

Advisory Planning District Task Force Final Report

February 9, 2015

In January of 2014, the Advisory Planning Districts Task Force began working to carry out the recommendation of the Consolidation Commission, as outlined in its June 22, 2011 Report of Official Recommendations:

***Advisory Planning Districts:** The Commission recommends that during the transition year (i.e. between an affirmative referendum for consolidation and installation of the new elected officers), the governing bodies develop a framework for implementation of advisory planning districts in the consolidated municipality. (17)*

The Consolidation Commission determined that the consolidated municipality needed to alleviate the concerns and address reservations about consolidation expressed by some residents that they “might find that their voice in, or control and influence over, the decision-making process is diminished in a consolidated municipality.”(17)

The Task Force discussed options for advisory districts and how they would work. We considered various ideas for geographically defined advisory districts, both with and without a leadership structure, and we considered empowering existing neighborhood groups with formal status. However, the majority felt there were fatal flaws and major stumbling blocks to those proposals. Currently any member of the community may appear before the Planning or Zoning Board to offer opinions on the issues or applications before it. The creation of a district has the potential to strengthen the neighborhood voice when there is consensus within that district but when there is division, it provides no clear advantages and could exacerbate conflict within a neighborhood.

Neighbors who share common interests in favor of or in opposition to development proposals have successfully formed groups to advocate their views before various municipal entities, including the Mayor and Council, Planning Board, Zoning Board, and other related committees. It is our sense that Advisory Planning Districts do not present significant advantages over voluntary neighborhood groups. We grappled with how Advisory Planning District boundaries would be drawn, how the districts would be organized and how leaders would be elected. Further, they present the possibility of creating a burdensome bureaucracy that would require ongoing maintenance, oversight and staffing.

When we examined the reasoning behind the commission’s recommendations, i.e. what problem we were trying to solve, we agreed that many of the residents’ concerns about losing their voices in a larger town were related to the planning and land use development process and could possibly be addressed by other means. To that end, we came up with a list of Task Force objectives.

Advisory Planning Districts Task Force Objectives

Objective #1. Ensure that Princeton residents have a voice in-the planning, zoning, development, and preservation processes impacting their neighborhoods now that Princeton is a larger community.

Objective #2. Improve communication and education in Princeton neighborhoods regarding the planning, zoning, development, and preservation processes. The procedures for consolidating the former Borough and Township zoning codes provide an opportunity for communication by the Planning Board and governing body to involve residents and to explain how the planning and zoning process works and how the merger of the zoning codes might affect individual neighborhoods.

Objective #3. Facilitate and encourage communication between neighborhoods and institutions and developers prior to and during the planning, zoning, development, and preservation processes.

Objective #4. Encourage more proactive planning, zoning, development, and preservation processes that improve communication with the public, and engage the community earlier in the process.

Objective #5. Ensure that the Master Plan and the zoning code balance institutional growth and developer-initiated changes with neighborhood goals of long-term integrity and stability.

The Task Force therefore recommends that the Mayor and Council adopt a Neighborhood Planning Program for the municipality, with the following suggested components, in order to improve transparency, education and communication regarding the land use planning process as well as to ensure that residents have a voice in the planning and development of their neighborhood.

- Require land use application materials to be submitted in an electronic format as well as the hard copies now provided
- Develop a notification system and mechanism to distribute land use planning materials digitally to interested residents more widely than the minimum required by law, and earlier in the process. Develop a mechanism to inform the community about land use projects that are in the pipeline.
- Enhance information distribution on applications and proposed ordinance reviews and amendments using emails and the municipal web page.
- Develop and maintain a directory of neighborhood groups and contact information to be posted on the municipal website for the purposes of sharing information and helping neighborhoods organize themselves.
- Outline the processes for land use applications, zoning ordinances/amendments and master plan amendments, and municipal capital improvements, as well as other information about the land use process, such as what constitutes major and minor site plans, and the roles of the Council, Planning Board, staff and others, in a document to be posted on the municipal website and possibly to be included in a newsletter.
- Develop a process to integrate planning information with an online map of the municipality, with the intent to provide detailed views informing all affected local neighborhoods and the entire municipality.
- Utilize the Planning Board's Zoning Amendment Review Committee meetings concerning new land use ordinances as a framework for inviting neighborhood participation. Reach out to neighborhood groups and hold meetings during evening hours and perhaps on weekends.
- Periodically hold neighborhood meetings to impart information and to solicit input regarding municipal activities related to individual neighborhoods. The core content of the meetings should include discussing how the master plan, zoning, and municipal capital projects impact each neighborhood. Meetings may also deal with other issues including traffic, sidewalks and bike paths, parking, storm water drainage, public safety, and solid waste collection.
- All municipal appointed task forces, boards, commissions and committees that make planning decisions should keep summary minutes of each meeting that include the names of those present, topics discussed, any actions taken, and the votes on those actions. The minutes should be posted on the municipal web page.
- All Planning Board and Zoning Board meetings should be televised and the videos should be posted on the municipal website.

The task force held a public meeting on September 17th 2014 to solicit input and ideas for the Neighborhood Planning Program. Attendees supported the recommendations. Specifically, attendees favored the idea of periodic neighborhood meetings, and greater proactive communication overall.

The Advisory District Task Force recognizes that many of these recommendations involve staff time and some require additional expenditures that would need to be considered by the Mayor and Council.

We recommend that mayor and council integrate these initiatives into a broader communications program for the entire community.

Respectfully Submitted,

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