

Introduction and Scope

Abilene, a medium-sized city located in west central Texas, has experienced many changes in its physical development in the past thirty years. The last document guiding Abilene's development was adopted in 1973. Its principles, while sound, were being challenged by changes in modern development standards, land use patterns, floodplain issues, disinvestments in the central city, and new centers of employment.

Abilene adopted a new Comprehensive Plan in January 2004, establishing a coordinated set of policies to guide physical development over the next ten to fifteen years. The Plan ensures that future public and private investment decisions are consistent with the long-range vision of its citizens. The Plan outlines implementation strategies and is meant to be a dynamic document evolving and responding to changing conditions.

In developing the Comprehensive Plan, city staff engaged the help of hundreds of residents. During the early states of public involvement, citizens debated several fundamental issues related to growth and quality of life. What emerged was a clear set of guiding principles by which the City should proactively direct and shape new development, future growth, redevelopment, and public infrastructure investment. The principles are based on the core values voiced by citizens: creation of stable and unique neighborhoods, attractive and conveniently located shopping areas, diversified centers of employment, welcoming gateways, and efficient public facilities.

The Comprehensive Plan is an excellent example of a municipal project that utilized citizen involvement and participation. The focus of this nomination examines public involvement in development of the Plan. The Plan also "speaks" to decision-makers via the written policy and framework developed by the final and adopted Comprehensive Plan document.

Measurable Outcomes of Citizen Involvement & Public Participation

City staff recognized the importance of engaging the public early and consistently for input and involvement in the project. In August 2001, the Abilene Community Excellence (ACE) Task Force developed a set of strategies for improving the City's community and economic development quality of life. Realizing that much has changed since the 1973 plan, the Task Force determined it was time to construct a new plan with a cohesive vision for the community's future, a plan that would provide a basis for future zoning and land use decisions, reflect more progressive planning thought, and complement other economic development efforts. From more than thirty strategies, the Task Force ranked the need for a new Comprehensive Plan as the community's second highest priority.

In the eighteen months that followed, the City engaged a diverse group of citizens (neighborhoods, interest groups, business/development, City staff, Planning and Zoning Commissioners/City Council, and the general public) in a collaborative planning process. Throughout the process, a twenty-three member Steering Committee helped shape the Future Land Use and Development Plan and its supporting policies. The Steering Committee was composed of a broad spectrum of community interest, e.g., neighborhood, business, education, civic and development organizations. The Committee met in a series of six workshops between September 2001 and February 2003 to provide input, recommendations, and feedback as the plan evolved.

Overall, public participation was a major component of the success behind the Comprehensive Plan. The public was stimulated to participate through various types of activities, materials, and promotions in order to

communicate and gather input for the development of the Plan. Project information was received and input provided through a variety of means. The following methods were used to educate the public and gather additional input about the Plan:

A. Surveys

Developed and distributed 12,000 copies of a detailed Community Survey through senior citizens centers, churches, and local elementary schools. Two thousand surveys were completed and returned. Preliminary survey results reflected some interesting information about why citizens choose to live in Abilene.

B. Newspaper Articles/Editorials

A major public relations effort was launched partnering extensively with local media, particularly the Abilene Reporter-News newspaper, to publicize the process. Several columns were written by City staff, including special reports complete with color city maps outlining several proposed development scenarios of the Plan process. News release updates on public forums and current issues were provided to the newspaper and the three network affiliate television stations.

C. Information Booths

City staff provided information booths at locations around town to provide information and answers to any interested citizen.

D. Billboards and Logos

Billboards were used to promote and direct traffic to the new Comprehensive Plan website. A unique Comprehensive Plan logo was developed for use on promotional materials and the website.

E. Project Website

A special Comp Plan website link, www.abilenecomplan.com was developed. At the time of this promotion, the City was also launching a redesign of its main website. To bring traffic to both sites and allow citizens to have to remember only one web address, the main website address, www.abilenetx.com was advertised. A very large, colorful graphic link to the Comp Plan was placed on the City's home page. On the Comp Plan site, online surveys and "Question of the Week," enabled citizens to share their vision for future development. Some questions were general, e.g., "What do you want Abilene to look like in ten years?; Would you like to see more development?; If so, where and what kind?" Other questions focused on specific issues, e.g., "Do you believe that new residential development should include the installation of sidewalks?" The website was an invaluable tool especially for reaching a large segment of the population that resides and/or works on Dyess Air Force Base where staff had limited access to survey and involve citizens.

F. Grocery Bags

In an effort to reach a more diverse segment of the local population, the project was advertised on paper shopping bags of a large local grocery store, with a distribution of 800 per week for three months.

G. Television/Radio

Developed radio and television Public Service Announcements with the Mayor asking citizens to attend public meetings. City representatives also did several live call-in programs on a local talk radio station and promoted the public forums live on early morning TV news programs.

H. Public Workshops

Throughout the process, citizens received project information and provided input into the planning process through a variety of means, including public workshops. In several evening meetings, the public was invited to comment on the progress of the plan and participate in the development of land use alternatives and several other planning issues. Public workshops were very interactive and provided citizens with a real sense of empowerment in the planning process.

During development of the plan, several fundamental issues arose regarding Abilene's future growth. Guiding principles emerged from these issues including new standards for future growth, redevelopment, and public infrastructure investments. These principles are based on the core values voiced by citizens during the public involvement process.

Since adoption by the City Council in January 2004, the Comprehensive Plan serves as a guide for decision-making regarding future development of the City. The Plan also provides the framework for future changes to the City's development regulations in order to implement those goals.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The public participation phase was successful in raising citizen awareness of Abilene's Comprehensive Plan and the world of urban planning in general. Staff and City leaders have had the opportunity to present the Plan to civic groups and organizations concerned with the development, growth, appearance, and image of the community. This effort has continued since the adoption of the Plan. The process of developing the Comprehensive Plan deserves recognition as a municipal project that increased knowledge of planning through public participation, particularly in the early planning phases, and most certainly before the plan was adopted. The final document provides a long-lasting resource for those decision-makers and community leaders tasked with reviewing decisions that impact the physical, economic, and social health of the City of Abilene.

The more public and development interests know about the Plan, its goals and policies, the more they will expect by way of results. Increased expectations, coupled with tangible progress implementing physical improvements, can help sustain the momentum for executing the City of Abilene's Comprehensive Plan.