

3.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Chapter 3

Community Engagement

Introduction

The preparation of the Master Plan for the Charlottesville Redevelopment and Housing Authority has been a transparent process, crafted with significant resident and community involvement. That involvement has extended from its inception and throughout the planning process to its conclusion. Resident and community involvement has occurred in a number of different locations and formats, to ensure the widest possible engagement in the process. Specific exercises to engage youth were also developed and included, to ensure their participation.

All resident and community meetings involved extensive dialogue between the consultant team, the residents and other community participants.

The process of public engagement

The process for preparation of the Master Plan involved four phases of work:

- Phase I: Documentation of Existing Conditions
- Phase II: Community Visioning
- Phase III: Alternative Scenarios
- Phase IV: Master Plan



Residents and Community stakeholders attend the "Introduction to Planning and Design" meeting at Mt.Zion Church.

Each phase of work included one or more opportunities for resident and community participants to review products, and provide input to the process. Engagement activities in Phase I included a presentation and discussion entitled "Introduction to Planning and Design". The purpose of this session, which was held the evening of May 14, 2009 was to describe the master planning process and time schedule, and define and illustrate the terms that would be used throughout the process. Key terminology such as "Rehabilitation" and "Redevelopment" were discussed and illustrated with case study examples. Residents were also given the opportunity to ask questions and provide comments. Many comments were received regarding problems experienced at the various sites. Transportation and pizza was provided for all participants, along with child care for young children.

The day after the *Introduction to Planning and Design* presentation members of the consultant team went to each CRHA site for a discussion with residents regarding problems, issues and needs at each property. The results of this effort were reported in the Phase 1 Working Paper issued June 5, 2009 (excerpts of which are included in Chapter One of this report).



Residents attending a visioning meeting at Westhaven on June 29th, 2009.

Engagement activities in Phase II: Community Visioning included two rounds of "visioning sessions," the first in June, and the second in July. The purpose of these interactive sessions was to begin to develop and visualize alternative ideas about what each site might look like in the future. At this stage of the process all ideas were welcomed to ensure that the broadest range of potential concepts could be developed. The vision sessions were conducted at each of the sites, with the exception of the June Riverside meeting (held at a local church hall due to the lack of indoor meeting space on-site).



Existing site were modeled in 3D over aerial photographs. Buff-colored blocks represent existing buildings. Painted blocks are new housing prototypes.



Resident and community stakeholder meeting at Michie Drive on July 24th, 2009.

All of the visioning sessions utilized a "kit of parts" that included a large scale site plan and wooden blocks, to give the residents a three-dimensional representation of the existing conditions on each CRHA housing site. The team also provided color-coded 3-dimensional "house blocks" that represented different housing typologies (single houses, duplexes, mansionettes, townhouses and stacked flats). Facilitated by design team members, residents then selected and moved building blocks on the site to illustrate alternative development plans. Plans varied in number of units, density and layout, and offered a way for participants to easily visualize the relationships that would result on the site. As alternative plans were developed in the vision sessions, residents were asked to comment on what they liked or did not like about the concepts. Comments were recorded on flip charts, and the alternative "vision" concepts were documented in photographs of the models. The consultant team built additional site models during the interim period between the two visioning rounds and brought those ideas back to the residents in the second visioning rounds in July to provoke further discussion. These discussions and model-building sessions engaged residents in place-making and served as a starting point for the shaping of a community vision.



Sixth St. SE Site model, showing 67 units and a street grid designed to align with neighboring streets in Belmont.



Westhaven site model, showing "tuck-under" buildings set into Hillside.



Westhaven site model looking west.



Notes from Youth meeting on June 30th, 2009.



CRHA Director of Redevelopment Amy Kilroy works with youth at the June 30th meeting.



Discussion about site density at youth meeting on July 24th, 2009.



Youth discuss their "good" and "bad" photographs at the July 27th meeting.



"Visual Preferences" break-out session on September 23rd, 2009.



"Site scenarios" break-out session on September 24th, 2009.



Alyn Pruett moderates a discussion of site scenarios at the September 24th open house.

The youth of CRHA's sites were engaged in two separate sessions during the Phase II Community Visioning phase. On Tuesday, June 30th, during the first round of community visioning sessions, the "Introduction to Planning and Design" presentation was restructured into a workshop format to engage the youth of the community in discussions about planning concepts. Issues of density and housing typology were discussed and youth used the housing typology blocks to build typical urban "blocks" with different housing densities. These density studies were then used to illustrate the benefits and drawbacks of different development patterns regarding issues of defensible space, private versus public space, parks and open space, and how to deal with cars versus pedestrians in the design of a place to live.

At the end of the June youth meeting, disposable cameras were given to youth with the assignment to go out into their community / site and take pictures of the good and bad things they observed. The cameras were later turned in and the film developed. During a second July meeting youths who had returned cameras discussed their photographs with the planning team. The results were both interesting and instructive to the planning process in that many photos focused on people as opposed to buildings, suggesting that the kids felt comfortable within their community of neighbors. Where photos were taken to show problems, they tended to focus on the play equipment as opposed to the housing, suggesting the importance of this design element to the overall sense of well-being at each site.

The outcome of the vision sessions was reviewed by the planning and design team and distilled into specific alternative plans for each site. The alternative plans were brought back to the residents and community participants in *Phase III: Alternative Scenarios*. In this Phase of work residents and members of the community were invited to two "open house" sessions to review the alternative concepts. The open house sessions occurred on September 23rd and 24th, 2009. The first session was held at The Carver Recreation Center, and the second at the Portico Church Event Center. Transportation was provided to and from CRHA sites for these sessions.

The open house sessions were set up as "break out" groups to address three "topics": **Site Plans, Unit Plans and Visual Preferences**. Unlike previous meetings in which each site was reviewed separately with residents of that site, in these sessions the site and unit plan alternatives for all sites were displayed together in their respective break-out group. The Visual Preference break-out group viewed photographs of different housing types, architectural styles and site amenities to elicit comments from residents regarding preferred building types and designs.

The break-out sessions were organized with breaks in the discussion at 20-minute intervals, which allowed participants to attend one, two or three of the break-out sessions and review and comment on site plan options, unit plan options and visual preferences if they so chose. Resident/community participant comments were recorded on flip charts.

At each of the break-out sessions, residents were given "stick-on" dots with one color representing a favorable response to an alternative (green on September 23rd and blue on September 24th), and another color representing an unfavorable response (red on September 23rd and yellow on September 24th). Residents were asked to place the dots according to their preferences. All of the "preference" drawings were photographed as part of the record of resident/community input. At the conclusion of the open house, a representative of each break-out group was invited to be the spokesperson and report the comments from their group to the rest of the participants.

Following completion of the open house sessions, staff of the CRHA conducted additional meetings with residents to offer another opportunity to receive input on the alternative concepts. Similar to the open house sessions, residents were asked to express their responses—either favorable or unfavorable, using stick-on dots. Resident comments were also recorded and photos taken of the "dot maps". These responses were combined with those of the preceding open house sessions.

In preparation for assembling the final plans for each site, the planning and design team reviewed the complete record of comments for each site—from the earliest responses on problems, issues and needs, to the most recent comments on specific alternative site plans to ensure that public input was verified and accounted for in the final plans.

Service provider and other agency engagement

In addition to resident and community input, the planning process included meetings to receive input from City Agencies, institutions and service providers who may become involved with, or be affected by, the CRHA Master Plan. Input sessions were held in May, at the outset of the process with the purpose of allowing the planning and design team to understand how the various agencies relate to, and interact with one another today, and how they may be able to participate in the implementation of the CRHA Master Plan. Follow-up sessions were conducted with representatives of the City Planning and Zoning staff, the Police Department and Charlottesville Public Schools, to review work in progress.

Service Providers, agencies and City Departments engaged through this process included:

- Charlottesville Department of Neighborhood Development (planning and zoning)
- Charlottesville Police Department
- City of Charlottesville Economic Development Department
- Charlottesville City Manager’s Office
- Charlottesville Fire Department
- Charlottesville Parks and Recreation Department
- Charlottesville Department of Social Services (DSS)
- Charlottesville Transit Service
- Charlottesville City Council Members
- Charlottesville Public Schools
- Charlottesville School Board
- Charlottesville Area Community Foundation
- Children Youth and Family Services
- Region Ten CSB
- Quality Community Council (QCC)
- Westhaven Nursing Clinic
- Charlottesville Community Design Center (CCDC)
- Public Housing Association of Residents (PHAR)
- Legal Aid Justice Center
- Charlottesville Housing Advisory Committee

- Fluvanna/Louisa Housing Authority
- Albemarle County Office of Housing
- Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission
- Piedmont Housing Alliance
- Jefferson Area Board for Aging
- Habitat for Humanity—Greater Charlottesville
- Habitat for Humanity of Virginia
- University of Virginia (office of the Architect)
- University Real Estate Foundation

There were many excellent comments received in the discussions with these groups.

Some of the important points taken away from these meetings include the following:

- A comprehensive plan for service provision at CRHA sites would help streamline efforts and avoid duplication.
- Provision of future community facilities at each site should take into consideration the needs of each community—a number of existing spaces are underutilized due to size limitations. On-site facilities are best.
- There is a need for programmed activities for teens.
- There is a need for after school programs—as the school drop-out rate is high.
- The time for development approvals needs to be considered in the master plan. “By-right” development approval can take 8 months to 1 year. A “Planned Unit Development” approval can take 24 months.
- Crime locations and types of crimes are well-known for CRHA properties. New site designs can/should avoid recreating these problems.
- Agencies will need to know the proposed phasing of CRHA renovation/redevelopment activities so they can plan appropriately. Schools in particular need to know the phasing for master plan implementation so they can plan for transportation and/or students shifting schools as a result of relocation.
- Housing – provider agencies should seek opportunities to partner. Agencies include: Habitat for Humanity, the Piedmont Housing Alliance, and the Fluvanna/Louisa Housing Authority.

- Mixed-age as well as mixed income communities are preferable to segregated senior-only developments. Seniors should be allowed the option to “age-in-place” in their neighborhoods, rather than relocate.
- The CRHA *Resident Bill of Rights* is the set of guiding principles for the master plan.
- Communication of the Master Plan and the renovation/redevelopment process and schedule will be critical to the success of the effort. There must be a good “communications plan”.

Summary of what we heard

During the preparation of the Master Plan the planning and design team heard, and took note of the many comments specific to each CRHA site. In addition to those, a group of issues, problems and needs was found to be fairly common to all sites and among all participants in the planning process. Perhaps first and foremost among these were the problems and issues with the existing housing units themselves. Since many if not all of the units share a common design, these are almost “universal” problems, and include:

- Small unit sizes, which do not have a ground floor half-bath, nor space for a clothes washer and dryer.
- Insufficient sound insulation between units
- Lack of central air conditioning
- Shortage of accessible units at each site (virtually all units are two-story, except those at Crescent Halls).
- Interior finishes and appliances that are “worn out”
- Residents of Crescent Halls generally would prefer bathtubs with shower seats to roll-in showers they have currently (specific to Crescent Halls)
- High maintenance back yard areas (too much grass)
- Architectural monotony—most of CRHA’s housing sites (with the exception of Crescent Halls and Westhaven) have a similar palette of exterior materials, and even a similar scale and housing typology. This serves to stigmatize and isolate public housing residents from the broader community.
- Perceived shortage of parking
- Site areas that due to low light and poor visibility from the street are locations where crime is a problem.

Perhaps second in importance to residents is the density of development. Many expressed a comfort level with existing site densities and types of housing. As alternative site plans were developed and reviewed, it became clear that residents generally were not as comfortable with higher density designs.

The location of site amenities—play fields, tot lots and community facilities—was an important factor to residents. Today at some sites those facilities are located at one end of the development and as a result may not be as well-utilized. They often seem to be disconnected from the housing site. Residents expressed a common feeling that the best and preferred location for those facilities is near the center of the site, where they will be easily accessible to all residents and highly visible for safety.

Residents at each of the sites were generally positive about the on-site sense of community with their immediate neighbors. However, there was an almost universal feeling that the public housing sites/communities were isolated from the broader community around them. In response many residents expressed the desire for greater physical connectivity to surrounding areas—whether they are linkages to shopping opportunities, recreational amenities, or nearby residential neighborhoods.

There was also expressed a common desire to have attractive, well maintained sites. At several sites residents have taken it upon themselves to create attractive gardens, which speak to a sense of pride of place and “ownership” of their community. However, at virtually every site the planning and design team heard negative comments about the location, appearance and maintenance around the dumpsters, which are today often placed in highly visible locations. A common feeling was that the dumpsters should be relocated and well screened with walls and/or plantings. Another alternative would be to eliminate dumpsters and shift to a scenario where residents have individual trash corrals at their units and are responsible for bringing their trash cans to the street on pick-up day. This scenario has worked well at other redeveloped public housing sites.

A common vision

While the final design for each site is unique, and reflective of its particular location and opportunities, the planning and design team developed, based on input from residents, community members, housing and service agencies, City staff, elected officials and CRHA staff and board members, a set of overarching principles that are embodied in the Master Plan.

These principles include:

Respect for the Resident Bill of Rights and the resident and other stakeholder input: The Resident Bill of Rights establishes a high bar for CRHA performance as the recommendations of the Master Plan are implemented. The preparation of the Master Plan has achieved a high level of communication throughout the process. That high level of communication and cooperation between CRHA staff and residents must continue as the Master Plan is implemented, in order to achieve the objectives set forth in the Bill of Rights.

Adherence to the CRHA goals to: become financially sustainable, develop mixed-income communities and expand the supply of affordable housing to the extent possible and appropriate within the framework of the other overarching principles.

Support for the City's long range planning goals and objectives: The CRHA Master Plan has been developed with an understanding of the City's planning and design goals, as reflected in: existing zoning, the Future Land use Plan, Neighborhood Plans, Corridor Plans, Open Space and Sustainability Plans. Most if not all of the sites have an opportunity(ies) to contribute to achieving the City's long-range vision for a compact, pedestrian-first, mixed-use, sustainable community. The Master Plan highlights these opportunities.

Adherence to sustainable community planning and design principles:

Traditional Neighborhood Design Principles, which include: a pedestrian-friendly street layout; houses that face streets or other public spaces; defensible space; and architecture which is compatible with the surrounding community, and expresses identity and sense of place, are built into the master plan recommendations for each site. The Master Plan also supports the City's intent to implement sustainable features in all new development, including: increasing tree canopy; implementing stormwater management “best practices” to reduce runoff and return as much storm water directly to the subsurface water system; developing a County-wide system of greenways and pedestrian connections; and incorporating sustainable design features in new construction.

Creating Connected Communities: The renovation and/or redevelopment of the CRHA sites cannot be, and have not been, viewed in isolation. A common purpose in the design of each site is to better connect, or where appropriate and necessary, reconnect the CRHA sites to the larger communities within which they exist. Connectivity elements incorporated in the site plans include new or reconfigured streets, pedestrian walkways, paths and trails, public transit, open space and recreational amenities.

Creating Mixed-Income Communities: Where possible and appropriate, the Master Plan includes the development of mixed-income communities as opposed to communities comprised solely of public housing residents. This is an important goal of the Housing Authority and HUD, oriented toward removing the isolation that results from economically segregated communities. As reflected in the Master Plan this means that there is no physical or design distinction between units occupied by public housing residents and those occupied by residents paying market rental rates.