

## **Outcomes of Participatory Zoning in Grand Rapids**

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The focus of this memorandum is the participatory process to revise the city of Grand Rapids' zoning ordinance, Zone Grand Rapids. Participatory and inclusive governance in Grand Rapids has generated many benefits for the community. We have observed this through conducting qualitative research in Grand Rapids since 1998. Our methods have included observing meetings; reading reports, meeting minutes, and media coverage; and conducting approximately seventy confidential, unstructured interviews with community members, city staff, and business and neighborhood association leaders. Through the following selection of anecdotes and quotations, we try to capture some reflections from participants about the outcomes – expected and unexpected – from the participatory zoning process.

### Improving the Meaningfulness of the Zoning Ordinance as a Governance Tool

The zoning ordinance process has improved the meaningfulness of the zoning ordinance as a tool for ongoing communication and deliberation.

In August 2006, we attended a community meeting about the zoning ordinance. A man who identified himself as a transportation advocate asked about creating overlays to interface with transportation systems to produce high usage corridors. The Planning Director suggested that, instead of having two sets of rules, it would be better to change the zoning outright to achieve transportation goals. She asked to borrow a copy of the Pattern Book, a workbook that participants had been using to recognize types of uses in their neighborhood, map them out, and start suggesting changes. Many people had brought their copy with them, although it was not the topic of this particular meeting. She used a map in the Pattern Book to point out that zoning for transportation could happen around the transit nodes shown all around the city as red dots, not just the district that the advocate had suggested. The advocate acknowledged that he was familiar with the map, but indicated that the community needs to think about encouraging mass transit use in relationship with residential areas, not just business areas. The Planning Director indicated that is the direction the zoning code is heading, and asked if that answered his question. He said yes.

This exchange suggests that the zoning process has become a framework for the city, community activists, associations, and developers to set priorities and make decisions. This meeting did not settle the transportation planning issue, but the group was able to pick up this concern, integrate it into the zoning discussion, and establish a channel for ongoing coordination of zoning and transportation actions. The meeting also demonstrated that the zoning process has brought a variety of ways of understanding zoning issues – including technical know-how, ethics, knowledge of specific issues, and a sense the “big picture — in a respectful, generative exchange that has allowed people to decide together on new direction for action. The fact that numerous people had brought copies of the Pattern Book to the meeting – and that it helped them to work through this particular area – suggests that the process is generating materials that will serve as a shared tool for ongoing discussion. That implies that the zoning ordinance – like the Master Plan – will be a living, breathing document that people continue to use to reference their ideas and ground ongoing discussions, not just a document that will be left on the shelf and forgotten. Indeed, one of Grand Rapids' many community organizers told us:

“Once we get a new zoning code I believe we’ll be able to use that as a tool almost as we use the Master Plan, or even more because it’s a legal document. We’ll be able to continually use that to teach people, because there’s always going to be a zoning issue popping up in every neighborhood. So we’re not going to give up on engaging the citizens, just like we’ve continued to revisit the Master Plan and emphasize that, we’ll do the same with the zoning code.”

### Transforming Neighborhood and Community Identity

The zoning ordinance process has helped to transform neighborhood and city identity. Through Plan Grand Rapids, participants had talked a lot about the character of their community and how they wanted that character to change, or not change. However, they also realized the difficulty of defining the character of the different areas and the necessity of trying to translate that into a revised zoning code. The Zone Grand Rapids participants have therefore focused on articulating different neighborhood types. Among other benefits, this has created a new way for residential and business districts to think about their identity and consider how they want to manage change in their neighborhoods.

Community members started to realize that they wanted to revise the zoning ordinance because, as one participant explained, the old zoning code “really worked against maintaining valued aspects of the older parts of the city.”

A community organizer told us, after neighbors and businesses completed the Pattern Book for their area, “We were amazed, once we’d finished our survey work, that the City’s work was amazingly accurate. They had done some preliminary work, and as we studied it we were shocked to find that most of what they had come up with was very similar to what we had come up with.”

As one business district leader put it, due to the zoning process, “We have a newfound, positive connection with the neighborhood association for the residential areas adjacent to us.”

Through the Plan Grand Rapids and subsequent Zone Grand Rapids discussions, a business district started to think about how it could be more involved in their neighborhood. Most of the businesses in the area served the region at large, not local residents. The association therefore launched a new initiative, involving adjacent residents and businesses, to think about how to encourage the development of restaurants, laundries, coffee shops, groceries, etc. to serve the neighborhood.

The neighborhood categories have aimed to surface underlying patterns across the city’s neighborhoods, not to impose new identities. The fact that participants now articulate that they live in an “early twentieth century neighborhood,” for example, suggests that the process has enabled them to recognize their neighborhood type as a resource, providing some newfound fuel for provide and stewardship. Zone Grand Rapids has also helped residential and business districts to create new connections with each other, which was an implicit goal of the process.

### Building a Broader and Longer View of Planning and Development Choices

The zoning ordinance process has helped to build a broader and longer view in the community of planning and development choices.

One of the business district members credited the district's discussions about zoning with having moved people beyond their own immediate concerns. Through the zoning ordinance discussion, they started to realize that they would like to have interesting business facades to invite customers in. So they approached a business owner on the street about removing a fence around her lot. She agreed and joined the association, only to suffer some vandalism shortly later. Still, the district member said, "I think that she has a sense for the bigger picture, that for example it would be better for her if traffic were slower, they'd be more likely to see her merchandise. It would be better for her if the perception of this area would be changed from a place where there's crime to a place where it's safe. Even though she might on certain bad days wish she had a fence, she recognizes that if everybody did that, the place would look like a fortress and it wouldn't be very retail friendly."

This suggests that participants are better informed about zoning's importance and uses, and that thinking about zoning is encouraging them to think about their district in a different way. The discussion is helping them to see the big picture when they make their own choices and review development options. Increasingly often, in fact, neighborhoods are motivated and able to create their own area-specific plans and development proposals.

### Broadening the Knowledge Base for Zoning

Community members have become skilled in the language and tools of zoning.

A neighborhood organization leader described watching residents become involved in the early stages of the zoning process. "[The city staff members] bring the picture boards with them. They have maps, they have pictures, they have all of that. And really, when you sit and say 'Okay, we're going to rewrite the zoning code,' of course everybody's eyes glaze over. But you know, when they present it and say, 'Here's what we're talking about. Here's a picture of what we're saying. Go out and show us these kinds of things in your neighborhood. Take pictures,' they are doing a really, really good job so people can see it rather than these vague, nebulous concepts out there. People can say, 'Oh, okay here we are on the map. Here's the kind of neighborhood we live in.' So the city staff have done an excellent job to make it an approachable thing, and making it much less complicated. Though they do say, it is very complicated, but here's the part we can all plan."

Another organizer noted, "Most people are like, 'Zoning, oh whatever,' because they don't know it affects them. When you sit down and talk to them about how it will affect the neighborhood, then they're like, 'Oh, yeah, we need to be at the table about that.'"

Acknowledging that people might ignore zoning issues, another organization put together a short skit called "Zoned Out" to get across the message that aspects of the community that people care about could be "zoned out" if residents "zoned out" on paying attention to zoning.

At the August 2006 community meeting we observed, the staff and community members engaged in a lengthy discussion about how to define density. The discussion began with a neighborhood organizer giving feedback that the structure of the zoning code definitions was not really working for her neighborhood association, and asking whether there would be some other ways to define density. The planning staff members stopped to give a brief primer on the typical ways of defining density, and then staff and community members worked through what was not working about the density definition, what they wanted to accomplish with density, and how different possible ways to define density would play out in different neighborhoods.

Zone Grand Rapids – Plan Grand Rapids before it – is preparing community members and city staff to collaborate to enhance planning outcomes. Intensive and creative outreach by the city and community organizations have educated the public about zoning, transforming it from a seemingly boring topic into a tool that people are excited about using. The density discussion shows that accumulated knowledge in action. It suggests that even the most technical matters – what should be the nominators and denominators, and the upper and lower limits for each – have been open to community and staff knowledge, expertise, and consideration. In that discussion, we saw the planning staff and community trusting one another's expertise and building up their knowledge. They considered how they could design a definition that everyone could understand, that would work well across the community and into the future, and that they could codify in the zoning ordinance so that the people in the room and others who would have to use it (developers, staff, other neighborhoods) could apply it easily and fairly.

### Strengthening Residential and Business Associations

The zoning ordinance process has strengthened some individual residential and business district associations.

When we asked one of the neighborhood organizers what the value of the zoning ordinance process was for her organization, she mentioned a development proposal that was under consideration in her area and commented, "I expect the zoning and this other project will kind of go together, build momentum together." She then explained that her organization had not appreciated citizen involvement until meetings about the Master Plan brought out hundreds of people, "and all of those people could be called on later for another thing... So we are hoping for the zoning to bring out a whole new group of people that are interested in community, and then you use them the best you can."

We commented to a business association organizer that his association seemed to be suddenly much more active, and asked what had gotten the ball rolling. He responded, "The best I can guess is that it was the zoning process. Now, I don't think that's all of it, but a lot of the business people said, 'Yeah, here's an opportunity to get some significant infrastructure improvements, this street hasn't been reworked for a long time.' So if I had to pick any one thing that I think might be propelling this current forward motion, I'd guess it's that. But also, maybe just a lot of years of hard work and people coming to meetings and sending minutes. But now we've gotten something that we're galvanizing around."

Giving neighborhood and business associations some zoning tasks to address has given them something to gather around and work on together. This has resulted in their using zoning ideas to lay plans for their neighborhoods. It has also has also given them a platform to work on other areas of concern.

### Enhancing Community-Government Trust

The zoning ordinance process has enhanced trust between the community and the city government.

Several city employees have mentioned that the cumulative result of the master plan, zoning, and other community engagement processes is that everyone expects that decisions will be reached inclusively. As one put it, residents expect and want to be involved in decision-making. City staff and City commissioners want residents' involvement, instruct developers to involve residents or local businesses in their proposals, and demand an

account of the community's thoughts about a proposal or other decision before taking action.

In the zoning ordinance meeting that we observed, participants could see what planning staff members describe as "the feedback loop in action." They saw the zoning ordinance text had been changed to reflect their previous suggestions, and they were asked whether the revisions captured the changes they had intended. Through the discussion of density definitions, they demonstrated their expectations about participating in the rhythm of an ongoing discussion of the content and purpose of the zoning ordinance revision. They also communicated their trust in the staff to listen to the public's knowledge and think through its implications with them, use staff's technical skills to translate it into the language of the zoning ordinance, and then consult again with the participants to make sure the ordinance was reflective of what they wanted. The zoning outcomes enable more trust. For example, simplifying residential zoning into only two types of districts captures the essential goals articulated through the process, establishes less wiggle room, and provides a code that everyone can interpret consistently, based upon the understandings developed in the process.

This suggests to us that meaningfulness of the zoning process is that it is part of a stream of inclusive efforts. Trust is built through participation, trust is sustained through a continuing spirit of inclusiveness, and trust helps to energize community partnerships to tackle all kinds of unexpected problems.

#### Generating Benefits in Context

In sum, it seems to us that the zoning process is as much about building community as it is about zoning. Terrific energies have built around Zone Grand Rapids. However, community building cannot sustain itself without the community continuing to engage in real work. It needs to carry forward into another project, in an integrated, coordinated effort. Fortunately, we have observed a consistent commitment to inclusive management in Grand Rapids. That is, the city engages the people affected by city decision-making in participatory, deliberative processes and strives to make decisions that are beneficial for the community as a whole. Since 1998, we have traced this commitment through the cultural transformation process that the city engaged in with its employees, community-oriented government teams of city and community members, the participatory master plan and zoning ordinance revision processes, various approaches to addressing the city's budget shortfalls, contract negotiations with city employee unions, and ongoing efforts to address parks and recreation and environmental concerns.

Throughout this period, we have observed a spirit of experimentation with public participation. Some of the processes and outcomes have been more satisfactory than others in terms of the community's feeling that it has been welcomed and able to participate meaningfully in making decisions about Grand Rapids. What excites us about what we sometimes think of as the "Grand Rapids way" is the feeling that the city will never "arrive" at a perfect participatory system. If the community were to seize upon a successful example – the Master Plan process, for example – and simply apply it like a recipe over and over, all of the energy accumulating through these community-building efforts might well atrophy. Zone Grand Rapids is an outgrowth of Plan Grand Rapids, not Plan Grand Rapids II or merely a continuation of Plan Grand Rapids. For that reason, we look forward to seeing what Green Grand Rapids, the continuing budget negotiations, and other processes have in store.