

Grass Roots Democracy: A Guided Process for Citizens to Draft Their Community's Comprehensive Plan and Development Regulations

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Abstract : Given a guided process, the residents of a community are best able to determine what they want, and don't want, regarding future development. Grass-Roots Democracy (GRD) Workshops are that guided process. This is not merely "public participation" or "input," but making substantive decisions. The process, and the result, received a national APA Meritorious Planning Program Award. It works in a wide variety of communities and circumstances. The Permit System Typically, the community implements development policies through a Permit System, but that is not the only purpose of a GRD Workshop. A policy can be mandatory -- either prohibiting or requiring that the development includes some feature or result. Or it could be relative - encouraging a beneficial impact or discouraging a negative one. Each relative policy includes an importance score from 1-5. A developer chooses how to implement a policy within his particular project. A project receives a performance score from -2 (very negative) to +2 (highly beneficial), which is then multiplied by the importance to arrive at a weighted score. The weighted scores for all relative policies are totaled, and to be approved, the development must achieve a neutral or positive net impact on the community. Density bonuses can be awarded for higher scores. There can be dozens of policies addressing any social, environmental, economic, fiscal, cultural, aesthetic, or other issues. Delay, uncertainty and litigation add cost, but no value, to a development proposal. This process provides a high level of reliability and predictability for both the developer and the neighbors alike. Policy Development and Prioritization -- A GRD Workshop The policies are developed by the grass roots citizenry, working together using a guided process. The Workbook. Possible policies are drafted by the planning staff and consultant and adopted for inclusion in the Workbook by the Planning Commission. Participation. The goal is broad and representative participation, with particular emphasis on high school students and young adults. The most effective inducement to participation is a promise that the results will be forwarded by the Planning Commission for adoption by the City Council. Process. Participants self-identify their perspective, and then organize into heterogeneous small groups. They arrive at a consensus on each policy -- whether it is appropriate, if so whether it should be mandatory or relative, and if the latter, its importance. After the workshop, the results are tabulated and presented to the Planning Commission, along with a proposed procedure for development approval. Reliability. Done properly by a large, representative, diverse team of participants, GRD Workshops build consensus and ensure political support throughout the planning process. An Ongoing Planning Program. Things change, and instead of preparing an entirely new comprehensive plan or adopting a new zoning ordinance, policies can be easily added, deleted, or revised, either incrementally or comprehensively.

Keywords : workshop, public policy, development policy, grass roots, democracy, diversity, equity, inclusion, public process

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