication through the very organizations that mediate it."

Thank you for your consideration

Sincerely

Poul Hertel

PS Data is hereby defined as Factual information, especially information organized for analysis or used to reason or make decisions.

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1-25-14

Gloria Sitton

From: Jackie Henderson
Sent: Friday, January 24, 2014 3:54 PM
To: Jerome Fletcher; Rashad Young; Tom Gates; James Banks; Gloria Sitton
Subject: FW: Whats next Alexandria

From: Poul Hertel [<mailto:poulh@erols.com>]
Sent: Friday, January 24, 2014 3:53 PM
To: William Euille; Paul Smedberg; Del Pepper; delpepper@aol.com; John Chapman; Allison Silberberg; Justin Wilson; Timothy Lovain
Cc: Jackie Henderson
Subject: Whats next Alexandria

Regarding; What's Next Alexandria

To; The Mayor and Members of the Alexandria City Council

Cc; Jackie Henderson, City Clerk

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Poul Hertel

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