

Neighborhood Advisory Committee Report

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Introduction

In May 2005, the Athens-Clarke County Mayor & Commission authorized the creation of the Neighborhood Notification Initiative (NNI). The NNI program was developed in order to advance the Neighborhood Planning goals identified in the 1999 Comprehensive Plan. Specifically, the Mayor & Commission selected the NNI program to facilitate improved communication channels between developers and affected neighborhoods. A pilot Neighborhood Planning Unit (NPU) program was also considered at this time, but rejected in favor of the county-wide notification initiative. The Mayor and Commission elected to revisit the need for an NPU system or another type of neighborhood planning program after a full year of the NNI's operation.

As a component of the adopted initiative, Mayor Davison appointed a ten-member Neighborhood Advisory Committee (NAC) in March 2006 to monitor the success of notification improvements and to recommend to the Mayor & Commission any next steps in Neighborhood Planning. The NAC members represent the eight (8) regular and two (2) super commission districts. In order to bring the most inclusive perspective possible to the evaluation of the NNI, member selection included residents of organized neighborhoods with active associations as well as residents of unorganized or organizing areas. The findings of the NAC are the focus of this report and outlined as follows:

- I. Defining the NNI
- II. Measures of Communication Improvements
 - a. "Pre-Application" Communication
 - b. E-mail and Registration Activity
- III. Participation Matters
 - a. Internet-based Communication
 - b. Organizational Challenges
 - c. Accessibility
 - d. Apathy and Mistrust
- IV. Other Neighborhood Planning Programs
 - a. Mandatory Community Meetings
 - b. Neighborhood Plans
 - c. Neighborhood Grants
 - d. Neighborhood Councils
- V. Recommendations
 - a. Implemented Recommendations
 - b. Additional NNI Recommendations
 - c. Beyond NNI-Additional Neighborhood Planning Steps

Defining the NNI

The NNI functions as a communication framework by establishing e-mail notification groups for registered neighborhood areas and other special interest areas. NNI neighborhoods are formed when organized or organizing neighborhood organizations register to participate in the NNI. Functionally, the difference between the NNI overlay and the NNI neighborhood group is that there is no contact person for an overlay--it is simply an e-mail notification group for which anyone can sign up, whereas an NNI neighborhood has a designated contact person who receives early notification about certain proposals such as rezones, planned developments and special uses.

In February 2006, the first group of neighborhoods and special interest overlay areas were adopted in conjunction with the NNI, and new groups are added regularly as registration information is submitted or overlays are suggested. Members of the public may sign up to receive e-mail notifications about proposed zoning actions. Anyone may sign up for notifications in any area, regardless of residency location.

Proposed zoning actions that generate e-mail notifications include the Plans Review of commercial, institutional, and multi-family projects and subdivisions of land that consist of five or more lots. They also include proposals for variances reviewed by the Hearings Board, for re-zonings, planned developments, and special uses reviewed by the Planning Commission, and for Certificates of Appropriateness reviewed by the Historic Preservation Commission.

Measures of Communication Improvements

A primary objective of the NNI is to establish early communication between neighborhood contacts and developers so that upcoming projects may incorporate local concerns and ultimately build community support. The NAC strove to find quantifiable ways to evaluate the success of the initiative at improving communication between neighborhoods and those effecting change within the community. While quantifiable data was limited the committee did find anecdotal and limited quantitative information to be quite useful.

“Pre-Application” Communication

The Neighborhood Planner was able to provide anecdotal examples of these NNI outcomes, with respect to both the dissemination of information from the ACC Planning Department to residents and the “pre-application” discussions between neighborhoods and developers. For example, one outcome observed by the Neighborhood Planner is that the NNI has improved the Planning Department’s capacity to notify the public of last minute changes in the public hearing schedule. Prior to the NNI, applications that are tabled or withdrawn only a few days before a hearing have often been viewed as problematic for neighbors who have rearranged schedules to attend a meeting.

Numerous instances abound of development project coordinators requesting neighborhood contacts for an area in which they plan to work. Prior to the adoption of the NNI, Planning Staff had limited success in identifying the appropriate contact people for many areas and neighborhoods. Although many of the areas remain unregistered, the NNI has significantly increased Staff's ability to put neighborhood leaders in touch with those coordinating development projects in their vicinity.

A comparison of Planning Commission applications from 2005 (prior to the NNI implementation) and 2006 (during its first year of operation) is somewhat indicative of this increase in early contact with neighborhoods. Of the thirty-six applications filed in 2005, Staff recalls six examples (17%) of early contact in some form between applicants and nearby residents. Of the thirty-eight applications filed in the 2006 and early 2007, Staff cited twelve (32%) of these circumstances. This is a substantial improvement, and while early neighborhood contact is only one of the objectives of the NNI, this statistic is quite encouraging.

To fully realize the program's primary goal of improving communication channels to better influence the outcome of developments, projects should respond to the issues and concerns that may be identified during these "pre-application" meetings. Planning Staff found that some projects have been modified in substantial ways as a result of this early interaction while others have been less responsive to concerns. Typical alterations include widened buffers, retained or improved landscaped features, modified driveway configurations, and future use limitations. The Planning Staff and NAC view this as a positive impact of the NNI.

E-mail and Registration Activity

The NAC also sought to quantify the initial success of the program by examining participation levels. Specifically, the NAC looked at measures such as: the increase in registered neighborhoods and groups, the number of individuals signing up to receive NNI e-mails, the number of people actually receiving those e-mails due to listserv "forwards", the number of actual notice recipients, e-mails opened, and reply inquiries.

The Neighborhood Planner began the registration process by sending out information about the NNI via postal mail and e-mail to the twenty-one (21) neighborhood groups listed in the Federation of Neighborhoods' membership directory. Five of these groups comprised the first set of NNI neighborhoods adopted by the Mayor and Commission in March 2006. As of spring 2007 a total of twenty-two (22) neighborhood groups are adopted NNI participants. This increase is illustrated in Figure 1.

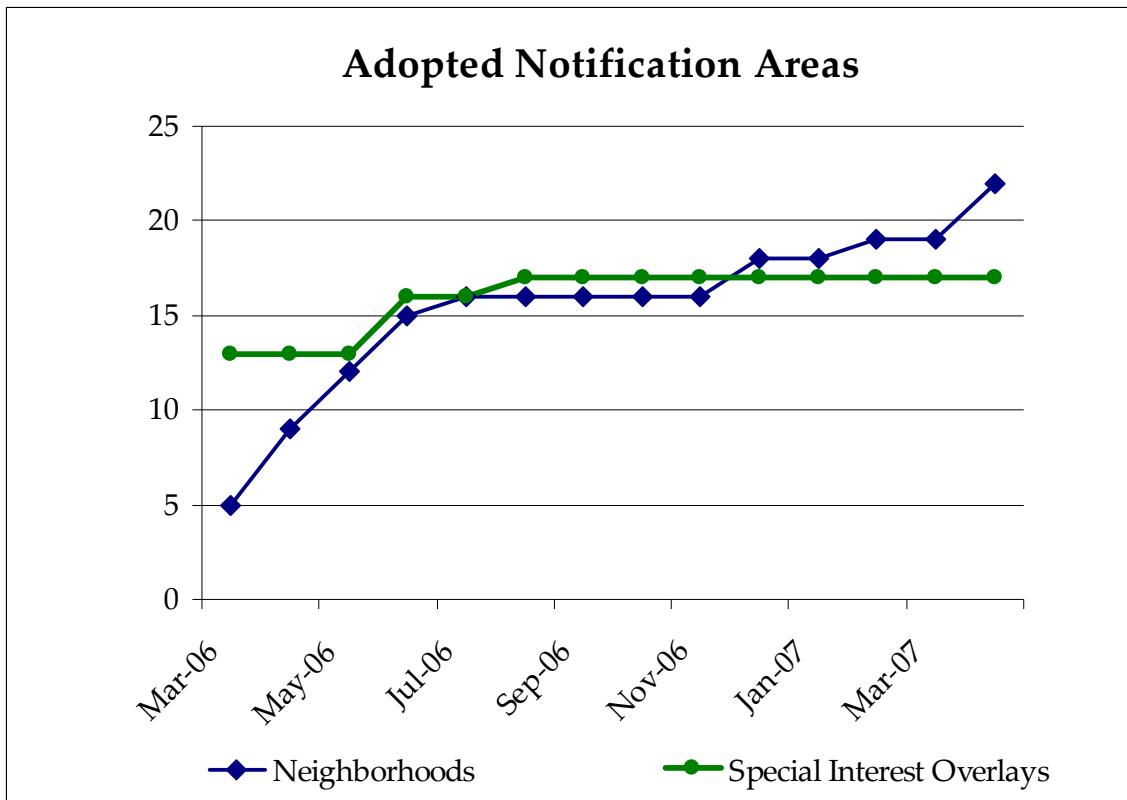


Figure 1. This chart illustrates the growth of registered neighborhood groups and special interest overlay areas during the first year of the NNI's operation.

Notification areas also include adopted Special Interest Overlay (SIO) areas that correspond not to neighborhood boundaries but rather to areas of particular interest for multiple neighborhoods, such as road corridors or centers of activity. These 17 SIO areas have been adopted based on recommendations from the community, and have been added to the Commission Districts to improve county-wide notification coverage. The total number of subscribed e-mail recipients has steadily climbed along with the number of adopted notification areas.

Figures 2 and 3 indicate the number of individuals signed up to receive NNI notifications (Email Signups) and the total number of email notices sent out based on individuals' interest areas and projects occurring in those areas (Total Email Recipients by Month).

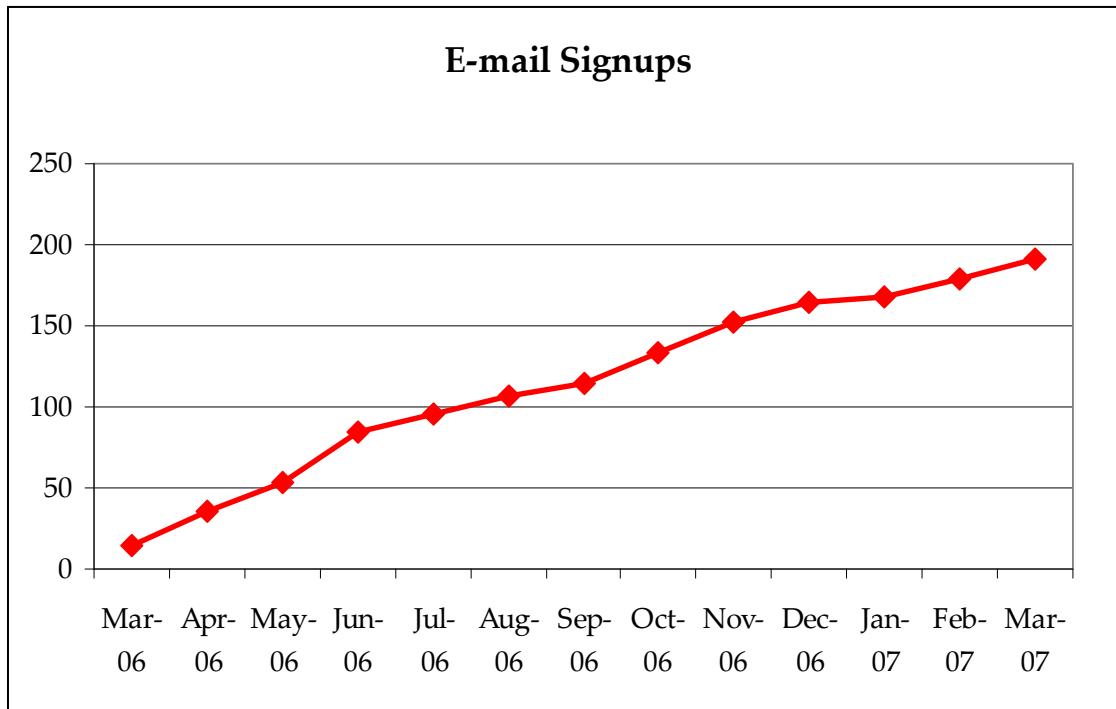


Figure 2. This chart indicates the growth in NNI email sign ups over the first year of the NNI's operation.

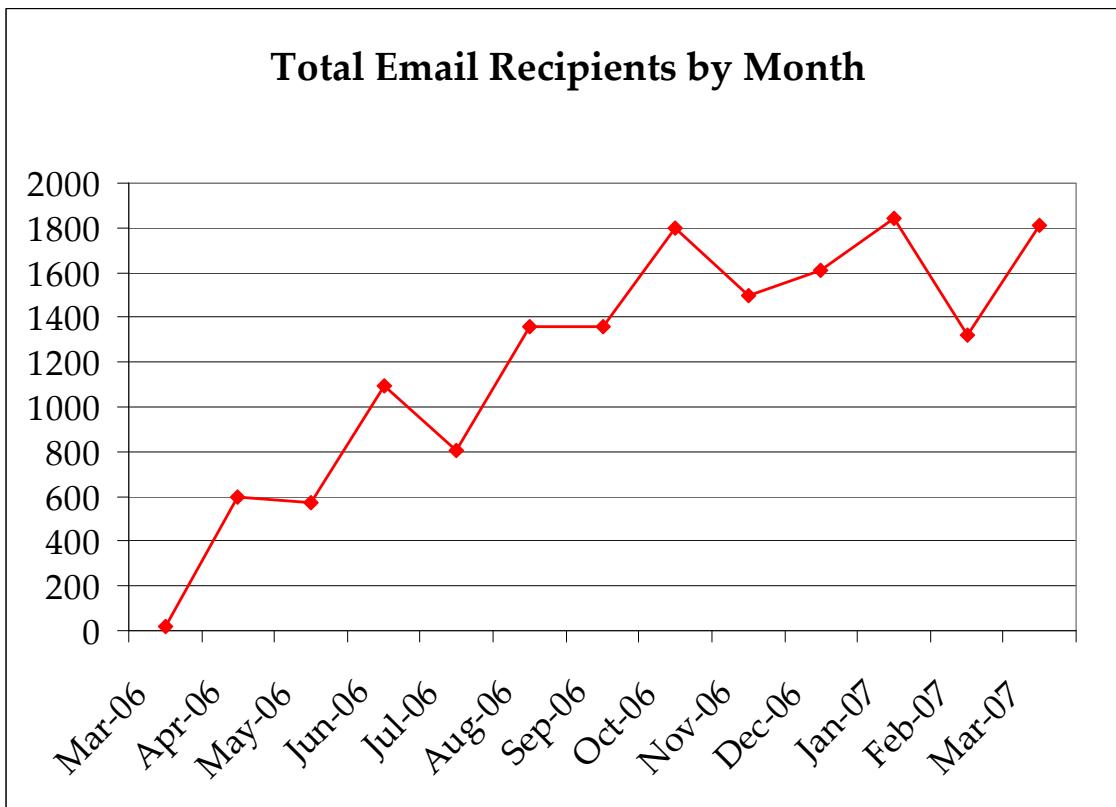


Figure 3. This chart illustrates the total number of email recipients each month from March 06 to March 07. These figures represent the cumulative number of recipients for each notice email.

How often the NNI email recipients read and respond to development notices is another indication of communication improvements. Because the subject line of each notice indicates the type and address of the application described within the message content, many recipients clearly selectively open the frequent notices. Figure 4 demonstrates by topic area how often NNI emails are opened by recipients and how many notices have been sent in program's first year. The Neighborhood Planner estimates at least one response requesting more information or clarification for each agenda sent out over the course of the first year. This figure would be approximately 90 responses sent directly to the Neighborhood Planner.

Analysis of NNI E-Mails from March 06 to March 07			
E-mail Topic	Total Emails	Total Recipients	Percent Opened
Rezones, Special Uses, & Planned Developments – Planning Commission	57	1717	53.1%
Variances – Hearings Board	39	1109	48.0%
Permitting – Plans Review	342	10650	45.1%
Certificates of Appropriateness – Historic Preservation Commission	62	2262	42.0%
Misc.- Comprehensive Plan, other Department Events	14	791	56.0%

Figure 4. Number and percent opened of NNI notices from March 06 to March 07

To estimate the wider potential communication network of notices forwarded on from original NNI recipients to other listserv groups, the NAC polled NNI recipients about the frequency of such forwards. Many respondents noted that they forward selected items of interest to friends and family who would also find them of interest. Several respondents regularly forward items to neighborhood listserv groups. Listserv groups cited by respondents as circulating NNI notices included Bar H, Belle Meade, Boulevard, Cedar Creek, Chamberlin, Friends of Five Points, Green Hills, Greystone, Idylwood, Old Heritage Farms, Old Hickory Pointe, Pinecrest, Pulaski, Red Fox Run, Snapfinger Woods, Woodhaven, and Athens Grow Green.

Participation Matters

The NAC also discussed issues related to civic participation, as these matters are critical to the health of any neighborhood planning program. Some of the identified issues are specific to the NNI while others more broadly apply to one's ability to participate in the public discourse as neighborhood issues arise.

Internet-based Communication

Specific to the NNI, an oft-cited criticism of the program is its reliance on internet-based communication, limiting participation for those without computer access. The NAC members generally agree that the advantages of the NNI's internet-based communication (including efficiency, timeliness, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness) warrant its continuation. Further, the NAC highlighted several strategies (both public and neighborhood-based) that currently attempt to compensate for this participation

limitation. First, in conjunction with the NNI e-mail notices, Planning Staff already use postal mail to notify property owners within 400 feet of a proposed rezone, planned development, or special use permit. Second, neighborhood organizations could be encouraged to utilize “block captains” or “phone trees” to keep neighbors without e-mail access informed.

Organizational Challenges

Another basic issue related to participation in the NNI is the challenge for unorganized areas of the county to prepare registration information for inclusion in the NNI. The “unorganized” areas within Athens-Clarke County have a variety of characteristics with equally varied challenges to becoming organized. Some are relatively dense, older neighborhoods while others are more sparsely populated rural areas. Even established neighborhood organizations will fall into periods of inactivity that present “reorganization” and communication challenges.

Despite these obstacles several notable participation challenges have been overcome in the first year of the program’s operation. The Chicopee-Dudley Neighborhood Association formed after several initial organizational meetings and a block-by-block petition campaign that united a 624-parcel neighborhood area with a common new community group. Though not yet established as a single NNI group, a coalition of southern Barnett Shoals Road neighborhoods came together to discuss registration options for the corridor. As a result four individual neighborhoods have already registered in this area, and the communication network among groups along the corridor has been strengthened.

Accessibility

Another matter influencing participation specific to the NNI is the content of the notices themselves. Some recipients have expressed confusion with respect to the messages’ content and/or the review process for the projects that are brought to their attention. The NAC has advised and continues to advise the Neighborhood Planner on how information may be better presented so that it is accessible, straightforward and meaningful to a broad, layperson’s audience.

A related challenge is the fact that many residents may have difficulty following the various review processes a given project may undergo. In other words, even if the e-mail is in clear terms meant to be understood by a broad audience, the resident may not necessarily comprehend the entire process enough to have a large picture of the project’s status and what the various application steps and related hearings mean for the project’s approval. To help provide clarity, the NAC members discussed possible improvements to the ACC Planning Department website and specifically to its Neighborhood Resources section. Web links included within NNI e-mails could provide quick access to these in-depth explanations of development review steps and basic planning processes.

The NAC expressed concern in its initial meetings with what its members perceive as an inherent bias in the development review process that weakens community and neighborhood input. The lack of transparency cited above is among these issues; for

while the review process often presents a steep learning-curve for individuals from neighborhoods, the development community has professional representatives that navigate the process with much greater ease. Meeting times for public hearings that occur during regular working hours i.e., the Hearings Board, or late at night, as is often the case with zoning items before the Mayor & Commission, reinforce this unintended partiality.

Apathy and Mistrust

Finally, the NAC considered the role of apathy and mistrust in limiting participation in both the NNI specifically and neighborhood and development issues broadly. A basic cause of apathy is the perception that individuals are powerless to effect concrete, positive changes in the way development occurs within and around their neighborhoods. NAC members recognize the importance of better information and increased communication to overcome this engagement challenge. Important first steps toward addressing these issues include the NNI program and general improvements to make the planning process more transparent.

While some degree of mistrust of the development process is common and to be expected in any community, the NAC expressed concern that heightened mistrust may result from a lack of transparency in the review process and inaccessible public meetings. Additionally, last-minute changes to applications and meeting times were cited as contributing to this issue.

Several positive steps have been taken toward ameliorating these concerns. The Planning Commission by-laws have been amended to clarify the procedure for tabling an application prior to its scheduled public hearing. Also, the NNI has been utilized to issue more timely updates regarding application changes to neighborhoods and other e-mail recipients. Planning Department website improvements include the addition of resources like *Planning & Zoning 101* to better explain frequently used terminology and technical review procedures to a broader community audience. The NAC stresses the importance of more educational tools and of continued attention to the role that predictability and transparency plays in assuaging apathy and in encouraging participation.

Other Neighborhood Planning Programs

The NAC discussed a variety of other neighborhood planning programs from which Athens-Clarke County might draw lessons. These programs varied from community to community but broadly fit into several categories of planning tools or strategies: development-driven community meetings, neighborhood-scaled comprehensive plans, neighborhood improvement grants, and neighborhood councils.

Mandatory Community Meetings

Several communities such as Boise, Idaho (population of roughly 200,000) and Charlotte-Mecklenburg County (population of roughly 540,000) require applicants seeking certain types of developments to meet with the nearby community prior to

submitting an application. These development-driven community meetings or “mandatory pre-application meetings” are most often required prior to requesting a conditional zoning designation (such as the ACC Special Use permit or Planned Development designation). The NAC is largely in agreement that the mandatory nature of these meetings would improve upon the NNI’s current voluntary policy.

Boise, Idaho, Neighborhood Planner Lance Evans described this requirement with the following details:

- All property owners within 300 feet of the requested development are notified by mail of the meeting.
- The applicant is required to submit a report summarizing the issues discussed at the pre-application meeting, along with any measures taken to address them, to the Planning Department with their rezone application.
- Neighborhood attendees are invited to submit their own summary report.
- Mixed results with respect to the outcome of these meetings. Some produce positive results and neighborhood support for project while others do not.
- Registered neighborhood groups are automatically allotted additional time to speak at public hearings for projects proposed within their boundaries (10 min, as opposed to 3 min.)

Neighborhood Plans

By far the most varied but widely utilized Neighborhood Planning tool of the communities discussed is the neighborhood-scaled comprehensive plan. Some communities, like Charlottesville, Virginia, (population of roughly 40,000) divide the city’s jurisdiction among neighborhood areas and assign Planning Staff to work with the areas’ various groups to develop neighborhood plans that collectively comprise the City’s Comprehensive Plan.

Other communities like Raleigh, North Carolina, (population of roughly 280,000) and Boise, Idaho, offer planning staff assistance in the development of neighborhood plans for neighborhood-defined areas on a request basis. In both of these communities, registered neighborhoods are eligible to apply with the Planning Department to begin the neighborhood-scale plans. These are adopted as supplemental components of their Comprehensive Plans. In Raleigh, the Neighborhood Plans are also utilized by areas that wish to establish Conservation Overlays in order to tailor zoning regulations for infill construction to be consistent with a neighborhood’s character. Again at the request of neighborhood groups, planning staff analyze existing, neighborhood-scaled development patterns such as building height and setbacks and recommend similar constraints for new construction as a component of the plan.

Neighborhood Grants

Neighborhood improvement grants represent another type of neighborhood empowerment tool that is frequently associated with both with the neighborhood registration process or with neighborhood-scaled plans. Participants in Charlottesville’s neighborhood planning process prioritize desired capital improvement projects such as neighborhood park amenities, traffic calming, sidewalks and street lights. The city

annually funds each neighborhood's top priority projects up to a maximum budgeted amount. Registered neighborhoods in Boise are eligible to submit grant proposals to the City for community improvement projects, and these grants are awarded on a merit-based review by the local governing body.

Neighborhood Councils

Finally, neighborhood councils are a common planning and advocacy vehicle in a variety of areas. The Council of Neighborhoods in Fayetteville, Arkansas, (population of roughly 64,000) is made up of one regular elected member from each registered neighborhood association. The mission of the Fayetteville Council of Neighborhoods is to promote and enhance the quality, stability, and vitality of the various neighborhoods in the City of Fayetteville; to provide a forum for neighborhood associations to share information, experiences, concerns, and ideas; and to help facilitate communication between neighborhoods, through their associations, and government agencies.

While it is an official body recognized by the City (its membership is tied to neighborhood registration), this council is advisory only in nature and is responsible for its own direction in terms of how often to meet, which issues to tackle, and what types of training and support they request from Fayetteville planning staff and the city in general.

Other neighborhood councils like Raleigh's Citizen Advisory Councils deal more directly with rezoning and development issues. These advisory panels provide a voluntary, but structured forum for input into the City's decision-making process. There are 18 geographically located CACs, which are responsible for reviewing issues of interest to their own community/neighborhood and expressing concerns to the City council.

The chairpersons and other officers are elected from among the members of each individual CAC neighborhood and items such as rezoning or development plans are discussed at the meetings. The opinions of CAC members and results of any votes taken at CAC meetings are presented to the City Council. The RCAC, the Raleigh Citizens Advisory Council, is the overall body made up of the officers of each of the 18 community CACs.

The NAC has provided a review of these various neighborhood planning programs in order to demonstrate the variety of options available as potential next steps in Athens-Clarke County and provide a foundation for further discussion. The recommendations of the NAC described in the final section below draw from the above examples but always with a mind toward fitting local needs.

Recommendations

The NAC is in general agreement that the NNI has had a positive impact on Athens-Clarke County. While actual participation has been difficult to precisely quantify, there is no doubt that the NNI has opened the lines of communication between potentially affected residents and those proposing land-use-related changes. In addition, internet-based communication between the Planning Department and ACC residents has been a useful tool for letting residents know about upcoming meetings, hearings or other

development-related activities. The Committee feels that the NNI was a great first step toward neighborhood-based planning and development, and hopes that the county leaders will continue, and ultimately expand upon, the NNI program.

The NAC has identified a number of recommendations not only to improve the operation and functionality of the NNI but also to more broadly advance neighborhood planning goals in Athens-Clarke County. Specific to the NNI, several improvements have already been implemented or are currently under development. Due to their scope or nature, other recommendations to modify the NNI operation require additional policy direction from the Mayor and Commission. Finally, the NAC has identified other recommendations based on local experiences and examples from other communities that the Mayor and Commission may wish to consider to further pursue neighborhood planning goals beyond the NNI.

Implemented Recommendations

Among the implemented NAC recommendations, the Planning Department website was redesigned to improve accessibility of information. The NAC identified areas where information was lacking or unclear so that the site's new design could better address these topics. Ongoing improvements to the Frequently Asked Questions and Resources sections continue to address the NAC comments.

The NAC discussed the opportunity to improve participation through better public notice and, specifically, through more legible Rezone and Variance Signs posted on properties. Two separate issues were identified that detracted from the efficacy of the signs. First, the sign text was not legible from the perspective of passing motorists; and second, the information was limited and unclear. The Committee worked with Planning Staff on a new design to simplify basic contact information scaled for a motorist, while including additional, detailed information scaled for a pedestrian. These design changes have been implemented, and the new public notice signs are currently being utilized.

Additional NNI Recommendations

One concern highlighted by NAC discussions is the failure of the current NNI to document or otherwise account for the content of neighborhood-developer discussions, whether they occur in privately arranged settings or in a pre-application meeting scheduled at the Planning Department. NAC members who have participated in these types of meetings expressed dismay that there was no record or reference of the meeting available to decision makers. Moreover, the minutes from public hearings fail to note the topics addressed during public input.

Improved Public Record. To remedy this shortcoming, the NAC recommends a modification of staff reports prepared for ACC Boards and Commissions to include a section that documents neighborhood involvement in pre-application discussions. As noted earlier in this report, the NAC is largely in agreement that mandatory pre-application meetings would improve upon the NNI's current policy of voluntary early communication with neighborhood groups. If implemented, the two recommendations would require rezone, special use, or planned development applicants to meet with

neighborhood representatives if their project fell within a neighborhood's boundaries. Application materials would include documentation of the meeting and any points of concern discussed.

Non-internet Notices. To address the concern of internet-dependent notices, the NAC suggests a pilot offering of postcard notifications to those without web access. Offered in a trial area, interest in postcard notifications would be gauged and costs estimated. If not cost-prohibitive or labor-intensive, the postcard option would be offered county-wide.

Public Awareness. A final recommendation of the NAC with respect to the NNI is to increase public awareness about the availability of the program. Continued investment of time and resources to promote the utilization of the NNI and the registration of new neighborhood groups will ultimately increase the efficacy of the overall program.

Beyond NNI – Other Neighborhood Planning Steps

The NAC is in general agreement that the NNI should serve as a first and not final step in neighborhood planning endeavors in Athens-Clarke County. Less clear, however, is what route those next steps should follow. The programs and planning structures highlighted in the previous section are meant to provide a point of departure for further investigation.

Town Hall Meetings. Specific ideas that the NAC suggests exploring include the establishment of neighborhood-scale “Town Hall”- style meetings. Held at regular intervals within each Commission District, these meetings would elicit input from neighborhood leaders and other interested parties about long- and short-term area needs as well as policy direction in general. Town Hall meetings would accord Commissioners and ACC Department Heads scheduled opportunities for public input separate from the decision-making forum of public hearings.

Neighborhood-Scaled Plans. Taking this concept further, “Town Hall” meetings have the potential to evolve into a neighborhood-scaled comprehensive planning process in which regularly scheduled District or sub-District meetings afford neighborhood leaders the opportunity to prioritize public policy, infrastructure, and land use issues for their areas. Several examples of neighborhood-scaled comprehensive planning cited earlier could provide illustrative lessons for this process. These plans would have the potential to augment our current Comprehensive Planning process with more frequent and focused input, establishing neighborhood-based planning priorities.

Capital Improvements. Capital improvement funds or grant opportunities could eventually be linked to projects prioritized in neighborhood-scaled plans such as sidewalks, street trees and other public infrastructure investments. This relationship between neighborhood planning and concrete improvements not only increases civic participation but it also helps ensure public investments that are responsive to area needs and desires.

Education Initiative. Finally, the NAC stresses the importance of continued public awareness and education for the success of future neighborhood planning endeavors.

Familiarity with development processes and various code enforcement channels is crucial for neighborhood empowerment. But while the NAC recognizes that any next steps in neighborhood planning should incorporate a focus on citizen education, perhaps more importantly the Committee suggests that they should also focus on interdepartmental cooperation and coordination. A multi-departmental approach to neighborhood planning initiatives and services will lessen the navigational challenges that citizens often face when dealing with development concerns and other community issues.

The neighborhood planning examples cited earlier and subsequent recommendations for next steps are intended to provide a foundation for further discussion about neighborhood planning in Athens-Clarke County. The NAC would like to thank the Mayor and Commission for the opportunity to provide input on the NNI program, and would like to encourage them to continue and expand upon the program to support neighborhood-based planning activities.

Appendix:

1. NAC Agendas & Minutes
2. NAC Email Discussions
3. NNI Survey- Email Feedback
4. Web addresses for other neighborhood planning programs
5. Neighborhood Advisory Committee membership