

Critical Moment*Detroit by Detroiters***What is Community Engagement?**Posted on [July 21, 2011](#)*Views of a Former Detroit Works Project Strategist*

by Angie Allen

The major tension in Detroit's land use planning for decades lies in the question of involvement: which people are engaged and how—and what these power dynamics mean for Detroit as a city of neighborhoods. Land use plans are ultimately accountable to the people most impacted by them. Mayor Dave Bing has made the false claim that the Detroit Works Project is “not top-down.”

I have had the unique experience of serving Detroit city government during two very different phases of community-oriented planning projects: I was contracted by the Detroit Planning and Development Department to co-lead the implementation of [Mayor Dennis Archer's 1997 Detroit Community Reinvestment Strategy \(Detroit CRS\)](#). In the past year, I worked at Community Legal Resources as part of the current [Detroit Works Project](#) Civic Engagement Strategy team.

In 1997, Mayor Archer had community leaders collaborate with university faculty in urban and regional planning, three planning firms, city department and agency executives, and a partnership of several philanthropic foundations to collect and interpret data, and begin designs for Detroit CRS. This community visioning land use process was not the creation of community leaders, but it did have significant resident engagement and involvement.

Compared to the Detroit Works Project, which many have denounced as not having meaningful resident involvement, there are two main reasons why the Detroit CRS was effective: community leaders worked directly with the technical team to collect data, and then integrate that data into final reports after meaningful neighborhood-based exchanges; and the Mayor allowed executive level leadership to engage the community openly about their concerns with the process.

The DWP's 55-member Advisory Task Force includes a range of community and business leaders. However, its members, who have met a handful of times since last fall, have not been used to bridge the divide between government and residents. They are vital links to neighborhood-based land use plans and programs that could help the city develop more than just a “blueprint for the city.”

Detroit Works Project held summits between March and May focused on seniors, youth, environment, the faith community, entrepreneurs and the business community, artists and cultural institutions, and new Detroiters—particularly those that are new immigrants or foreign born. Each summit planning team had a minimum of three months to plan a two-to-four hour summit for approximately 250 to 450 people to result in broad land use issue recommendations to the Mayor by topic—not addressing neighborhood-level concerns. Advisory Task Force members were kept to a limited role.

Only the senior summit planning team, led by the [Detroit Area Agency on Aging](#) made an effort to engage the community. The DAA developed a planning team representing 40 city departments, city agencies, and community organizations, and held 20 pre-summit forums upon which their six-hour March summit was based. Approximately 450 people attended, more than half the total turnout at dozens of city-sponsored neighborhood cluster meetings held between late January and early March.

Compare this to the 1997 Detroit CRS, when 20 community leaders met monthly for six months to design the year-long process alongside executive city department leaders and university urban and regional planning faculty. Drawing on community leaders' efforts, the city administration then hosted a citywide meeting of over 800 community residents and leaders to elect leaders to ten community leadership boards composed of twenty members. These leadership boards would guide the year-long community visioning and strategic planning process.

Moreover, they established community information and data collection centers to supplement the leadership boards. The centers were housed in community-approved schools or existing community spaces, and employed youth, adults, and seniors to interact with their neighbors and collect information that would inform the plans of the community leadership boards. This entire process was funded by a philanthropic collaborative between the [Kresge](#) and Skillman Foundations. The Greater Downtown Partnership served as the fiduciary of the \$1.5 million project.

The city staff that coordinated this engagement strategy advised the community leadership boards. I was one of the four contracted Planner/Coordinators who managed the city's transfer of leadership to community boards. Planning firms worked with the community boards to develop the final neighborhood cluster plans.

These final reports were intended to be used by city planners, who would be assigned to each community's neighborhood cluster to make the plan real. No other planning process undertaken under the leadership of the city departments had so extensively engaged community residents and leaders – setting a definable and replicable precedent for what “community involvement” meant for future efforts.

Where did the plans go? Although the Detroit CRS was completed on time and on budget in February 1998, the city planning department mysteriously chose to archive the final reports. No planners or other resources were committed to continue work with the community.

The reports identify standard areas of land use such as transportation, education, and environment. They also include non-traditional areas of focus such as youth development and quality of life on the neighborhood and street level. To this day, the [Detroit CRS reports](#)—detailing revitalization goals for a 20-year span—are accessible at the City of Detroit Planning and Development Department website.

Current Detroit Works Project civic engagement leaders dismiss the Detroit CRS reports as pie-in-the-sky community dreams. But these neighborhood reports have much more detail at the street-level than the current city has developed.

Despite Archer's deliberate attempt to stop Detroit CRS, a few key processes took place. Several neighborhoods and grassroots organizations continued their own community planning efforts, some in combination with architects, urban planners, and engineers. The [Brightmoor Alliance](#), for example, has had approximately four different land use plans done in the past six years.

Also, community development organizations emerged to warehouse community data and share it with stakeholders undertaking planning efforts. The best-known of these organizations are [Data-Driven Detroit](#) and [Community Development Advocates of Detroit \(CDAD\)](#).

Both of these organizations work with established community development organizations and remain open to engaging block clubs. CDAD's February 2010 Neighborhood Revitalization Strategic Framework is very similar to the many "zone" proposals that have come out of the Detroit Works Project summit meetings—for example, art residences and education zones, ecclesiastical zones, and hubs for youth engagement.

One coalition related to comprehensive land use has also come forth: [the People's Movement Assembly](#), which is addressing the same types of issues (such as neighborhood stability, environment as a human right, media justice, and food justice) in a more resident-oriented way. But to be most effective, these types of organizations need a citywide infrastructure to allow the remaining 713,000 residents in Detroit to maximize the land use planning information they collect.

The institutional memory of these engagements with residents was lost with the end of the Archer administration. Promises made by executive-level staff were not kept, community development initiatives and organizations were established by philanthropic foundations and by national organizations to attempt yet again pave new ground in Detroit land use planning. These initiatives (which are highlighted on the DWP website) include the Skillman Foundation Good Neighborhoods Initiative, and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) Sustainable Communities program.

The Detroit CRS set a precedent to involve residents directly in the program implementation and engaged them in a dialogue that enabled them to learn from each other. Detroit CRS was not perfect but it was a successful model of resident engagement in land use planning that the city wrongly dumped.

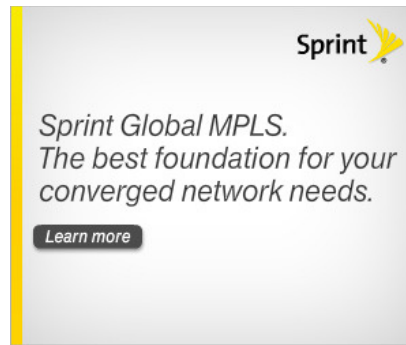
The Detroit Works Project collected community comment cards and video comments from residents during the last six months of meetings. It has not posted summaries as promised. The DWP has not held a Mayor's Advisory Task Force meeting since December 2010. Only two meetings in Phase 2 had flyers translated for non-English-speaking populations.

How can community outreach be successful if you do not know who you are reaching out to? If you cannot invite residents to participate in ways they are used to? If you do not share information in a timely way that can be understood and used?

Residents who will be most impacted by development need to engage a city administration or any community-serving organization that is committed through actions (not speeches) to involving them in planning—and carrying out those plans. Otherwise, more than just a moment in time will be lost.

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