

September 23, 2011

Dear Planning Staff and AECOM,

Thank you again for meeting with the Alliance last week, and for sending documents regarding the Comp Plan Character District process for our review and comment. I'll provide some feedback here that I hope is helpful to you in designing and facilitating the upcoming workshops.

First, I would like to point out that there is still a lot of confusion around what exactly each phase of the process will focus on. These documents help clarify, but please note that you have not been consistent in what to name each phase, which adds to the confusion. For example, your three documents give three totally different names to the first phase of the process: "Illustrating our Vision Workshops," or "Identifying," or "Existing Character Workshops". I'd encourage you to use consistent naming, and think that "Existing Character" and "Future Character" Workshops are the clearest names for what people should expect in each phase.

Second, I'm unclear how many Character Districts there will be. You presented 15 to the electeds, but they decided to add one more, so don't you have 16 now? Your documents still say 15.

Moving on to the Workshop Agenda, we have a number of concerns and suggestions. I'll present those point by point on the questions you present in your agenda:

1. *What makes the District special?*

What sort of info are you hoping for here? What will you actually DO with this info? Unless you're clear how you would USE the answer to this question, don't ask it.

2. *Where do people live and what are the housing types?*

3. *Where are the employment or commercial centers?*

4. *What amenities are present (trails, transit, recreation, schools)?*

We think that questions 2, 3, and 4 are largely a waste of the public's time, which should be used on topics where their perspective is more important. Planning staff already have extremely detailed answers to these questions, displayed on highly accurate maps. Don't ask a question you already have the answer to.

5. *Where are the key sensitive wildlife and visual areas?*

This seems like an important question, because existing maps (Natural Resources Overlay and Scenic Resources Overlay), don't have the fine level of detail that local residents can provide from their intimate knowledge of the area. What will you do with the answers to this question? Will you draw new areas on the map as being critical to wildlife and scenery, based on anecdotal input from residents?

6. *Identify areas that are likely to change. What are some opportunities for these areas?*

7. *Describe improvements needed to preserve and enhance the character of the district as well as meet the community's goals.*

Questions 6 and 7 seem to clearly belong in Phase 2, the “Future Character Workshops.” We don’t think that adding these questions into a workshop on “Existing Character” makes sense. At the very least, it is extremely important that you focus these questions in Phase 2 even if people begin to talk about this in Phase 1.

8. *Based on the definition contained in the Comprehensive Plan, is the District more suitable as a complete neighborhood or a rural area?*

Question 8 seems to be THE major point of this workshop, and should be emphasized, not tacked on the end.

Additional Questions we feel should be included:

First, remember that you had previously talked about the primary purpose of Phase 1 being to adjust any Character District boundaries as needed based on public feedback. If so, we believe this should be an explicit question, and an emphasis of this workshop. Your workshop agenda says “Actual districts to be determined,” so please be clear in asking people to work on that. However, I will note that we are still not convinced that the actual boundaries of the Character Districts matter for much.

Second, we feel the public could provide valuable input on their sense of the “Character” of each character district. You will capture some of the technical, quantitative information on character with your questions, but you haven’t done much to gather information on the more nebulous QUALITATIVE character of each district. What is the social character of each district? Young families? Retired? Wealthy? Working class? Highly organized and cohesive? Individualistic? Tendency to use pathways, or only cars? This is data that may not be as readily available to planners, and can be useful in thinking about what issues to focus on in each character district, and how to approach the different audiences that live in each district. We would encourage you to ask questions that get at the qualitative social character of each district.

Thoughts on Public Participation


We do not anticipate broad public participation in Phase 1 of your process, due to very late release of a plan for the workshop, confusion about what the purpose of the workshop is, and a very skeptical and burned out public.

The Alliance is interested in strongly encouraging public participation in Phase 2 of your process, but in order to do so we need much more detail on how you intend to conduct Phase 2. We would like to work with you in identifying exactly how you will organize and facilitate the workshops in Phase 2. We need clarity on what questions will be asked, what workshop format will be used, and how participants’ feedback will be used to inform your decisions. We also need to know where these workshops will be held, and which character districts will be the primary focus of each workshop. Bear in mind that we need answers to all of these questions by the first week of October if you expect to engage the public meaningfully in Phase 2.

The Alliance respectfully requests an opportunity to meet with planning staff and AECOM in the immediate future to discuss your plans for Phase 2 and provide you with suggestions before you finalize the design of the next workshops.

Thank you again for your work on this vital step in our Comprehensive Plan, and we look forward to continuing to work with you.

Sincerely,



Trevor Stevenson
Executive Director