

Citizen Planning Academies

by Michael Chandler

Virginia law requires each locality within the state to prepare and adopt a comprehensive or master plan. Despite the mandate to plan, the Virginia Code is silent as to what localities should do to help citizens understand planning and the planning process. Indeed, the Code is void of any reference, requirement, or suggestion that would help Virginians understand the complexities associated with comprehensive community planning. A check of your state planning enabling law will likely yield a similar result.

One of the major challenges facing most communities, and their planning boards, is how to explain planning and the planning process in terms citizens can understand.

Each October, Virginia Tech co-sponsors a three-day training institute for planning commissioners. During the 1995 program, we featured a session entitled "Does Virginia Need a Citizen's Planning Academy?" Our goal was to describe a way of allowing citizens to learn about planning in a non-threatening environment (i.e., outside the context of a heated public hear-

ing). Two county planning commissions took up the challenge and, in the fall of 1996, sponsored citizen planning academies (CPAs).

The balance of this article will highlight the approaches taken by King George County and Hanover County in developing their CPAs (which I was fortunate to have been able to assist with). I hope this will give you some "food for thought" about the use of CPAs as one approach to educating and involving members of the public in community planning.

KING GEORGE COUNTY

King George County is located in the predominantly rural, northern neck region of Virginia. The Potomac River bounds the county on the north and the Rappahannock on the south. The county lies close to some of Virginia's most rapidly growing areas.

The King George County Planning Commission sponsored the Citizen Planning Academy, receiving technical assistance from the RADCO Planning District Commission and from Virginia Tech. One of the county planning commission's principal reasons for sponsoring the CPA was

to interest citizens in the comprehensive plan revision process scheduled to begin in early 1997.

The county planning commission advertised the CPA in the local newspaper and also mailed a brochure describing the program to people who had previously completed a county land use issues and opportunities survey (the survey was conducted as a prelude to the comprehensive plan revision process).

The CPA featured four sessions, all held at the centrally located King George County High School. Each session was open to the public and free of charge. Sessions were in the evening, and lasted approximately two and one-half hours apiece.

The first session, which attracted sixty persons, focused on land use planning. Topics included the basics of planning, how the planning process works, planning's legal foundation, and the tools of planning. Faculty from Virginia Tech, joined by a private consultant, presented the material.

Session #2 examined the players and issues in planning. Speakers included members of the county planning commission, governing body, board of zoning appeals, and planning staff. Each described what they did and how they influenced the county planning process. Approximately forty person attended sessions #2 through 4.

Sessions #3 and 4 shifted from a predominantly lecture mode to one of group interaction. During session #3 participants were assigned to groups and challenged to discuss and critique the planning issues currently facing and likely to face King George County. Session #4 focused on the future. Once again, participants were assigned to groups. This time each of the six groups was asked to color a county base map depicting their preferred future county land use pattern, using a common set of land use categories. The maps were then posted and comparisons made. Strikingly, the six maps agreed on approximately ninety percent of the issues. This surprised



On-Line Comments

"In Tallahassee, proposed plan amendments to expand the size of our Urban Services Area, and several bitterly fought, but unsuccessful, appeals of development approvals by neighborhood groups led a former Planning Commissioner to initiate a citizen planning class. Kathy Archibald, on her own initiative, worked with staff to put together a syllabus. She advertised the class and was overwhelmed by the response. She ultimately capped the class at about 40. She provided each citizen with their own copy of the Plan.

The class met every other week, for almost 5 months. About 25 people stuck with the whole course, which covered most aspects of the our Comp Plan in detail.

A number of the graduates are actively involved in the current round of plan amendments, which included a number of significant text amendments proposed by the Chamber of Commerce. We are going to do a modified class in 1998, run by the Planning Department, more on a monthly schedule."

— Wendy Grey, Planning Director,
Tallahassee-Leon County, Florida

many participants because persons perceived as “tree lovers” found they wanted many of the same things as developers, and vice versa.

Participants gave very positive evaluations at the end of the CPA. More importantly, the King George County Planning Commission was successful in securing citizens willing to serve on a citizen’s task force to help rewrite the county’s comprehensive plan.

HANOVER COUNTY

Hanover County is located immediately north of Henrico County and Richmond. It includes a range of urban, suburban, and rural areas. Over the past twenty years it has experienced tremendous growth pressure from the Richmond metropolitan area.

The Hanover County Planning Commission and Planning Department sponsored the Citizen Planning Academy, with assistance from Virginia Tech. Hanover County’s reason for sponsoring the CPA centered on a desire to enable county residents to learn more about the planning process and planning issues. The planning commission also felt that by building interest in planning, more citizens might choose to get actively involved in future county planning activities and studies.

In contrast to the King George CPA, persons interested in attending the Hanover County CPA had to apply. To keep things manageable, a decision was made to limit attendance to thirty people. As a condition of acceptance, each participant agreed to attend all five sessions and complete all homework assignments. Remarkably, only two persons missed a session — and everyone did their homework!

The Hanover academy was offered in the evening during the workweek. Each session lasted three hours, and each was held in a different part of the county. Planning staff suggested this approach to help emphasize to participants both the need for a countywide perspective and the range of planning issues facing the county.

As a prelude to the first session, each participant received a copy of the county land use plan. Much like at the King George academy, the first session focused on the basics of planning, and included a review of the planning process, background on the history of planning in the county, and a discussion of present day

<i>King George County</i>	<i>Hanover County</i>
Four sessions; 10 hours total	Five sessions; 15 hours total
Open enrollment	Applications required
All sessions held at high school	Sessions held at different locations
Sessions at two week intervals	Sessions at two week intervals
No cost to participants	\$30 enrollment fee
Attendance voluntary	Attendance required
Handouts provided at each session	Notebook given each participant; plus handouts at each session
No assigned homework	Assigned homework
Lecture and group format	Lecture and group format
Refreshments provided	Refreshments provided, plus graduation dinner
Media covered all four sessions	Media covered final session
Participants evaluated sessions	Participants evaluated sessions
For more information, contact: Charles Sakowicz, County Planning Director: 540-775-7111	For more information, contact: Michael Crescenzo, Deputy County Planning Director: 804-730-6171

planning challenges.

During the second session the Hanover County attorney reviewed planning’s legal foundations, after which a private consultant and faculty from Virginia Tech discussed basic planning tools, such as zoning and subdivision regulation.

Session #3 introduced the class to some of the participants in the planning process. County planning staff, members of the planning commission and governing body, and others described their role in the planning process.

Much like the King George CPA, the last two sessions of the Hanover County CPA shifted from a lecture to group participation format. During these sessions each group was asked to develop a list of planning issues likely to face the county over the next ten years, and then to work on a future land use. As in King George County, the Hanover County participants then compared their maps (and, again, found many similarities). Session #5 also focused on the role visioning and thinking creatively can play in the planning process. A dinner and brief graduation exercise completed the academy.

Participants were quite positive in their evaluations of the value of the CPA. Indeed, the Hanover County planning staff

was challenged by the academy “graduates” to sponsor the program on an annual basis. Hanover County intends to offer another citizen’s planning academy in 1998.

SUMMING UP:

A fundamental goal of the citizens planning academy concept is to help educate, inform, and involve citizens in the community planning process. While King George County and Hanover County took somewhat different approaches to implementing their first citizens planning academies, both found their experience positive and beneficial. ♦

Michael Chandler is an Associate Professor and Community Planning Extension Specialist at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. Chandler also conducts planning commissioner training programs across the country, and is a frequent speaker at workshops. His column appears in each issue of the Planning Commissioners Journal. Chandler would be glad to speak with any PCJ readers interested in finding out more about citizen planning academies; he can be reached at: 540- 231-6921.

