Making Good Design Happen

Judith Grant Long

There is no shortage of ideas about how to manage the tremendous growth pressures facing municipalities in New Jersey. Variously labeled "smart growth," "transit-oriented," "compact," or "sustainable," these approaches to community design share an emphasis on reducing sprawl by promoting higher density residential development, open space preservation, and mass transit as an alternative to the private automobile.

On paper these community design principles are seductively simple, yet many municipalities find it difficult to make the transition from plan to reality. Instead, good designs sit, gathering dust at City Hall, often because important questions about implementation were not considered, such as:

• Do current and forecasted market conditions support the plan?
• Do community leaders and residents support the plan?
• Do the affected property owners and local private developers support the plan?
• How much will each element cost, and how will it be paid for?
• Who is responsible for developing which elements of the plan, and when?
• How is the plan affected if market conditions change?

Making good design happen relies on treating these implementation

Transit Village in South Orange is an example of good design.

Photo: J. Wells

issues as an essential part of the community design process.

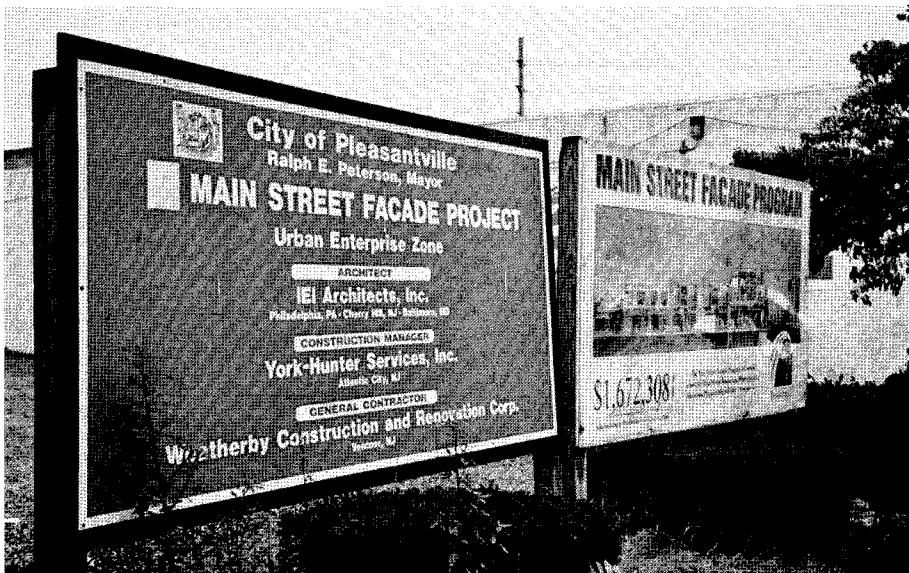**Start with a Good Plan** The first step in making good design happen is, of course, a good design. For most municipalities, formulating a design plan is a familiar process: identifying the sites and problems to be addressed, proposing a set of alternative solutions, assessing their relative merits and selecting a plan for adoption.

Ideally, expert community designers guide this process. Municipalities often choose to hire outside consultants to bring their specialized experience, as well as a fresh perspective to local problems. Outside consultants, however, are no substitute for

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Judith Grant Long is Assistant Professor of Urban Planning and Policy Development at the E.J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University. She can be reached at jglong@rci.rutgers.edu.

Photo: J. Wells

The Main Street Facade Improvement Program in Pleasantville will bring a new look to the business district.

so another outside consultant is usually required. Seek firms with a proven track record of assessing both the demand for, and the fiscal impact of, innovative forms of development. They should also be independent of other parties to the plan, and be available to refine their findings as the plan changes shape in subsequent stages.

Build Community Support The next step is to refine the initial design vision based on the findings of the market and feasibility analysis. This is the heart of the community design process, and offers unparalleled opportunities for building community support for the plan.

Political leadership is essential to making good design happen. Many of the "smart growth" design innovations call for changes in long-established development patterns. As a result, they face opposition from private developers who are concerned about selling their product, as well as local residents resisting new development in any form.

By educating political leaders about the advantages of good design, the message is put in the best hands for dissemination. Initiatives such as the Mayor's Institute on Community Design (p.18), are making important strides using this approach (www.archfoundation.org/micd).

Since elected officials control the regulatory and approval processes, they are generally in the best position to facilitate the support of affected landowners and local private developers. Innovative community design cannot be implemented without entrepreneurial private developers as partners.

Also, local residents tend to respond more favorably to their own community leaders embracing and advocating new ideas, rather than lecture-style presentations from outside consultants or "suits." The most successful community designers engage in information-sharing exercises to build local resident support for new ideas, using hands-on tools such as charrettes, surveys and focus groups.

the local knowledge of community leaders and municipal staff, and the chosen firm should have a proven record of in-house collaboration.

There are many excellent professional designers and planners offering services in New Jersey. They can be reached through professional organizations such as the Urban Land Institute (www.uli.org), American Institute of Architects (www.aia.org) and American Planning Association (www.planning.org). Also, many university-based

Check Market Conditions Once an initial design vision is developed, the next step in making good design happen is to conduct a preliminary check of its feasibility. Too often, municipalities prepare extensive plans without properly analyzing market conditions, or consider them too late in the process.

It is essential to assess the feasibility of the plan before it gets too detailed, and before anyone becomes too invested in a particular vision. By

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community design programs are willing to lend both their expertise and enthusiastic students to New Jersey communities confronting growth management and other planning and design issues.

Perhaps most important, there are grants available to defray the cost of preparing community design plans with a "smart growth" orientation. Consult the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (DCA) website for more information (www.state.nj.us/dca).

testing the preliminary design relative to current and predicted market conditions, conflicts can be identified and resolved early in the process.

This preliminary market assessment is especially important for "smart growth" designs, where matching innovative housing products to actual market demand remains a significant challenge, especially in suburban and ex-urban locations.

Market analysis is an expertise rarely held in-house by municipalities, or by community design consultants,

Run the Numbers Community leadership in broad support of good design is a different thing from approval of a specific plan. Making good design happen costs money, and before voting in favor of a plan, local leaders and residents want to understand its financial implications.

A financial plan detailing the cost of the improvements, a phasing schedule, and a cost allocation formula should be prepared and revised at key stages during the process. Municipal finance and development experts should prepare this plan, ideally the same firm hired to conduct the independent market analysis.

There are a number of grant and financial incentive programs for municipalities undertaking "smart-growth" strategies, so it is critically important to hire experts who can weave these programs together. Again, consulting the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs is a good starting point. For "smart growth" initiatives alone, the DCA has awarded close to $4 million dollars in grants since the start of 2002.

The financial plan should also recommend the phasing of any public improvements, and indicate whether or not each element is intended to precede or follow any corresponding private development. If the plan covers a large area, one or two demonstration sites should be chosen, where the conditions are particularly ripe for success.

Recheck Market Conditions Finally, if market conditions change, it is necessary to revisit the entire plan. All too often the implementation of good design plans lag optimal market conditions, either because the planning and approval process was too long, or because of unanticipated market shocks.

While it is tempting to shelve the plan until market conditions improve, wise municipalities use soft market cycles to re-tool plans. Soft markets are also an ideal time to negotiate land acquisition, and to move ahead with strategic infrastructure improvements. Combined, these activities can make a municipality "ready for business" when the market inevitably turns upward.

Conclusion Making good design happen—making the transition from design concept to reality—requires that implementation be treated as an essential component of the community design process. Of course, making good design happen starts with a good design, but equal attention must be given to understanding local market conditions, building community and development industry support, and creating a feasible strategy to pay for municipal improvements. ▲