

# Expanding Public Notice and Participation Opportunities: Carolina North as a Pilot Study for Chapel Hill

Neighbors for Responsible Growth  
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## INTRODUCTION

Neighbors for Responsible Growth (NRG) recently surveyed citizens in Chapel Hill interested in how the community can best be engaged during the Carolina North development process. The impetus for the survey and this report is a Chapel Hill Town Council resolution that mandates a plan for public notice and participation during the first three years of the Carolina North development. In sharing these findings with the Town, NRG hopes to constructively inform the development of the plan, and to promote broader discussion about how expanding opportunities for public involvement can strengthen Chapel Hill's governance process.

Significant findings of the survey show:

- An effective public participation plan must be multi-faceted in order to accommodate limitations on citizens' time.
- Citizens are interested in information sources that represent a broad range of perspectives.
- Individuals want feedback when they provide input on government issues.
- The community lacks understanding about how citizen advisory boards/committees work and how they represent the public.

## BACKGROUND

The Town and University sought public notice and participation throughout the planning process leading up to approval of the Carolina North Development Agreement. Citizen input was embodied early in the planning process through groups such as the Horace Williams Citizens Advisory Committee and the Leadership Advisory Committee.

Public participation matters because Town decisions benefit from citizen input, and because public participation strengthens our local democratic institutions. The need for continued citizen participation in the Carolina North planning process is underscored by the number of important decisions that will be made during the life of the Agreement.

Note that language calling for an inclusive, transparent, and consistent public notice and participation process for Carolina North is included in the Development Agreement (Sections 4.37,

5.8.12, 5.23.3, 5.27.5), but does not set forth specific strategies that should guide implementation of that process.

On June 22, 2009, the same day that the Chapel Hill Town Council approved the Carolina North Development Agreement, the Council also passed a resolution directing the Town Manager to develop a plan that will guide public notice and participation during the first three years of development.

The action clause for the resolution reads:

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Council of the Town of Chapel Hill that Town Manager shall submit to the Town Council a detailed plan for public notice and participation, utilizing existing advisory boards to consider the issues in the context of the entire Town, during development of the first 800,000 square feet of floor area at Carolina North and that said plan shall be provided to the Council no later than the first business meeting in January of 2010,

NRG is submitting the recommendations in this report for the Town Manager's consideration as he and Town staff develop the plan mandated by the resolution. In an effort to solicit public input that could be included in the recommendations, NRG conducted an online survey November 16-25, 2009. The survey was announced largely through neighborhood mailing lists, and 234 citizens from more than three dozen neighborhoods participated.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

During the final months of deliberations leading up to approval of Carolina North Development Agreement, NRG felt that citizens would have benefited from:

- More interaction between citizens and the citizen boards and advisory committees
- More interactive formats between citizens and Town representatives/staff
- More timely public notification about key events and documents

Some of the shortcomings of the process were aggravated by the condensed timeframe agreed to by the Town and University for approving a development agreement. However, these issues also highlighted some of the limitations of the public participation strategies adopted for the project.

#### WHY NOT PARTICIPATE?

Chapel Hill boasts a rich tradition of active citizen involvement in local government decisions. Its citizens care deeply about their community and have a vested interest in preserving the qualities that make it a special place to live. That said, public participation is a finite, and often fickle, resource. Citizens vary not only in their level of interest in local government, but also in the amount of time they have to devote to staying informed and participating. When asked what factors prevented them from being more involved in local government decisions (Table 1), limited time was by far the most frequently cited.

**Table 1 - Factors identified as limiting more active citizen involvement in local government.**

Limitations on my time	73%
Lack of timely information about key events and decisions	32%
I don't know enough about how the process works.	30%
I don't believe my input will make much difference.	28%
I assume someone else is following the issues on my behalf.	19%
It's just not that important to me.	2%
Other	10%

Source: NRG survey (November 2009)

Decisions about how to effectively engage the public around important local issues should be made with these factors in mind.

#### A FRAMEWORK FOR PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

As a framework for considering new tools and strategies that might be adopted to promote active citizen involvement during the Carolina North build-out, this report considers public involvement as three parts: (1) notification, (2) input, and (3) feedback on input.

##### 1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT: Notification

During the Carolina North build-out, citizens will benefit from timely notification about important events, documents and opportunities for public input. Examples include traffic study results, construction site plans for each new building, and proposals for vehicular and pedestrian facilities improvements. The results of NRG survey questions on preferred methods for staying informed (Table 2) reinforce the conventional wisdom that no single outreach strategy can be relied on too heavily.

**Table 2 - Preferred methods for staying informed about CN: Percentage that indicated *likely* to use**

A Town-sponsored electronic mailing list established especially for Carolina North updates	82%
Your neighborhood mailing list	71%
Local newspapers	69%
Email or website updates provided by a grassroots group like Neighbors for Responsible Growth	68%
Written notice/post card from the Town	64%
A Carolina North website that includes citizen comments on issues important to you.	56%
Word of mouth	42%
The Town's general electronic news bulletin (Chapel Hill eNews)	41%
The Town's website on Carolina North	37%
Meetings televised on local cable, or recordings of those broadcasts made available through the Town website	21%
Facebook site dedicated to Carolina North news	18%
Twitter feed dedicated to Carolina North news	5%

Source: NRG survey (November 2009)

Most citizens are inundated with information, and look to a variety of strategies for helping them filter information effectively. One method is the use of news sources that allow citizens to sign up for information only on topics in which they are interested. The strong preference shown by survey

respondents for a mailing list established especially for Carolina North news (82%) may reflect an interest further limiting their news exposure. Fortunately, the Town’s new website supports improved options for filtering email for specific topics such as Carolina North.

Another tool that citizens depend on to manage local information is their neighborhood mailing list (71%). These lists are active in many Chapel Hill communities. Most often, a volunteer in the neighborhood serves as a gatekeeper for information forwarded to the lists.

The value that citizens place on learning from other citizens is another theme that emerged in the survey results. More than half of the respondents indicated that they would be likely to use a website that includes the comments of other citizens (56%). In a separate question, nine out of ten respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they appreciated knowing how their neighbors and other citizens felt about issues important to them.

Written communications methods such as local newspapers (69%) and written Town notices (64%) also fared well among the survey respondents.

## 2. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT: Input

Town strategies for collecting public input have historically emphasized face-to-face formats such as public hearings and information meetings. Attendance at most public meetings during the Carolina North deliberations was sparse, even prompting some Council members to publicly express their concerns about the lack of public participation. The NRG survey results on options for public input (Table 3) suggest that the Town may be relying too exclusively on traditional formats such as public hearings.

**Table 3 - Methods for providing input on CN: Percentage of respondents that indicated *likely* to use**

Complete a brief online survey	89%
Send in written comments via email	86%
Post comments to a website where you can see the comments of other citizens as well	44%
Comment at a small house meeting held in or near your neighborhood	43%
Comment at a public hearing held at Town Hall during the evening	24%
Send in written comments via postal mail	21%
Leave comments via an automated phone message system	20%
Comment at a public hearing held at Town Hall during the day	10%

Source: NRG survey (November 2009)

Online surveys and email were identified as much preferred methods for sharing comments. Considering the stated constraints on citizens’ time to participate, this finding should come as no surprise. Online asynchronous tools make it possible for citizens to share their concerns around their own schedules and priorities.

The online survey approach already has a precedent in the planning process for Carolina North. In April of 2009, NRG worked with the Town Engineering Division to gather citizen input on traffic

conditions in neighborhoods in close proximity to the development or along primary corridors serving it. Over a two-week period, more than 600 citizens completed a brief web-based survey. That information was submitted to the Town staff without identifiers and used to inform subsequent traffic studies.

One variation on the face-to-face meeting that did garner significant support was the “house meeting” concept. Smaller meetings held in close proximity to residences offer citizens the chance to interact with neighbors and others who may share a common set of interests or concerns. NRG feels that the success of small meetings, like large ones, depends on providing an understandable framework for how citizens will be impacted and providing them assurance that public input will be heard.

### 3. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT: Feedback on public input

“Is anyone listening?” was a common theme of an NRG focus group conducted November 5, 2009 at the Chapel Hill Public Library. At a typical Chapel Hill public hearing each citizen who signs up to speak is given three minutes to comment, but there is no formal provision for feedback on the comments. While a structured public hearing is necessary to conduct the Town’s business in a timely and efficient manner, this format supports only limited interaction between citizens and their representatives. Nine out of ten citizens who completed the NRG survey indicated that they would like a response from the Town when they share their comments or concerns.

This issue has to do with more than simply the courtesy of acknowledging receipt of a citizen’s message; when timely feedback is provided while citizens are engaged, the Town has a true opportunity to improve public understanding about the complexity of local government decisions and to build community support for the process. Two-thirds of the citizens who completed the NRG survey said they wish they knew more about how local government works. Opportunities to promote greater public understanding can only be realized when mechanisms for true discourse are in place.

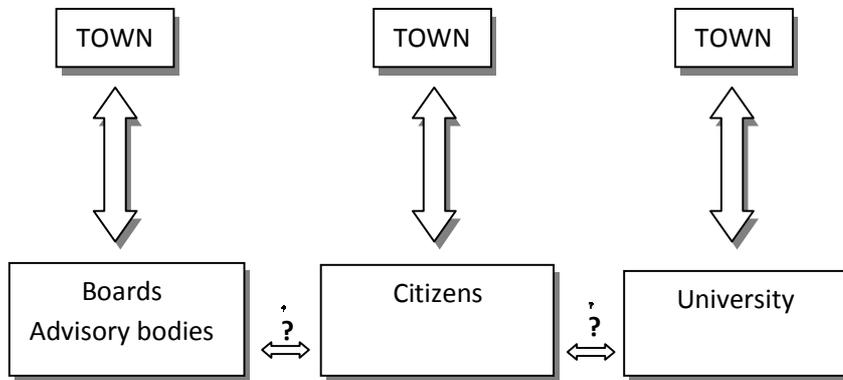
The formats used for public meetings matter. The Carolina North planning process would have benefited from more interactive formats such as question-and-answer sessions with key staff members. At one point during the Carolina North planning process, Town staff summarized citizen comments so they could be found and referred to in a written record, a useful way for all stakeholders to track public interest.

The campus-to-campus bike connection workshop sponsored recently by the Town and University has been successful in gathering citizen opinion about the possible location of the routes between Downtown and Carolina North. Next steps should include dissemination of meeting summaries, milestones, and a work plan that describes how citizens will be consulted in future decisions.

The level of interaction between the Town and citizens represents only one aspect of effective public engagement. Another aspect is the flow of information among key stakeholders. The

Carolina North planning process was largely one-to-one or one-to-many, with the Town serving as the central coordinating agency (Figure 1).

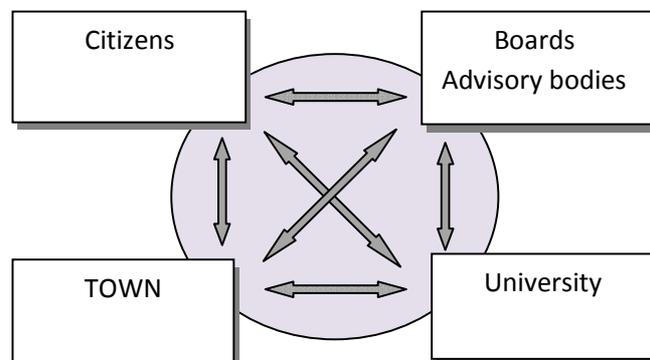
**Figure 1: Conventional interaction among Carolina North stakeholders**



Missing from the process have been substantive opportunities for interaction between stakeholders other than the Town. Communication between the public and citizen advisory boards and committees is one example. When asked if they had a good understanding about citizen advisory groups and their role on issues such as Carolina North, only one in three survey respondents agreed. As mentioned earlier, the survey results also show that citizens appreciate knowing how their neighbors and other citizens feel about issues important to them, yet there is no formal structure in place to facilitate interaction among citizens.

NRG feels that all the stakeholders would benefit from a communications model that supports a many-to-many flow of information (Figure 2). A platform that makes the communication process more transparent between all stakeholders takes pressure off any one party to provide all the answers and exposes everyone involved to a wider range of perspectives.

**Figure 2 – Many-to-many communications among Carolina North stakeholders**



Many-to-many communications is at the heart of interest in popular digital communications tools such as blogs, forums, wikis, and social networking sites such as Facebook. Most of these tools can

be implemented quickly and at very little cost, and can serve as an archive for public discourse for citizens entering the process at different points in time. NRG is not suggesting these new tools replace public hearings and other traditional communications strategies, but that they be considered as options for expanding and enriching public discourse.

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Town, the University, local advisory boards and committees, and citizens all have important roles to play in ensuring an effective public notice and participation process for Carolina North.

As mentioned earlier, citizen boards and advisory committees can be more effective advocates for the public by building on their outreach and engagement efforts, but they must be provided with the support and infrastructure necessary to succeed. NRG feels that citizen boards and advisory committees are currently underutilized as a formal mechanism for gathering and processing public input, and would like to see the Council re-task the Advisory Committees and expand their roles in these areas.

Grassroots advocacy organizations such as NRG, CURB, Justice United, and the Village Project can certainly help support the work of the Town and citizen boards and committees. However, NRG believes that over-reliance on volunteer citizens to foster public engagement leaves too much to chance.

Ultimate responsibility for effective public notice and participation rests with the Town. The Town Manager and staff, with guidance from the Council, must be willing to expand their toolset for empowering relevant boards and advisory committees and the citizens they serve.

## CHALLENGES

Implementing new communications strategies will require careful planning and a certain amount of risk-taking. As with any successful innovation, there must be a commitment to assessment and improvement until the goals of the initiative are met. The recommendations laid out in this report are broad. Successful implementation will require more detailed planning.

Issues for consideration, for example, include how to expand opportunities for constructive communication in ways that do not place unrealistic expectations on Town staff, boards and advisory committees, and citizens. In the event that electronic forums are adopted, the proper balance between effective moderation and censorship must be realized. For what kind of public input is anonymous public input acceptable? To what extent would comments in online forums be submitted into the public record?

## CAROLINA NORTH AS A TESTBED FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The Carolina North development has been championed by the Town and University as a model to be emulated by future development projects in Chapel Hill. The development will demonstrate the University’s commitments to sustainable energy and ecological preservation, for example. The Town should also use this landmark project as an opportunity to pilot new communications strategies that may ultimately serve our local democratic process across a wide range of local issues.

### WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE

For the purposes of discussion, NRG has adapted the quarterly schedule for Carolina North that is published on the Town’s website and included suggested communications strategies for each activity on the schedule (Table 4). The communications options included in this table represent only a few of many approaches available to the Town. Within the table, “CN web w/comments” refers to a Carolina North website that supports posted messages and comments (e.g., blogs, forums).

**Table 4 – Suggested communications strategies for selected Carolina North milestones**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Schedule</b>	<b>Communication options</b>
TIA update	4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter 2009	-Public information session -Summary of key findings posted to CN web w/comments
Campus-to-campus connector conversation begins	4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter 2009	- At least two public meetings Route identified in one year -NRG CBBC rep invited to join technical meetings -Summaries and key documents posted to CN web w/comments
Report to Council on public input process	1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter 2010	-CN web w/ comments -Public Q&A session w/staff
Short range transit plan begins	1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter 2010	-Summaries and key documents posted to CN web w/comments -Targeted mailings -Public Q&A session w/staff
Communication between relevant advisory boards and citizens	Ongoing	-Relevant summaries and documents posted to CN web w/ comments. -Boards monitor CN web

		w/comments
Citizen problem reports, questions	Ongoing	-Special email address -CN web mail forms -Designated phone number -CN web w/ comments
Site construction plans	Pending construction, ongoing	-Post to CN web w/comments -Public Q&A session w/ staff
University reports (carbon reduction, transit/greenways partnership, land uses, feasibility of cost sharing for rec areas)	3 <sup>rd</sup> Quarter 2010	-Post to CN web w/comments
Review of Annual Report	4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter 2010, 2011, 2012	-CN web w/ comments -Public Q&A session w/ Town and University staff
Periodic assessment of overall effectiveness of agreement	3 <sup>rd</sup> Quarter 2012	-Online public survey -House meetings in neighborhoods close to CN -Public hearings -CN web w/comments

## REFERENCES

Internet Tools for e-Democracy in Urban Planning (Goodspeed)

<http://goodspeedupdate.com/e-democracy-in-urban-planning>

How Web 2.0 Will Transform Local Government (Schrier)

<http://www.onlinecommunityconsultation.com/2008/12/how-web-20-will-transform-local.html>

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