

An Introduction to Charrettes

by Bill Lennertz, Aarin Lutzenhiser, and Tamara Failor

Community members too often become frustrated by limited public participation opportunities when major projects are being proposed. This can come up with neighborhood or area revitalization plans; large-scale development proposals (especially when affecting residential areas) or master plans; new annexations; and similar situations.

People may attend public meetings with high hopes for the results, only to conclude that decisions are being made behind closed doors. This can result in apathetic sentiments like, “they’re just going to do what they want whether or not I get involved.”

At the same time, planning commissioners are often disappointed when large-scale, controversial projects or plans are presented to them at public hearings attended by crowds of angry residents complaining about having little prior input. The result can be contentious, time-consuming, and unproductive public hearings, and a hardening of antagonisms between the various parties.

THE CHARRETTE PROCESS

An important goal of a charrette is to bring decision makers and community members together in one place to create a plan that represents a detailed, feasible agreement – a consensus which can otherwise take months to achieve.

The French word “charrette” literally means “cart” and is used to describe the final intense work effort expended by art and architecture students to meet a project deadline. At the École des Beaux Arts in Paris during the 19th century, proctors circu-

lated carts to collect final drawings while the students frantically put finishing touches on their work. The charrettes that we at the National Charrette Institute teach combine this creative, intense design work session with a collaborative public workshop.

A charrette usually runs between four and seven days (depending on the complexity of the issues) and involves an intensive series of meetings and design sessions. This time compression facilitates creative problem solving by accelerating decision making and reducing unconstructive negotiation tactics. It also encourages people to abandon their usual working patterns and “think outside of the box.”

We build into the charrette process a series of three major “feedback loops” where design ideas are created by a charrette design team based upon project constraints and a public vision, and then re-presented within hours for further review, critique, and

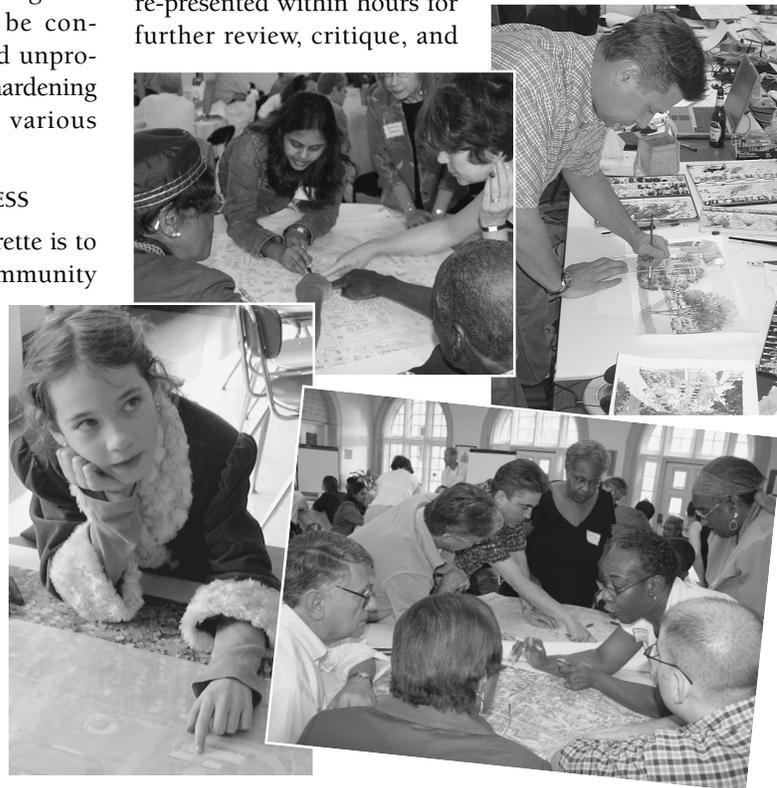
refinement. Regular stakeholder input and reviews quickly build trust in the process. These feedback cycles also foster a holistic understanding of complex problems by all participants, and form the basis of a plan that reflects all viewpoints.

The design team which organizes and runs the charrette is typically comprised of the project sponsor (e.g., the city planning agency, developer, and/or community group) and a multi-disciplinary team of professionals. This group is usually staffed, at a minimum, with planners, architects, landscape architects, transportation engineers, and economists. This team is usually comprised of consultants, sometimes augmented by agency staff.

A multi-disciplinary team is important in ensuring that the design work during each step of the charrette is realistic. To create a feasible plan, every deci-

sion point must be fully informed, especially by the legal, financial, and engineering disciplines. The focus on feasibility brings a level of seriousness and rigor to the process for everyone involved.

An important objective of the charrette process is to identify areas of disagreement. During the charrette, the design team works to create design and planning solutions that resolve areas for which there may be no readily apparent solution. A well-run charrette reduces the potential for



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surprise conflict arising late in the game.

Before a successful charrette can be held, there's need for preparation. This first phase of getting "charrette-ready" can last anywhere from six weeks to nine months. The second phase is the charrette itself. Following the charrette is the third phase, or plan implementation, which is required to ensure project success.

Phase One: Getting Charrette-Ready

Getting charrette-ready includes project set-up and organization, identification of project constraints and objectives, stakeholder involvement, information gathering, feasibility studies, and logistics planning.

Being "people-ready" means that the key stakeholders have agreed to participate in the charrette process, that there is a shared understanding of the nature of the project, and that everyone understands how the process will work and what their roles in it will be.

Being "information-ready" means that all the information required to make informed decisions during the charrette

is available. This is usually comprised of studies and analysis of existing conditions. The type of information and level of detail required varies with the project.

Outreach and engagement is key to the charrette preparation phase. To assure diverse and representative participation in the charrette, multiple outreach methods must be used. Some of these methods include: attending neighborhood meetings, engaging churches and organized groups, one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders, mailings, phone calls, e-mails, handbills, signs, websites, and newsletter announcements.

Stakeholders should include final decision makers, all people who will be affected by the outcome, people who have power to assist, and very importantly, people who can block a decision. The objectives of the various stakeholders are identified through meetings and inter-

views before the charrette. Potential blockers must also be engaged early. Surprisingly often, they turn into the biggest project supporters.

The design team typically sets up a charrette studio at or near the project site. The studio is a complete temporary design/planning office *and* community meeting space. Close proximity to the site is important in order to make it easy for people to participate and for the design team to have quick access to the site. We've worked on charrettes where the studios have been located in places such as empty main street storefronts, community centers, high schools, or armories.

Residents, land owners, business owners, and representatives from community organizations, provide vision, input, and review throughout the charrette. This involvement is solicited through scheduled meetings, open public meetings, and by enabling individuals to simply drop by the charrette studio.

Phase Two: The Charrette

Charrettes generally range in length from four to seven days. The following describes a typical seven-day charrette schedule.

Day One of is all about sharing information. The charrette begins with an open public "hands-on" workshop where participants work in small groups to describe and draw their vision of what the place will look like ten or twenty years in the future after the project is complete. A community representative from each team presents their top ideas to the whole assembly. Everyone learns from each other's work and several alternative themes begin to emerge.

On Day Two and subsequent days, the design team works to develop plans based on the public's vision and the project objectives. The team meets with key stakeholders and develops concept alternatives. Design is a powerful tool for establishing a shared vision. Drawings illustrate the complexity of problems and can be used to resolve conflicts by proposing previously unexplored solutions that represent win/win outcomes.

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The Planning Commission's Role in a Charrette Process

Planning commissioners can play a variety of roles in a charrette, ranging from leadership positions during the charrette to being active observers. At a minimum, a commissioner should participate in the charrette public meetings so as to be a fully informed about the project and the process. Contrast this with the conventional planning process where commissioners first see a plan when it is well along in the process.

With a charrette, all stakeholders are involved from the beginning and throughout the design process. This approach fosters shared understanding and co-authorship of planning decisions, which forms a solid foundation for project implementation.

Most charrettes precede the formal project application and public hearings

process. However some jurisdictions recognize that those who conduct charrettes are being asked to spend additional time by going through another round of public hearings after the charrette. Baltimore County and Sarasota County allow developers an accelerated process with fewer public meetings if they do a charrette. In some cases the developers are also required to adhere to a higher standard of design guidelines.

The question of "open meeting" laws and "ex parte" communications may come into question in charrettes. Although these laws vary from state to state, in most of the communities we've worked with public officials can attend and participate at charrettes, provided they do not meet as a body to make decisions at the charrette. However, this is something you should check on with your city attorney beforehand to avoid any potential problems.

On Day Three, the community is invited and encouraged to give their input on the developing designs while ideas are fresh. This is usually done through a public meeting or open house.

On Day Four, the design team synthesizes the input and narrows the number of alternatives, working toward the goal of a preferred plan.

On Day Five, the design studio opens to a mid-course public review of the ongoing work. This session is often the climax of the charrette. The remaining options are debated and then rated for their performance against the project objectives and public vision. The best features from each option are merged into a new solution. Often during these sessions, solutions to “unsolvable” problems are created. People are overheard leaving these sessions saying things such as, “now I see why alleys are important,” or “I understand now how parallel parking contributes to walkability.”

On Day Six, equipped with the information and input from the public open house, the charrette design team moves forward to investigate the final, preferred design in detail. Drawings at multiple scales are created and the project’s performance is analyzed. Implementation strategies are also created.

On the final evening of the charrette, the design team presents all elements of the project including master plans, building designs, economic and transportation impacts and strategies, and the implementation plan. Everything needed to move the project forward is covered.

Phase Three: Implementation

Following the charrette, the design team analyzes and tests the plans. Addi-

tional stakeholder input is gathered. Final changes are made and the plans are presented to the public at a charrette follow-up meeting that occurs no more than one month later.

The goal of the plan implementation phase is to refine and finalize charrette products that will guide the project through adoption and development. It is important to maintain political leadership and support, keep community members informed and involved, and coordinate with approving agencies.

SUMMING UP:

Everyone involved in a community planning effort benefits from a process that is accelerated, well-planned, and productive. Charettes provide a way of designing major or controversial projects and plans so they are more likely to be approved and implemented. This is the result of the stakeholder buy-in that comes from carefully structured, but creative, community collaboration. ♦

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How Much Does a Charrette Cost?

The charrette event cannot be separated from the preparation and implementation phases. Therefore, it is not possible to budget for a charrette in isolation. The cost is completely dependent on project scale and complexity, how much preparation work has to be done, available resources and data collection needs, and stakeholder outreach and engagement.

The price range for projects using a charrette, including preparation and implementation, can range from \$75,000 to \$250,000 and up.

Charettes are paid for by a public agency, a private developer, or both, as in public/private partnerships. Charettes that focus on public planning projects (such as comprehensive or general plans) are usually paid for by a public agency, while developers pay for charettes that involve development projects. The public agency and the developer sometimes share costs for large-scale master plans.

It is possible to reduce project costs through the use of volunteers, local agencies, and university architecture and planning departments. The National Charrette Institute and other organizations are working to create more affordable charrette models and resources, such as the NCI Charrette RFP Template, *The Charrette Handbook*, and the NCI Charettes CD-ROM.

For more ideas on how to do a charrette on a tight budget, go to: www.knowledgeplex.org/xchat.html, then scroll down to the archives for July 17, where you can hear three experienced charrette organizers discuss ways of keeping costs down. A link to this discussion will also be posted at: www.plannersweb.com/charettes.html.



Continuing on the PlannersWeb:

What do the Boston Red Sox, Fenway Park, and charettes have in common? Find out more on our PlannersWeb site, with a fascinating report put together by PCJ General Manager Betsey Krumholz. We’re also posting a list of resources for learning more about charettes, with several online links. Go to: www.plannersweb.com/charettes.html