Community Planning that Works

by Amy R. Naylor, Anne Tate, and Joel S. Russell

[Editor's Note: The following article pieces together the observations of several of the key people involved in setting up Brunswick, Maine's remarkably successful planning "charrette" held in September 1991. Amy Naylor was (and is) the planning director for Brunswick; Anne Tate is a Boston based architect who served as the principal consultant responsible for facilitating the charrette; Joel Russell is a planning consultant and attorney with Woodlea Associates of Salt Point, New York, and was also a member of the consulting team. I was fortunate enough to have been able to attend one of the evening sessions of this four-day long charrette, and can personally attest to the vitality and extraordinarily high level of citizen involvement].

Groundwork

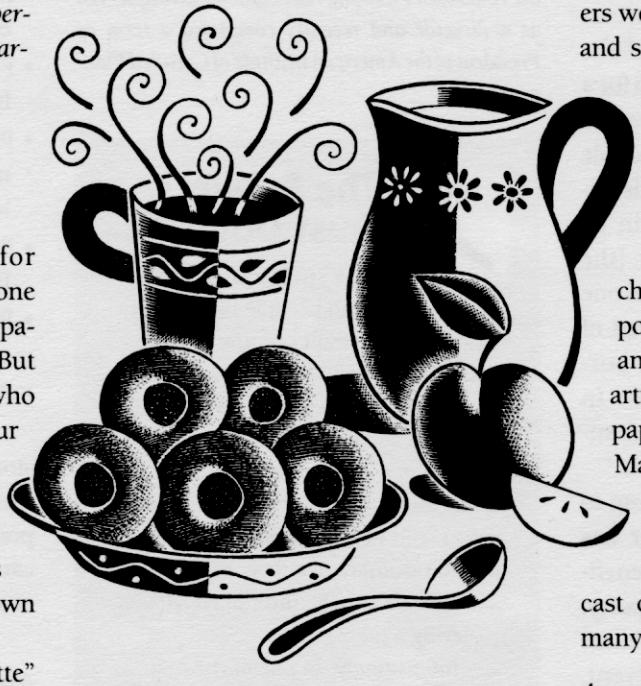
Amy Naylor:

As the planning director for Brunswick, Maine, population 21,000, one of my jobs has been to oversee the preparation of the new comprehensive plan. But it was town residents, not planners, who made citizen participation history in our community. What follows is the story of Brunswick's experience. I hope it will encourage other citizens and planners to try their hand at what is possibly the most democratic form of town planning around.

The idea for the Brunswick "charrette" came from a number of unrelated events. *Charrette, p.11* Most importantly, as the planning director I was beginning to feel that the town's new plan might be written by a committed, but relatively small number of people. We had advertised our meetings and used all the common public notice methods, but I was still concerned that when we eventually had to go before the Town Council for approval of the plan, three years' worth of work might be lost because someone, somehow, had been left out of the loop.

Anne Tate:

I was retained as a consultant to help facilitate the charrette process. Joining me were Rick Chellman, a traffic engineer, and Joel Russell, a land use lawyer specializing in rural issues. The planning for the event was done by Amy Naylor and many local volunteers. When we — the outside consultants — arrived, the stage was set for a four day public event during which it was hoped that townspeople would create a blueprint for the community's growth for the next ten years.



Amy Naylor:

As I developed the work program, it became apparent that success depended upon a small army of volunteers. I also had to convince other people that it could work. The Chairman of the Comprehensive Plan Committee agreed to support the idea, with some polite reservations. He wasn't sure that "if we 'built' it, they would come."

I decided to place an ad in the local paper asking for volunteers to plan the charrette. It was a pleasant surprise when about ten people showed up. They included the owner of a local real estate agency, a member of the Town Council, the Town Commons Committee chairwoman, a local activist who works with teenage mothers, and several retirees. In the end it was their work that made the charrette happen.

The strategy was to kick off the charrette with a free "town supper." This unique approach became fun; each day the volunteers seemed to think up another creative twist to the publicity campaign. Flyers were printed in the form of invitations and sent to over 500 people. The invitations touted the main course "Brunswick Stew" and teased with the promise of a "peep show" where the audience could "rank the Brunswick beauties."

The weekend before the charrette, committee members placed posters and invitations in every nook and cranny of Brunswick. They wrote articles and press releases for the local paper. For weeks prior to the charrette, Marybeth Burbank, the Town Councilor on the committee reminded her colleagues of the event. Since Town Council meetings are broadcast over public cable, this meant that many other people were also reminded.

Anne Tate:

The charrette was planned to take place over several days during the day and into the evening to accommodate a diverse range of schedules. Office employees could only come in the evening, farmers came in the afternoon. A class of high school students spent one whole day with us. The core team kept going so that people could participate whenever convenient. The drawn-out schedule proved to be an advantage because we were able to generate curiosity about the event and to capitalize

on the momentum. People enjoyed their participation and talked up the day's events; new people came the next day. Supplementing the word of mouth network, we had excellent newspaper coverage. The Portland Press Herald decided to cover the event daily, and the Brunswick paper followed suit. Local coverage began in earnest with front page photos of vocational students preparing ten gallon pots of Brunswick Stew.

The Charrette

Amy Naylor:

The charrette began at 6:00 pm on Wednesday, September 19. Over 300 people attended the dinner and "peep show." Both newspaper and television covered the event. One reporter actually escorted the oldest living resident to the dinner so she could write a story from her perspective.

As slides were shown the audience laughed at pictures of cows drinking from bathtubs in the pasture and booed at images of strip development. Neighbors recognized each other in slides of gatherings on the town mall. The talk started. "Which one did you like best?" asked one resident to another. "Which one was worst?" People thought the show was "interesting," "fun," "a good evening out," and the stew "the best I've ever had — and free!" I left the meeting hall feeling we had succeeded even if no one showed up for the next three days. *Visual Surveys*

Anne Tate:

After the "peep" show, Joel and I (along with Richard Remsen who had worked on a traditionally planned village for Rockport, Maine) gave short illustrated talks comparing village scale development and rural scenes with contemporary car-sensitive planning. In these brief presentations we were able to set the stage for treating a new plan as a positive opportunity by showing examples of how well written codes and guidelines could produce or protect the types of environments most people admired.

Amy Naylor:

The next morning began as a slow trickle. By 8:30 am people were wandering around the cavernous third floor of Fort Andross, the 19th century former textile mill that was the only place in downtown Brunswick large enough to hold the charrette. A local real estate agent had "coerced" a group of his colleagues to staff a hospitality table by the door. Each person who walked through the door was greeted, asked to register, shown the agenda, and informed about what was happening. Everyone was made to feel welcome and directed toward the action.

By 9:30 there were eighty people engaged in vigorous discussion about their neighborhoods. I wandered around the floor to make sure things were going smoothly, but did not get involved in the workings of the exercise. This was the people's meeting, and they were accepting the challenge.

Anne Tate:

The first exercise asked everyone to draw a line around their neighborhood and describe in five or six points what made it a neighborhood. This worked extremely well. It gave people a chance to literally locate themselves on the maps. We learned what people cared about, and they became grounded in their own expertise about their town.

Amy Naylor:

Over dinner our consultants began a rehash of the day in preparation for the evening meeting. Anne, Joel and Rick were beginning to "chomp at the bit" because they had been told to listen, not talk, for the entire day. The comprehensive plan

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"Charrette"

The term charrette, originally a reference to the carts used to collect the work done by French architecture students at the Institute of Beaux Arts, came to mean an intensive period of work done against an important deadline. More recently useage of the word has shifted, so that it now refers to a multidisciplinary group effort to solve a particular problem.

Editor's Note: Visual Surveys

The Bruswick charrette used one form of visual survey — billed as the Brunswick "peep show" — to begin the charrette. The idea was to get participants to react to, and rate, slides showing different aspects of the town's physical environment. In Brunswick, the "peep show" also helped break the ice at the start of the charrette. The next issue of the *Journal* will feature an article by James Constantine of the firm of Anton Nelessen Associates which pioneered the use of visual preference surveys and continues to work with communities across the country in conducting such surveys. Constantine will examine, in greater depth, just what these surveys involve and how they can best be used.

Remember To:

by Amy Naylor

Have Plenty of Food. We always had good, free food around. Coffee, donuts, fruit and juice were available all day. Lunch was catered by a local restaurant. We even told people they could stop by for their coffee break or for lunch on us. A cadre of volunteers baked hundreds of cookies, brownies, and other sweets. Remember, food is love.

Use a Variety of Methods to Get Input. At one point we simply posted a large piece of paper on the wall by the exit and asked for comments about various subjects that came up. We also posted the schedule in many places so everyone knew what was happening at any par-

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ticular time. Last, we asked for written comments on the process from those on their way out.

Make Sure to Keep a List of Attendees. We knew the name and address of each person who came to the charrette. At the end of the event a nineteen page summary was mailed to everyone on the list, with a cover letter asking for comments or corrections to the summary. This follow-up let everyone know their comments had been heard, and gave them a second chance to provide input. The summary has been a critical component of the documentation process.

Document, Verify, and Ask for Feedback. In addition to the summary, we also kept all maps, charts, lists and other written information that came out of the charrette groups. Some of the maps have been used over and over again; and the impact of bringing out the original map is interesting in that it verifies and reinforces the original work. No one says, "I didn't say that," or "I wasn't heard."

Have a Good Time. Don't take things too seriously, and remember that the most important thing is simply to get citizens to take an interest in their community, to share their knowledge, and to meet other people who also care.

Have Faith in the Public. Use their work to set your agenda. Invite the political decision-makers to every event so they see firsthand what the public wants. But if you're not interested in what people really have to say, don't do a charrette.

The Exercises

by Amy Naylor

1. Town Supper. The purpose was to start the charrette with an interesting event that promoted fellowship and community spirit.

2. Visual Survey. A series of visual images of the town was shown after supper. The idea was to ease people into the thought process of planning for their community. Everyone can relate to visual images and form some sort of opinion. It got people thinking about the

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committee was firm about the charrette being a time for "Brunswick residents to talk, not consultants."

It was raining when I headed back to Fort Andross. I opened up the door to a room of nearly one hundred people. The group leaders who had been chosen at the end of the day's exercises were taping their work to the wall while people gathered around them asking questions. Some grabbed the ever-brewing coffee and never-ending cookies and just caught up on local news. Others were going from wall to wall on which working drawings had been tacked. Many were admiring the colorful digitized maps, picking out their spot in the world and finding what the soils, slope and water table were on their lot.

Anne Tate:

The second stage of the charrette process involved defining, and then mapping, "growth" and "rural" areas — terms used by the Maine State Planning law. Rick Chellman and I worked with those focusing on "growth" areas, while Joel facilitated the "rural" areas discussion.

Amy Naylor:

At 9:00 am on Friday another eighty people returned to designate future growth and rural areas. The consultants were crucial at this point. By the end of the day one farmer offered to help pay for Mr. Russell's expenses if he would return to help rewrite the town's zoning ordinance for the rural area. As an outsider with new ideas, the fact that Joel had spent the first two days listening made a great deal of difference to the public. When at last he did speak, he was heard.

Joel Russell:

Working with the rural group, I found tremendous resentment against zoning in general. Many landowners saw zoning as big brother telling people what to do with their land. Several people pointed out that the rural tradition is freedom of land use, a "live and let live" attitude. For example, people used to be allowed to operate small businesses on their properties before zoning came in and declared the countryside to be "agricultural/residential." Suddenly, the only uses that could be made of a piece of property were farming — not exactly the most profitable of enterprises — or suburban sprawl development. Rural people wanted more freedom of choice. They were afraid that labeling the countryside "rural" would further limit their ability to make a living on the land.

I pointed out that a "rural" designation could be implemented by making the zoning less, rather than more, restrictive. This could be done by allowing greater freedom for small-scale businesses, as well as more flexibility in lot sizes. When rural landowners realized that protecting rural character could mean more freedom rather than less, they began to see the "rural" designation more positively.

Anne Tate:

In the discussion of the growth area, we focused on the characteristics of the town and its neighborhoods. The problems of increasing development inside the town very quickly turned to traffic. It was clear that we could spend all three days talking about traffic. In order to keep the discussion moving, Rick and I hung up a map of the community with a large blank piece of paper next to it. For the rest of the charrette people gathered around this and noted their "favorite" trouble spots, or wrote down complaints and suggestions. We did take time with the group to discuss various strategies for slowing or diverting traffic in particular areas, and to assure people that we would be able to address their concerns in the implementation phase.

With a greater sense of confidence about what the designations could mean for Brunswick, people broke into three groups to draw maps of the growth and rural limit lines. We spread out the maps, magic markers were flying almost as thick as the advice.

The maps were drawn on tracing paper, so that we could pin them up on top of each other. When the moment of truth came, there was a remarkable degree of concurrence among the maps. I asked whether they could identify and characterize the areas where the maps diverged. It

was quickly established that each discrepancy marked a particular issue of concern in the town. Once we removed these issues from discussion, the basic outline was quickly agreed upon. This was a basic strategy we returned to again and again. Rather than try to push through an agreement, we broke the issue down into distinct conflicts, established remaining agreements, and set up discussions on the trouble spots.

Each trouble spot embodied a different set of concerns and was handled differently by its discussion group. For example, Cook's Corner is a sprawling strip on the edge of town. The discussion of this area began when I asked whether development should be encouraged there. I was told, "No, it's awful, there shouldn't be any more of it." Then I asked how the area would improve if it could not grow. The challenge: "If this could develop into whatever you wanted, what would you include?" led to a flurry of creative suggestions. We only interfered when we heard things like "that will never work." Everything they wanted to see was possible, desirable, and entirely of their own imagining. What the citizens of Brunswick wanted at Cook's Corner was more of what they already knew well: a compact, convenient walkable mixed-use place.

Amy Naylor:

Anne Tate and Rick Chellman didn't just talk, they drew and wrote. Anne and Rick convinced participants that not all growth was bad, and that we couldn't correct problems in existing developed areas unless we allowed them to continue to develop. Residents began to develop a vision

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The Exercises

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elements that made up Brunswick.

3. Neighborhood Identification. This exercise further enhanced participant links with the planning process by getting them to identify their own neighborhood and describe what made it a neighborhood. This exercise asked participants to talk about something they knew personally — especially good for people who might otherwise be reluctant to speak up.

4. Opportunities and Constraints. The purpose of this exercise was to provide a foundation for the designation of "rural" and "growth" areas, by having people understand that not all land is equal in its capacity to handle different kinds of land uses. For example, some land may be suitable for building, but only with expensive construction techniques.

5. Defining "Growth" and "Rural." Before designating growth and rural areas, it was important to reach consensus on the meaning of the terms.

6. Mapping "Growth" and "Rural" Areas. This exercise was intended to learn where participants felt growth should occur, and where rural areas should be retained. The point was not to solve problem issues, but to define them — to get issues and points-of-view on the table. Solutions could be worked out later; the key was to get people to participate.

7. Strategies to Make "Growth" Areas Grow, and Keep "Rural" Areas Rural. During the previous exercises, the major goal had been to encourage participants to share their knowledge, views and impressions. This last exercise was where the "technical experts" were called to share their knowledge to help achieve the land-use policies developed during the previous exercises. While this was the last exercise of the Brunswick charrette, it was followed by an important final meeting at which the residents who participated in the charrette summarized the work that had been done.

Editor's Note: The Town Council & The Charrette

The following is from a conversation with Marybeth Burbank, a member of the Brunswick Town Council and active participant in the charrette:

Journal: How was the charrette useful to the Council?

Burbank: The charrette succeeded in documenting public preferences. This will be important when the comprehensive plan goes before the Council for approval. The Council was also kept informed of what was going to take place.

Journal: Was there anything that surprised you about the charrette?

Burbank: The most surprising thing was the level of participation. We were listening to the people, and the people felt this. Then they opened up. It takes courage to participate, but when peoples' ideas were written on a map or taken down in notes, this "hooked" them. The charrette process was new and different and real.

Journal: Was there any concern about bringing in outside consultants to facilitate the charrette?

Burbank: Actually, having outside consultants was an advantage. They were unbiased and carried no political baggage. They also had the ability to bring in their outside experiences. Amy Naylor [the Planning Director] was also critical to the success of the process — she didn't have her own agenda, and really wanted to hear what the people of Brunswick thought.

The Role of the Professional Consultant

by Anne Tate

I firmly support participatory planning and the empowerment of citizen groups. At the same time, professional planners and consultants have important roles to play in education and implementation. Often towns hire excellent consultants to assess their resources, note their trouble spots, "take the local tempera-

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ture" — and then turn this into a set of goals and a plan. When faced with the next phase, which involves adjusting local zoning codes, subdivision regulations, etc., the community is back on its own. Something about this sequence seems amiss. The consultants tell the town what kind of future to want and then the townspeople are left to figure out how to get it. I think this is upside down.

The Brunswick charrette worked in part because it was rightside up. The professional planners were the support services for the first phase, answering questions, untying knots, facilitating discussions. The citizens set the agenda, established the priorities, and in the end were the framers of the comprehensive plan, assembled and edited by their town planner.

Most communities have a strong sense of identity, likes, dislikes, and goals for the future. Yet, they are often impaired by a fatalistic attitude toward growth, a conviction that commercial growth neccessitates strip development, that housing density means condos in the fields, and that zoning represents a reduction in property rights. Communities need to understand that other visions are attainable, economically viable and legally defensible. This is where well-informed professionals can be useful educators.

A second role for professional consultants is in the implementation phase, where their expertise and experiences from other places can best be utilized. Consultants can often help a community move quickly from the objectives set out in its comprehensive plan to specific ordinances and techniques designed to implement these objectives.

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of neighborhoods mixed with parks and retail/commercial space.

We completed the last exercise at 5:30 pm on Friday the 20th of September. On Saturday morning, we showed the town what we had done.

The final day of the charrette began at 9 am — again with plenty of coffee, orange juice and donuts on hand. The idea of using the results of the visual survey as a way to keep citizens interested appeared to work. About one hundred people stood on the floor of the Coffin Elementary School eating, drinking coffee, talking, and looking at the maps and drawings from the previous two days.

The speakers were the citizens of Brunswick. They began to describe their neighborhoods slowly at first. Some were not accomplished speakers and were very nervous about making a presentation. But as they looked out at the faces in front of them, they realized there was no one they didn't know. As we got further into each presentation, the give and take between speaker and audience increased, and the meeting developed into a discussion.

As noon approached and participants realized the four-day marathon was ending, we began to congratulate each other. It was almost as though we were saying goodbye and didn't want the charrette to end.

Joel Russell:

Well, maybe it wasn't quite a love-in. A four-day meeting cannot work miracles, especially in matters as controversial as a town's growth and development. However, this process worked better than any I have ever seen. The open charrette format, with over 500 active participants, led to a broad-based consensus about growth and rural preservation. Distrust, fear and alienation were transformed into positive community energy. What emerged was a clear and well-considered expression of what the people really wanted. Isn't that what democracy is all about? ♦