

A Guide for Building Trust Among Neighbors, Developers,
Planning Officials and Environmental Groups



Collaborative Land Use Planning

Karl Kehde

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Your questions and comments are welcome.
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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

As a community we make many efforts to encourage the kind of friendly vitality we all want in our neighborhoods. We form clubs, build parks, and manage sports teams. We enjoy community celebrations of holidays. We have both government and volunteer efforts to promote justice and fight poverty. We have anti-litter campaigns. Lessons are taught in homes, schools, and at religious services. We spend money for law enforcement, neighborhood schools, branch libraries, and light pole banners promoting community activities. We make all those efforts and many more. Why aren't we doing better? Why do we have deteriorating inner city neighborhoods and compartmentalized Sprawl in the suburbs? What could we be doing better?

It is difficult to enhance community spirit, when the land use decision makers are in conflict.

From the research I realized that enhancing the sense of community in our settlements is very difficult to achieve with a land development design and approval process that assumes that the agendas of developers, environmentalists, neighbors of proposed projects, and planning boards are likely to be in conflict. The regulations for our land development design and approvals actually assume conflict and are written to protect the rights of parties in dispute. Protecting rights is important in the event that a dispute erupts, but that can't be the guiding principle for land use planning. In order to build a community-enhancing project on the ground, a community-enhancing (collaborative) process is required to create it. In fact, at the same time the land use decision system is protecting people's rights in cases of disputes, the system needs to allow and encourage cooperation. Complying with regulations that protect rights must not squelch productive, cooperative efforts. Unfortunately, that is what is happening now. Cooperative, creative planning for our communities is inhibited by the current system. How do we get from where we are to where we need to be?

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To answer that question we need to highlight another lesson learned: good structures alone do not make a good community.

There are places and structures that contribute to the vitality of a community. There are places you have been where people naturally relax, smile, and get along with each other. What are they? Parks, pedestrian malls, gardens, playgrounds, libraries, and cafes. There are also structures that make some people feel safer and happier. A secure bikeway/walkway from school to home, or from home to the library or playground, is often mentioned. People feel better about their neighborhood if children can get around it safely. Beautiful vistas and public art can have a beneficial effect on community life. We need more of these positive places, and each neighborhood presents particular opportunities for such structures, but something else is needed as well. What?

Imagine for a moment two groups of people that don't like each other. Sadly it is easy to think of many such feuding groups from around the world. Now imagine those groups transplanted into the most beautiful, efficient, and well designed neighborhood you can imagine. Will the beautiful physical environment last?

A neighborhood needs to be maintained, and it requires tender, loving care. To improve or maintain the physical structure of a neighborhood requires good community relations. That serenity will endow them with energy to invest in their neighborhood. In fact, the beauty and harmony of the structures on the ground will become a reflection of the quality of the relationships among the inhabitants of the area. What you have on the ground in your community is a reflection of the quality of the community life that exists there. What are the factors that improve the quality of community life?

Good physical structure alone does not make a happy community.

To improve or maintain the physical structure of a neighborhood requires good community relations.

“With this process the planning board has the opportunity to be a part of plans that actually reflect their town, rather than dealing with a concept brought in by an almost alien intruder. So, I think planning board members could really be working on something that they would enjoy. What an opportunity for them!”

**Peter Meyer, President,
Professional Planning
and Engineering,
Cedar Knolls, NJ**

INTRODUCTION

**Flexibility, creativity,
and teamwork are
needed to tend to
the structure of the
community . . .**

There are many ways that community life is improved. The Smarter Land Use Project has found that, when it comes to planning development projects, the factors needed to improve the quality of community life are flexibility, creativity, and teamwork. Each land development project is done at a specific time and in a specific place, each of which has certain human and physical needs and potential. No master plan and no amount of land development regulation can address the problems and opportunities that surround each proposed development. The proposed project must be designed to deal with these problems and opportunities in a way that is unique to the project's time and place. Merely complying with zoning ordinances, designed to protect people's rights, limits the creativity of people involved in the planning process. Today, the developers take the lead in project planning and must focus on making a profit while obeying the ordinances. Their goals and skills don't equip them to focus on creatively studying the situation in order to make the best projects possible for the community. Any developer needs help from others to do that. The problem is that the flexibility, creativity, and teamwork needed for the best results can be severely inhibited by assuming disputes will erupt. Disputes do not have to erupt. There is a solution.

**. . . and we can have
them without
changing the
ordinances!**

The solution doesn't require changes in the ordinances. It doesn't change the basic administration of land development. Yet, it allows creative, flexible visioning by neighbors, developer, planner, and environmentalists working collaboratively as one team. The project planning process is no longer restricted to considering regulated facilities that generate a profit for the developer in a project designed to be upheld in court should litigation be required.

INTRODUCTION

The solution is a collaborative process that flourishes by designing projects expressly to include facilities that enhance community life – the interactions between neighbors. Projects that are primarily beautiful structures don't necessarily include facilities that enhance interactions between neighbors. Many people feel isolated and afraid inside nice homes. When the neighborhood includes features that enhance its sense of community, relationships improve among the residents and the community becomes safer, more beautiful, and a nicer place to live. Every proposed project offers the opportunity to add some things to enhance community life at the same time the developer makes a profit. Our research has shown how that can happen.

Neighbors, developer, city planner, and environmentalists can create projects that enhance community life when they work as one team. We have also found that they can mold themselves into a strong team even if they begin from a state of distrust and hostility. It also turned out that community life and relationships are enhanced by the process itself, never mind the results of the process. That is great news! We have to go through the project design and refinement process anyway, and now there is a way that the process can, itself, become an engine for improving human relations and consequently producing a better community on the ground. And if that isn't enough good news – the planning board meetings become more pleasant and efficient – shorter meetings, less frustration, better results!

When the neighborhood includes features that enhance its sense of community, relationships improve among the residents and the community becomes safer.

A team-building design process yields a community-building project.

“We're dealing with plans that have community support and not just planning board support, because the people in the community participated in the creation of those plans. And community support is terribly important to us.”

**Ted Chase, Planning Board
Chairman and Town
Council, Lewisboro, NY**