

PlacePlans: Where Are They Now?

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Enthusiasm Radiates Through PlacePlans Survey

In this issue, we turn our attention to a survey conducted for the League that examined the impacts of the PlacePlans process on cities that participated in the program, as well as some that did not.



Over a period of three years, the PlacePlans program provided funding and technical assistance to support placemaking efforts in selected Michigan cities. This magazine has highlighted some of the exciting individual plans and projects produced through the program. Michigan Municipal League staff hoped to understand the impacts of the program in a more systematic way, so in October 2016, with their help, I carried out a survey of both cities that had participated in the program and cities that had not to learn about their experiences doing placemaking. We found that although most cities had not yet made much progress implementing their projects, the PlacePlans program changed the way people thought about what was possible in their cities—an important planning outcome in itself.

Perceptions of PlacePlans

We found that respondents from participating cities felt overwhelmingly positive about PlacePlans and its impact on local placemaking efforts. As one respondent wrote, “It was a real, tangible, visible, hands-on experience that brought together excellent ideas, vibrant creativity, positive energy, and practical real-world implementation approaches.” The three types of assistance that participants most often ranked as very helpful were facilitation (steering committee or focus groups) (65%), concept design (56%), and popup placemaking/demonstration projects (48%).

Concept designs helped cities make decisions. As one respondent wrote, “The concept designs illustrated limitations of the current [farmers market] location and potential of an alternate location.” League staff and partners’ facilitation skills brought inclusiveness and professionalism to the process.

One respondent said, “The MML and MSU staffs did a tremendous job of getting stakeholders to participate in a way that avoided stakeholders becoming territorial. [City] staff would have a difficult job getting so many stakeholders to work towards a common goal.” Another said that those providing assistance made the process “Very visual, very inclusive. We had people, families, kids engaged. Many of the participants we interacted with were people we typically do not see at public meetings and events.” One respondent explained that popup placemaking provided a reference point as the implementation process continued, saying, “The reports and outputs from the workshops and pop-up experiments have been very helpful as we made further progress, and we reference those shared experiences quite regularly with our residents and business owners.”

The main criticisms leveled at the PlacePlans program were that in a few cases design concepts and cost estimates didn’t seem sufficiently grounded in what the city was capable of implementing, or the scope wasn’t tied to the reality of the city’s budget.

Placemaking Implementation

Because of how recently the cities had gone through the process, most had not made much progress implementing their PlacePlans initiatives. However, respondents provided many written comments listing steps towards implementation, including a temporary ice rink, grant applications, trails and other recreational facilities, policy and regulatory changes, land acquisition, public plazas, and a road diet. Respondents identified lack of funding, lack of staff capacity, and changes/losses in project leadership as the most significant barriers to implementation.

We had hoped that our survey would show that cities that had gone through the PlacePlans program had, on average, made more implementation progress than those that had not; however, our results generally didn’t show a statistically significant difference between the two groups. The exception was the PlacePlans cities which the League had funded through implementation mini-grants: those cities had, on average, made significantly more progress toward completing their PlacePlans projects. It is not surprising that funding is very helpful in moving a project forward—a majority of both selected and non-selected cities reported that a lack of funding was a major barrier to implementation, so removing that barrier would allow the project to advance. It was also the case that the League chose to fund projects that seemed particularly well-planned and shovel-ready, so the infusion of money allowed the city to move quickly and therefore report results.

Although most respondents judged that their cities had not yet made much progress in implementing the plans, in some ways, the act of planning in a process like this becomes an outcome in itself, because it changes the conversation around what is possible. Some of the written comments support this last point, with one respondent saying, “The project got people talking about the future of the downtown and what it could, and should, look like.” Another respondent said, “While our plan was never implemented as designed, aspects and the spirit of the plan has been the guiding force.”

Conclusions and Next Steps

Respondents from participant cities were on the whole extremely enthusiastic about PlacePlans. Although it is not apparent from the statistical analysis, many of the written comments suggest that PlacePlans have already made a difference in these cities in extending their staff capacity, gathering and focusing community input, and expanding the idea of what placemaking projects might be possible.

Based on these early, positive signs, we would expect to see more concrete evidence of implementation in the next few years. As we mentioned above, it is not surprising that grant funding gave some immediate momentum to getting projects done, but it will also be important to know whether the other types of assistance the League provided are helpful over the longer term. Consequently, it would be helpful to revisit this survey in another year or two when cities have had more time to make progress on implementing their plans.

Going forward, it also seems that studying more explicitly the role of community support and involvement would be informative. Although the statistical analysis did not indicate a significant difference between pre- and post-PlacePlans community support, the written comments emphasize its role. Several critical commenters expressed concerns that community involvement was not broad-based enough, that the same insiders would ultimately control the process, and that internal dysfunction among city leadership would derail the project. On the other hand, many of the positive comments focused on the benefits respondents had already seen from successful community participation processes, whether it was bringing in new participants or creating a space for important community conversations around future placemaking efforts. 

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