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[ARLINGTON URBAN DESIGN CENTER]

This application is submitted to the 2011 Transforming Local Government/FCCMA Conference partnership for the "Making Magic – How Bold Can Governments Be?" case study. The entry focuses on Arlington's Urban Design Center, a partnership between the City of Arlington and University of Texas at Arlington.

SYNOPSIS

Introduction

The Arlington Urban Design Center (AUDC) was established in 2009 as part of a continuing effort to improve Arlington's image and provide guidance for future development. The City has begun to experience a significant amount of development activity, primarily due to the opening of the new Cowboy's football stadium, the success of the Texas Rangers, and the selection of Arlington as the site for Super Bowl 2011. In order to capitalize on this surge of reinvestment, the Community Development and Planning Department collaborated with the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) School of Urban and Public Affairs to create a unique studio staffed with six graduate students studying architecture, landscaping, and urban planning disciplines. Led by City employees, the AUDC strives to promote high quality and sustainable projects that achieve a balanced land use mix throughout the City.

The AUDC partnership has been extremely successful during its first year, completing approximately 30 projects and validating the need for such a service. The Center has also secured roughly \$46,500 in grant funding and private donations. Both public and private organizations such as neighborhood and non-profit groups, existing businesses, and even City departments have benefitted from the AUDC's services.

Project Intent

Since its inception, the primary goal of the Arlington Urban Design Center has been to educate the public on urban design's direct relationship to the City's economic health and prosperity. The premise behind this goal is that incremental improvements to the appearance and functionality of Arlington will increase property values, spur reinvestment, and revitalize neighborhoods. This intent drives the AUDC's effort to promote the attractive and efficient design of buildings and spaces that will retain their value for years to come.

The Center provides a rare opportunity for clients to gain access to convenient and free design services. This is extremely valuable for small business owners or local developers in need of guidance regarding the City's codes and development standards, or who may not want to invest a large amount of capital for preliminary architectural work. It is equally beneficial to neighborhood organizations lacking financial resources and unfamiliar with the development process. The AUDC is capable of providing a variety of conceptual design services including neighborhood plans, façade improvements, land use planning, density studies, landscaping plans, sustainability recommendations, adaptive reuse options, non-vehicular circulation layouts, and signage concepts. In addition to these benefits, the presence of the Design Center also provides City staff the opportunity to steer developers toward a desired type of development.

As anticipated, the AUDC partnership is evolving into a mutually beneficial relationship and strengthening ties between the City and UTA. Students who staff the studio supplement overburdened City employees while gaining valuable experience on real-life projects, making them more marketable in

the workplace. It is also hoped that this relationship will enhance the prominence of UTA's Schools of Architecture and Urban and Public Affairs on a nation-wide scale, and promote the City of Arlington as an excellent place to do business.

Anticipated and Actual Outcomes

The AUDC has several expected outcomes, many of which have already occurred. The City has strengthened ties with the University, and begun partnering on outside initiatives. The Center has assisted a variety of public and private organizations in preparing design concepts and many have already been implemented. For example, the AUDC designed a drought-tolerant landscaping plan for the area surrounding an icon for the City's Entertainment District. Several businesses have used façade improvement concepts to apply for grants and improve the appearance of their buildings. Feedback from clients reveals that recipients find the service to be a time-saving and cost-effective solution to design obstacles.

Long-term, it is anticipated that the Center will help shape Arlington's physical appearance, making it a vibrant community composed of attractive neighborhoods and healthy businesses. In addition, the availability of designers is hoped to improve service delivery and give clients the perception that Arlington is a great place to invest. The AUDC will also contribute to UTA's prominence as a top tier design program that produces marketable graduates.

Costs and Savings

The City of Arlington contributed \$23,000 in funding to the AUDC in fiscal years 2010 and 2011, in addition to UTA's contribution of \$45,000. The City provided space and located the Center on the first floor of City Hall, making it very visible and accessible to the public. The Center also received a grant from the Arlington Tomorrow Foundation in the amount of \$45,000 for fiscal year 2011. These funds pay for the interns' salaries and supplies. Students use their personal laptops and software, which is a significant savings for the program. It is estimated that the Center's initial work saves the owner at least 10 to 15 percent of a project's final design cost. In its initial year, the Arlington Urban Design Center has saved clients almost half a million dollars in conceptual design services.

Innovative Characteristics

While only in operation for a short time, the Arlington Urban Design Center has been very successful due to its original approach. The City and UTA's financial commitment to high quality design allows Center staff to provide services free of charge, which drastically increases utilization. The ability of the students to use their personal /school equipment significantly reduces the amount of investment needed for the program and allows the AUDC to function with very low overhead. Computer software such as Geographic Information Systems, AutoCAD, Adobe Photoshop, 3D StudioMax, Rhino, and Google Sketchup permit the staff to prepare plans, renderings, and models to visually show clients how their property can be modified.

The program is unique in that it provides clients with direct access to professional design staff and guidance on development proposals. In addition, AUDC staff can educate users about sustainable development techniques such as solar energy, porous paving, rain harvesting, and energy efficient building materials.

Obstacles and Results Achieved

As with many local governments, the AUDC struggles to obtain adequate funding on a consistent basis. Marketing the program's services and soliciting donations is an ongoing challenge. Property owners are sometimes hesitant to engage the AUDC because they are unfamiliar with the service or distrustful of government in general. Finally, management of the Center requires a significant amount of staff time, and the program's studio facility is at capacity.

To date, the Arlington Urban Design Center has assisted 30 clients including:

- Business façade improvement conceptual plans for at least five local businesses
- Design for townhomes on Abram Street for Tarrant County Housing Partnership
- Fish Creek Neighborhood Plan and entryway design for St. Claire Woods subdivision
- Streetscape improvement plans for First United Methodist Church
- Landscape design for Entertainment District iconic sign
- Monument sign design for the new terminal at the City's municipal airport
- 3D renderings for Fire Station and Convention Center's walkway project

Future projects include master planning for Ditto Elementary School, development of the Animal Service Center's vacant site, road alignment study along the west side of Lake Arlington, and 3D visualization of redevelopment opportunities at target areas and along major corridors.

Since its inception, the AUDC has improved service delivery by increasing the availability of staff and staff extensions. It is anticipated that the City will receive an overall benefit in the future from increased reinvestment and a well designed City, which directly enhances the quality of life.

Issues and Problems

Although many were initially skeptical of the AUDC and its necessity, it has become a valuable resource for many City clients. In fact, demand for the Center's services has exceeded expectations and the AUDC has had to turn down several requests.

PRESENTATION COMPONENTS

Innovation and Creativity

This is the first successful large-scale collaboration between the City and UTA. Both entities are very satisfied with the outcome, have willingly contributed to its operation for two consecutive years, and are optimistic about its future. Besides its cost-saving aspects, the program's shared efficiencies are what most directly contribute to its success. Students provide the necessary man power and equipment, while Arlington employees are instrumental in supplying direction, leadership, and knowledge of City standards.

The AUDC have been the primary advocate of encouraging clients to think "green" in terms of site planning and design. Implementing sustainable planning principles and sustainable building standards is essential to Center's projects.

Technologies used include a variety of computer software such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), AutoCAD, Google Sketchup, Rhino, 3D StudioMax, and Adobe Photoshop. In addition, cutting edge planning practices and theories are employed as necessary.

Outcomes Achieved

The intent of the Design Center is to improve the quality of Arlington's built environment and promote sustainability through the art of design in order to enhance the City's livability. Since its inception, the AUDC has been actively involved in more than 30 projects and has several underway, including business façade improvements, site plans, streetscape improvements, neighborhood plans, landscaping concepts, and visual renderings.

Arlington has come to the realization that previous development efforts within the City were not focused on sustainability because in a typical market-based environment, an architectural firm is only able to allot time to a project based on the fees it is expected to generate. Developers are always on the lookout for the lowest cost alternative, resulting in developments that are profitable, but not necessarily sustainable. The AUDC seeks to reverse this trend by providing preliminary design services at no cost to the client.

Short-term results are presented in the form of convenient and no-cost design services for local businesses for façade improvements, design-centered approaches to planning issues, and hands-on experience for UTA graduate students. Long-term results include quality individual projects and attractive, well-connected public spaces throughout the City, resulting in improved overall appearance and function for Arlington. Since its inception, the Center has improved service delivery by giving clients direct access to design professionals at no cost. This not only improves perception of the City functions, but is also expected to generate continuous community reinvestment for years to come.

Applicable Results and Real World Practicality

Within a year, the AUDC has already implemented several practical solutions to design issues. This program could easily be applied to other municipalities, provided that there is a willingness among elected officials to improve their community's design, and a base of knowledgeable interns available.

An example of a practical application the Center initiated is the Tarrant County Housing Partnership's (TCHP) green townhouse project. When the TCHP applied for a HOME grant in 2008, they were denied because the design did not meet enough criteria to qualify as sustainable. The TCHP solicited the help of the Design Center and reapplied for the grant in 2009, avoiding the investment of any additional design funds. The Center created a high-quality residential product with a conscious focus environmental and energy conservation. The design included a common green space around existing trees that were preserved. Units were designed to reduce energy consumption by orienting windows in a north-south direction and applying overhangs. The design was well received by the Grants Committee and TCHP will be receiving \$750,000 in funding for the project.

Arlington's Urban Design Center provides a model to follow for creative collaboration with local partners, creating a mutually beneficial outcome including:

- Students benefit extensively from real project experience
- New students are attracted to UTA because of the unique, hands-on opportunity to be part of a successful Design Center
- City departments are able to utilize students' skill sets and additional man power
- Businesses, neighborhoods, and residents benefit from the availability of free professional service

If selected, the City of Arlington could choose from many successful AUDC projects and provide a synopsis of their ignition, progression, and outcome. The program has engaged in many projects that would be interesting to conference attendees, and similar ventures could be implemented in their communities. Practical applications would address program startup needs and methods for securing funding, staff, and clients.

Specific performance measures for the AUDC program are as follows:

- Feedback from customer survey cards
- The number of repeat clients
- Private donations
- Grant funding
- Continued City Council funding
- Number of clients served

Case Study Presentation

A presentation of the Arlington Urban Design Center would include a lively PowerPoint presentation filled with "before and after" images to illustrate how the AUDC has improved existing developments throughout the City. Display boards featuring renderings, sketches, photos, and 3D models would be available to further demonstrate the Center's work. Participants would be able to look through physical documents such as the Fish Creek Neighborhood Plan. A group activity might involve a design charrette to teach attendees how to facilitate similar projects in their own jurisdictions.