

2009 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

# Public Participation & Neighborhood Planning

2009

## What is the Public Participation & Neighborhood Planning Element?

The 1997 General Assembly passed five pieces of legislation and budget initiatives known collectively as "Smart Growth." Maryland has adopted the principles of Smart Growth to be incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan. The following Smart Growth principle relates to the Public Participation & Neighborhood Planning Element

**Principle:** Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration

- To respond to a community's own sense of how and where it wants to grow
- To lead to creative and speedy resolution of development issues
- To build a greater community understanding of the importance of good planning and investment
- To involve the community early and often in the planning process in order to improve public support and create innovative strategies

### State Planning Visions found in this Element

**Public Participation** - Citizens are active partners in the planning and implementation of community initiatives and are sensitive to their responsibilities in achieving community goals

**Stewardship** - Government, business entities and residents are responsible for the creation of sustainable communities by collaborating to balance efficient growth with resource protection

## Community Vision for Public Participation

According to the 2008 Community Survey, residents would like the City administration to promote more public involvement in local decision-making. There is a feeling some residents who feel disconnected from what is "going on" in the City, and they would like to feel more included.

From upcoming City events to changes in City services, there is a constant flow of City news that residents may want to be made aware of but may be unable to find the information. The local newspaper and City brochures are residents' two main sources of information. While the Mayor and Council meetings could be a better source of information for residents, many are unaware they can attend the meetings.

The City website is another source of information that has been underutilized by residents. Many residents are unaware of the City website or do not own a computer. Those residents who had visited the website said that the City could improve it by making it more friendly and inviting as well as more updated, accurate, and relevant.

The desirability of effective communications with the public is another aspect of public participation. Residents want open doors of communication with City staff and City officials.



## Part 1: Purpose of Public Participation

## Chapter 2

Part 1: Purpose of Public Participation

Part 2: Engaging the Public

Part 3: Communication & Information

Part 4: Neighborhood Planning

Goals and Objectives

### Section 1: Introduction

Successful public participation results in higher quality decisions because it taps the energies, knowledge, special insights, and resources of residents in addition to reflecting their needs, values, and concerns. Public participation goes beyond public information. The purpose of public participation is to inform the public as well as to solicit input and responses on public needs, values, and evaluation of proposed actions.

The City of Westminster encourages citizen input through the broad dissemination of proposals and alternatives, public meetings after effective notice, opportunities for written comments, communication programs, information services, provisions for open discussion, and consideration of public comments. The City of Westminster works to achieve an interactive dialogue between local decision makers, its staff, County staff, and its residents.

### Section 2: Core Values for the Practice of Public Participation

The International Association of Public Participation has developed the "Core Values for Public Participation" for use in the development and implementation of public participation processes. The purpose of these core values is to help make better decisions which reflect the interests and concerns of potentially affected people and entities. The core values of public participation are as follows:

1. Ensure those who are affected by a decision are welcome in the decision-making process
2. Promote the public's contribution to influence sustainable decisions
3. Recognize the needs and interests of all participants, including the decision makers
4. Encourage the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision
5. Seek input from participants in designing how they participate
6. Provide participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way
7. Communicate to participants how their input affected the decision

## Section 3: Public Meetings

Westminster holds public meetings to allow for open discussion of relevant issues at hand and that public hearings allow for appropriate testimony. When public meetings or hearings are conducted, Westminster makes every effort to ensure participants have the opportunity to assist in planning efforts where their opinions are heard. All persons attending the meeting or hearing who desire to participate should be allowed to do so. However, specific circumstances, such as the meeting or hearing purposes, number in attendance, time considerations, or future opportunities to participate may require appropriate constraints be applied. These constraints are clearly outlined by the facilitator or chair if the need arises.

Public Meeting Actions:

- An agenda will be established that clearly defines the purpose of the public meeting or hearing, the items to be discussed, and any actions that may be taken.
- The scheduled date, time, and place will be convenient to encourage maximum participation by residents.
- A clearly identifiable facilitator or chair will conduct the meeting or hearing in an orderly fashion to ensure that all attendees have an opportunity to offer comments, discuss issues, or provide testimony.
- The facilitator or chair will provide opening remarks that clearly outline the purpose of the meeting or hearing, describe procedures attendees should use during the meeting or hearing when offering input, and describe how the public input will be used.
- As appropriate, an overview of documents or proposals to be considered will be discussed.

## Part 2: Engaging the Public

### Section 1: Boards, Commissions & Committees

Citizens of Westminster provide valuable leadership to the City through participation on Boards, Commissions and Committees. Members participate in advisory, regulatory, governance and oversight activities pertaining to a wide variety of subjects. The Mayor and Common Council are committed to appointing citizens who have diverse qualifications and viewpoints that represent all segments of the community. The job of Board, Commission or committee members is crucial to the success of the City of Westminster. By sharing their experience, expertise, and time, residents provide valuable insight to the operations of the city and city administration's decision-making process. Boards, commissions and committees review new and existing projects and proposals in specific areas and suggest an appropriate course of action to the Mayor and Common Council.

## Section 2: Purpose of Community Surveys

The City of Westminster encourages active participation in city government. As part of these efforts, Westminster plans to conduct community surveys periodically to assess the opinions of residents on the quality of city services, the quality of life in the City, and attitudes toward immediate issues currently before the City government. The first community survey was conducted to gather input from the community to be used in the update of the Comprehensive Plan.

## Section 3: 2008 Community Survey

In February 2008, City staff and officials worked together to develop a community survey that would be conducted to gather input from residents for the 2009 Comprehensive Plan update.

In June 2008, the Department of Planning, Zoning and Development mailed out the 2008 community survey to over 6,000 households in the City of Westminster. This was the first time a survey had been administered to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the City of Westminster as place to live, work and visit. Of the 6,000 households that received the survey, 1,320 completed surveys were returned, providing a 22% response rate.

The areas of focus for the “2008 City of Westminster Citizen Survey” included:

- ❑ City Services
- ❑ City Streets
- ❑ Utility and Environmental Services
- ❑ Transportation
- ❑ Public Safety
- ❑ Recreation & Parks
- ❑ Economic & Community Development
- ❑ Downtown Westminster
- ❑ City Communication & Information
- ❑ Budget Priorities

## Section 4: 2008 Community Survey Results

The results of the survey offered two main types of data for City administration to review. First, survey respondents were asked to rank city services and amenities. This provided the City administration with demographic preferences to analyze the quality of city services as well as the quality of life for residents in Westminster. Second, survey respondents were asked eight open-ended questions where they had the opportunity to write comments or suggestions for each question. These comments and suggestions offered City administration a closer look at what residents want and care about beyond numbers through specific and personal responses.

Staff calculated the rankings of the quality of city services and the quality of life into a statistical analysis that represents the overall resident satisfaction/dissatisfaction. The last question of the survey asked respondents to identify where they live in Westminster based on neighborhood planning areas.

The neighborhood planning areas allow City Administration to study the City, not only as a whole, but also by individual areas. Staff calculated these figures into a statistical analysis. The analysis allowed city administration to compare and contrast specific survey responses to prioritize major issues of concern for the City Budget, the Capital Improvement Program and the 2009 Comprehensive Plan.

## Section 5: Neighborhood Vision Workshops

Neighborhood Vision Workshops allow City staff and officials to meet residents on a one-on-one basis, and in groups, at small community meetings. The workshops are organized in an interactive format that provide residents opportunities to brainstorm, discuss, debate and voice their ideas, concerns and issues with City representatives. Topics cover a variety of general issues depending on the purpose of the meeting.

## Section 6: 2008 Community Vision Workshops

In the fall of 2008, the City of Westminster hosted a series of workshops inviting all residents to participate and share their vision of the future of Westminster. These workshops were called “Community Vision Workshops” and were designed to be larger versions of a Neighborhood Vision Workshop. The workshops were held on three different dates at three separate schools in order to provide several opportunities for residents to participate.

About 400 survey respondents provided their home addresses and gave permission to allow City Staff to contact them for more information. These 400 residents were mailed postcards to invite them to the workshops. The three workshops had a total of forty attendees, including members of citizen boards and commissions.

Each workshop was organized using the same format. The attendees were broken into smaller groups and then asked a series of questions in which they were requested to brainstorm and discuss the questions within their group before submitting their answers. The workshop featured three categories:

- ❑ Identity & Vision
- ❑ Economic & Community Development
- ❑ Future Growth & Development

Staff reviewed the answers that workshop attendees provided and organized the various comments and suggestions into categories. The answers expressed ideas that help define how residents view the future of Westminster.

## Section 7: Vision Report

The results of the 2008 Community Survey and the 2008 Community Vision Workshops were combined to develop the 2008 Community Vision Report that served as the basis for the 2009 Comprehensive Plan update.

When the City holds future Neighborhood Vision Workshops, staff will use the format of the 2008 Community Vision Report to develop individual Neighborhood Planning Area reports to present to the Mayor and Common Council. Each Neighborhood Planning Area has different housing stock, distinctive amenities, such as parks or schools and a diverse set of concerns and issues (Map 2.1). Combining community survey results, and resident input gathered at workshops, will allow individual neighborhood strategies to be developed and implemented.

## Part 3: Communication & Information

### Section 1: City Newsletter

In response to feedback from the 2008 Community Survey, the City now provides a City Newsletter for all residents. The newsletter contains information about programs and projects the City is working on, and information about City events. Each month an updated newsletter is available on the City Website as well as within the City utility bill. The newsletter is based on a partnership with City Departments and local community organizations to present all of the upcoming local events to residents. It benefits local organizations because the newsletter offers opportunities for increased attendance due to increased community awareness. The City Newsletter has opened the doors of communication with residents and has improved the availability of information to residents about City news and events.

### Section 2: City Website

The 2008 Community Survey allowed residents to make constructive comments and quality suggestions on ways to improve the City Website. The Mayor and Common Council decided to use this feedback to create a new City of Westminster Website was launched in July 2009. The new website created a user-friendly experience that allows residents and visitors to find information about their local government, upcoming events and activities, communicate with City Staff and stay informed about the issues before Boards and Commissions. It also promotes public participation through advertising public meetings and volunteer opportunities. Rather than static, the site is now geared toward e-commerce and e-marketing for the future of City communication. Numerous personnel are being trained to update and improve the site to using feedback provided from online customer visits. This enables staff to better serve its constituency through interactive handling of ideas.

## Part 4: Neighborhood Planning

### Section 1: Neighborhoods, USA

Neighborhoods, USA is a national non-profit organization committed to building and strengthening neighborhood organizations. Created in 1975 to share information and experiences toward building stronger communities, NUSA continues to encourage networking and information sharing to facilitate the development of partnerships between neighborhood organizations, government and the private sector.

The Neighborhoods, USA organization encourages municipal governments to create partnerships with their neighborhoods. NUSA's primary goal is to help create vibrant communities in which all residents benefit. It is the intent of NUSA, in promoting these collaborations, to achieve greater understanding of the premise that neighborhoods are truly the building blocks for overall community well-being. It is important that municipal officials recognize the opinions and suggestions of neighborhoods as expressions of the quality of life issues with which they are concerned. NUSA affirms its role as advocate for neighborhoods by providing information and alternatives to help coordinate efforts for creating long term solutions to the unique problems faced by municipalities and neighborhoods across the nation.

The City of Westminster is committed to creating an environment that is conducive to neighborhood involvement and participation in making the city a better place to live, work and visit. In recognition of the City's efforts to improve the quality of life of all neighborhoods, Westminster was accepted as a member of Neighborhoods, USA (NUSA) on June 20, 2008.

### Section 2: Charrettes & Taskforces

#### *Charrettes*

A charrette is an intensive creative session in which a team concentrates on specific design problems with residents and presents solutions. A Charrette allows for people to be involved in a design or master plan project and provide input to City Staff. This process fosters public participation and the community's direct involvement in the decision-making process. In the future, City staff will promote the use of a charrette to gather ideas and input on major development projects or master plans.

#### *Taskforces*

A taskforce is an appointed group of residents and community stakeholders who meet on a regular basis to develop a series of recommendations to City Administration about a specific community issue, project or proposal. In the past, the City has depended on the valuable input and support of taskforces for developing successful projects that have improved the quality of life for all residents of the City of Westminster.



## Section 3: Neighborhood Planning

By addressing neighborhood problems and drawing on the desirable attributes of neighborhoods, neighborhood planning works to enhance Westminster's quality of life.

The citywide vision and policies describe an overall preferred growth strategy for Westminster, while neighborhood planning establishes a specific vision and strategy for each neighborhood area. Fulfilling each neighborhood vision will collectively achieve the Community Vision of the City of Westminster. Neighborhood planning has the following benefits:

- Ability to develop and respond to a comprehensive inventory of neighborhood specific issues and concerns
- Retain or strengthen a sense of place; that is, a combination of character, setting, land uses, and environment that makes a neighborhood unique
- Collectively address neighborhood concerns and goals with those who live, work or own property in the neighborhood planning area
- Cooperation to create a stronger community
- Improve two-way communication among the neighborhood, and the City so that information and ideas may be shared between the groups
- Identify and address opportunities and barriers to implementing citywide policies and to enhance the effectiveness of citywide planning

Westminster's future growth will continue to increase the complexity of opportunities and issues that the City will encounter from limited land to limited resources. While many of these opportunities and issues can be effectively addressed at a citywide level, others need more specific solutions on a neighborhood level. Westminster's neighborhood areas are shown on the Neighborhood Planning Areas Map (Map 2.1). These areas form the boundaries for the neighborhood plans, based on geography, the transportation network, and land use; they are utilized for planning purposes only. Westminster's neighborhoods are unique and each neighborhood plan will address a different set of issues and opportunities.

## Public Participation & Neighborhood Planning Element

The 2009 Comprehensive Plan promotes the value of public participation in the development and implementation of City plans and projects. The City of Westminster strives to share information and involve the community and key stakeholders in the process of making decisions. The Public Participation Element's purpose is to outline how the City of Westminster proactively communicates with residents in an effort to share information, how to educate and engage the public, and how promote opportunities to volunteer or participate for City programs, services, or committees.

### Goals & Objectives

#### **Goal P1: Provide a variety of forums and formats that ensure quality public participation by residents and business owners**

**Objective 1:** Conduct community surveys of City residents to assess the community's attitudes and opinions on the issues affecting Westminster's quality of life and future

- a. Work with City Staff and community representatives to create a survey format
- b. Develop a "Community Survey Participation Plan" to outline how the survey will be distributed, collected and tracked
- c. Create a "Survey Data Entry Program" database and process to ensure accurate interpretation of surveys
- d. Provide the results of surveys to residents, community representatives, City Staff as well as the Mayor and Common Council

**Objective 2:** Hold Neighborhood Vision Workshops in each of the eight neighborhood planning areas

- a. Work with City Staff and community representatives to prepare the agendas for the Neighborhood Vision Workshops
- b. Develop a Workshop Participation Plan to outline how workshops will be advertised, how to invite residents, and how to incorporate City representatives as facilitators
- c. Choose locations to hold the Neighborhood Vision Workshops to encourage attendance by local residents

- d. Present the results of the Neighborhood Vision Workshops to residents, community representatives, City Staff, as well as the Mayor and Common Council

**Goal P2: Provide open and effective communication with the public**

**Objective 1:** Develop productive channels of communication with public entities and private partnerships

- a. Identify and prioritize issues in conjunction with public and private partnerships
- b. Encourage public entities and private partnerships to participate in meetings

**Objective 2:** Cooperate with all levels of government to communicate and provide for the needs of Westminster residents

- a. Assist the Mayor and Common Council in relaying issues, solutions, and messages to Westminster residents
- b. Leverage up-to-date technology for improved and standardized internal communications and external service delivery
- c. Promote Boards and Commissions as effective and objective forums for discussing issues that allow residents to become involved and to be effective in participating of community decisions

**Objective 3:** Provide citizens with complete, accurate, and timely information enabling them to make informed judgments

- a. Utilize and improve quality and effectiveness of the City Newsletter to continue to provide residents with information about current City news and upcoming local events
- b. Maintain a City website that is easy to update and navigate and is a comprehensive information portal to residents, visitors and businesses
- c. Develop press releases and other public information pieces regularly to facilitate widespread awareness and education of events and news
- d. Continue to develop media presentations and informational videos to be placed on the City Website and other locations that are accessible to residents and visitors

**Goal P3: Collaborate with neighborhoods to prepare or update neighborhood area comprehensive plans that study the infrastructure and community facilities of the neighborhood planning areas**

**Objective 1:** Address neighborhood-specific issues and opportunities in preparing neighborhood area plans

- a. Implement goals and objectives in the Westminster Comprehensive Plan that relate to each neighborhood planning area
- b. Ensure all neighborhood residents, businesses, and property owners have the opportunity to be involved in the preparation and review of neighborhood area plans
- c. Identify and report issues and opportunities raised by neighborhood residents, businesses, property owners, and other interested groups and individuals

**Objective 2:** Bridge the interests and issues reflected by City staff and elected officials, and neighborhood representatives and residents

- a. Design presentations of the initial identification of issues and opportunities regarding the neighborhood
- b. Identify short-term immediate issues for resolution by the appropriate department or agency
- c. Develop a neighborhood vision which includes long range ideas and concerns for the neighborhood

**Objective 3:** Utilize all reasonable measures of communication with the neighborhood during the neighborhood planning process

- a. Require a formal announcement of the neighborhood planning and update process, and recruitment of neighborhood representatives
- b. Discuss the current issues and feedback regarding neighborhood planning with representative neighborhood groups
- c. Coordinate with departmental City staff for the purpose of providing support throughout the plan creation
- d. Identify and recruit neighborhood representatives and organizational contacts to provide feedback to City staff and officials, and to remain informed of City projects