

# **New Planning Initiative for Baltimore County**

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by

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In June 2009, for six days, over 15 staff members from the Baltimore County Office of Planning participated in an effort to bring the process of community planning back to the community, by holding an entirely staff-run community design charrette. Like other large metropolitan areas, older suburban areas have experienced challenges with aging housing stock and the pressures of suburban sprawl, but they also hold the potential for revitalization as desirable locations that offer a traditional neighborhood foundation, close proximity to jobs and amenities, and social vitality that is often lacking in outlying suburban areas. Baltimore County has the third largest jurisdiction (599 sq. miles) and population (785,615) in the state of Maryland with no incorporated municipalities. It is the only jurisdiction that fully surrounds the Baltimore City.

Increasingly, local jurisdictions are confronted with issues requiring more complex interactive solutions. While traditional, longer planning processes remain valid and are often preferred, the use a charrette, heavily weighted towards a community's interaction and consensus, for proposed design solutions. The final charrette plan differs from traditional community plans by providing drawings, other graphics, and text to illustrate the functionality of proposed solutions.

Commonly, consultants are hired by local jurisdictions to run a charrette. Given funding limitations, a consultant-run charrette may not always seem viable. As an alternative, Baltimore County has adopted a charrette approach that trains and utilizes staff to conduct charrettes, while not incurring huge costs. With the use of staff in lieu of hiring consultants, the Office of Planning came to the conclusion that cost of hiring consultants is significantly more than the cost of operation of an internal charrette team. The cost of hiring consultants can range from \$30,000 for a small team of 3-4 people, to over \$120,000 for a large team of over 8 designers. According to Deputy Director Jeffrey Long, "The expenses related to the design team will pay off after one charrette."

In 2008 the Office of Planning created the Community Design Team (CDT), a team that pulls from the existing staff of planners and designers. One staff member, the CDT Coordinator, is assigned the full-time job of coordinating the CDT when the team's services are needed during the charrette week. The CDT Coordinator also identifies projects that may benefit from the charrette process, and then works with a community-based steering committee for at least six months prior to the charrette conducting community outreach and logistical preparation for the charrette.

The creation of the CDT took several years of preparation. It started with an analysis of the office's capability to effectively conduct a charrette, the development of a strategy for current staff to be removed from their regular office duties for 5-7 days, and the ability for the rest of the office to maintain a regular level of operation while a large number of staff were away. The Baltimore County Office of Planning is a larger agency, of about 40 staff members. Despite the large number of overall staff, the office had develop a strategy to perform its regular duties, even with up to fifteen staff members participating in the charrette.

Also, many members of CDT staff participated in the NCI charrette training program, when Bill Lennertz, NCI Executive Director, conducted a charrette training seminar specifically for the Office of Planning in 2004. The CDT Coordinator, Amy Trexler Mantay, received additional charrette planning and management training through National Charrette Institute's NCI Charrette System Certificate training program. Ms. Mantay also brought past charrette experience to the position having participated charrette management for charrettes in North Carolina, as well as prior consultant-led charrettes in Baltimore County. Another preparatory step was hiring a local architecture professor to conduct a basic drawing and rendering refresher course for CDT staff. CDT staff also participated in graphic design courses held specifically for the CDT using programs such as Adobe Photoshop and Sketch-up. This training enhanced staff's personal knowledge and capabilities in other aspects of their planning work.

The cost of using the CDT is fairly minimal, with small expenses such as providing drawing supplies, some meals and snacks, and in some cases, paying a fee for renting a space in the community for a design studio. Another immeasurable benefit is the knowledge CDT possesses of each community, from years working in the County on other planning projects. This provides an established relationship prior and during the charrette which has proven, in Baltimore County, to create a more constructive environment during the charrette. The CDT also knows the political constraints of design ideas, and whether they can feasibly be implemented in the County. This creates a more realistic plan, rather than a highly idealistic plan that may not be able produce results.

With the use of the CDT, a significant amount of study and analysis can be accomplished prior to the charrette because the CDT has greater access to County data and other resources. As a result, during the charrette the CDT can spend more time focusing on developing and refining concepts and less time understanding existing conditions. Since consultants may only be paid for work during the charrette week, the compressed work time does not allow for such in-depth analysis. Charrettes are an innovative and effective process to address issues in the community, which is why Baltimore County has used the process in several communities. While it took several

years and a lot of preparatory work to create an internal team, it was worth the effort and cost.