



TRAVERSE CITY
pop. 14,674

Traverse City: A New Approach to Public Engagement

By Nathan Elkins

PlacePlans is a demonstration and technical assistance program developed in 2012 under the auspices of the statewide MPlace Partnership, with lead sponsorship from the Michigan State Housing Development Authority. The program focused on assisting cities, selected through a competitive process, with the development of visionary yet realistic strategies to redevelop a key walkable, mixed-use area of their community. The League, along with faculty and students from Michigan State University School of Planning, Design and Construction and MSU Extension, worked with community leaders, residents, anchor institutions, and expert consultants to bring the best practices in placemaking and civic engagement to bear in a customized way for each of the 22 participating cities.

This article is the continuation of an ongoing series, *PlacePlans: Where Are They Now?*, which checks in on the progress in PlacePlans cities, with a particular eye on the lessons learned that can apply to communities everywhere.

Communities are growing, technology and way of life are constantly changing, so why should our public input meetings remain the same? Turning the dreaded municipal public meeting into an energized, creative, and engaging event isn't as hard as you might think.

In Traverse City, we used a unique variety of public engagement methods for the City Lot project, funded in part by the Michigan Municipal League's PlacePlans program. Influence Design Forum, the project consultant, collaborated with the city and a steering committee to generate new ideas for getting the community involved.

The approaches we put into play included passive input, tactical urbanism, engaging project partners, stakeholders, picnics, parties, and kids.

Passive Public Input

Passive input is a term that developed and evolved throughout the life of the City Lot project. Early on, we decided to place a chalkboard on the site to allow the public to engage freely. This allowed the community's ideas to organically develop over the first eight weeks of the project. We also created a presence on the web as well as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to promote

events on the site. Yoga in a greenspace was one such event. City Lot was also a planned stop along a youth cycling organization's weekly bike ride, an outdoor classroom for a local elementary school, and a studio for local artists. The events and chalkboard ideas combined to create a buzz that helped support the project's public engagement success.

Tactical Urbanism

Tactical urbanism is an umbrella term used to describe a collection of low-cost, temporary changes to the built environment, usually with the intent to improve local neighborhoods and public spaces. City Lot introduced the concept to the steering committee early-on in the project as a hands-on approach to community engagement. Community ideas culled from the passive input phase were demonstrated on the property to show how they would look in 3-D. This pop-up demonstration was held in conjunction with the first public open house—a community picnic. Raised wood planters were constructed and filled with plantings to simulate urban farming; permeable pavers were placed in the alley to show how green infrastructure could improve storm water runoff into a nearby creek; and natural playscape elements were arranged to allow children a place to play while enjoying live music with their family. We even created a basketball court in a parking lot to represent activities that could take place inside a new community center, and set-up cafe tables along the street to provide an outdoor seating plaza.

Project Partners

Often, public projects and their consultants overlook engaging project partners throughout the lifecycle of the project—once just isn't enough. Municipalities should encourage consultants to keep lines of communication open among different departments. Interdepartmental interaction is key to the success of any project. For example, the project partners for City Lot were engaged many different times throughout the project. The city's Parks and Recreation Division, Department of Public Services, and Fire Department were engaged early and often to enable staff to learn about the community's ideas in real-time.

Stakeholders

The one common element that stakeholders share is their interest in the success of the project. To make their experience as interesting as possible, we formed working groups that combined stakeholders with different backgrounds but similar experiences and professional qualifications. The Natural Resources, Arts and Culture, and Neighborhoods groups were made of community members with backgrounds as diverse as arts, planning, finance, and environment.

Kids Of All Ages

An important component of placemaking and community engagement is ensuring that public input is rooted in the community and all ages are encouraged to participate. Kids want to be involved in the design process, too. Asking for their input shows them that their contribution matters, too. The City Lot process engaged children of all ages throughout the project—from youth cycling, live music, and natural playscapes, to hands-on art and local food.

Picnics Not Workshops

Try replacing your next workshop or public charrette with a community picnic. Some of the best ideas come from neighbors and friends sharing a meal around a table, families with children, and young professionals engaged in small-scale informal settings. The City Lot Community Picnic event featured an open house format. Six stations were set up to share information about specific areas of the property. Small temporary signs summarized the site's history, condition and shared ideas gathered from the community about potential uses. Tactical urbanism was used to frame ideas—a live music concert to simulate an amphitheater, temporary café tables to imitate public seating along the street, a basketball court in the parking lot to replicate an auditorium and gymnasium, and raised garden boxes to showcase the idea of urban farming.

Release Parties

Final presentations should be fun! Perhaps one of the most critical steps of any public planning and engagement process is the communication of the consultant's recommendations to the community. This also an opportunity to keep the project moving forward and continue building support. A party is a great way to celebrate the results of the community's ideas. The City Lot project organized a Concept Release Party complete with artisan beer, local food, art activities, and live music. The public was invited to attend this family-friendly event to review newly-created conceptual drawings for the use and design of the property. Community members also had a chance to provide additional feedback on the designs. The mix of new approaches of public engagement used for the City Lot project shows how a new location and environment for a public meeting can encourage more community members to participate. Taking things more slowly at the beginning allows ideas to marinate and begin to grow organically on their own. And don't forget—it's okay to engage kids and throw a party! 

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