Pinellas County Quality Communities Code
Stakeholder Focus Group: Businesses and Institutions
October 22, 2010, at 10:00 a.m.

Liz Freeman with the Pinellas County Planning Department welcomed the focus group participants and provided an introduction to the Quality Communities Code (QCC) project. Liz then turned the meeting over to Gary Cornell (Jacobs) and left the room. Gary introduced himself and Jennifer Straw (Jacobs) and explained the purpose of the meeting, guidelines, and process. Focus Group members introduced themselves and the discussion followed.

The following is a general summary of the questions asked of participants and the comments and responses.

Why do you want to be in Pinellas County? What brings businesses here?

- The beaches are an asset to this community and bring residents and businesses here.

- We need to figure out how to incorporate good-paying jobs into our economy to keep the businesses and residents here.

What about the way this community is put together that makes this area a good or bad place to locate?

- The economy/market

- We need to figure out where the customers are—where businesses can locate to be successful.

- When locating, it is not terribly important whether locating in incorporated or unincorporated areas, however it is easier to build in some areas.

- How do you drive the businesses to the unincorporated area? There may be an unfair stigma about the unincorporated area.

- There is a lot going on in some of the unincorporated areas, but is it enough to drive businesses up there?

- We need to figure out how to bring large companies here, to provide jobs and to contribute to the tax base.

- There are not a lot of large pieces of land available, so how do we entice businesses to relocate here?

- When the economy was doing well, many people couldn't afford to live here; it is now more affordable and we may have a potential advantage.

- Businesses have suffered from the economy—this may not have anything to do with where they are located but just a direct link to the economy in general.

- People like living and working here, so how can we get them to stay here?

- The growth potential in the County is limited due to the lack of available vacant land.

- The future of Pinellas County will see a shift in where people live and in demographics, but there may not be any net "growth" in the future.

- People are worried/scared that they cannot survive here due to the economy in general.

- There is a fear about having to get through a lot of levels of bureaucracy when trying to locate in the unincorporated area because of past experiences—even though this is not the case anymore, there is a perception still out there.

- When trying to do anything in Pinellas County, because of the 24 municipalities and the County, it is difficult to get things done—it's complex to have to deal with everyone separately; may have to deal with the State also if you are trying to locate on a State Road—this slows projects down significantly.

- People like being in the unincorporated areas and don't want to be annexed, but need a more user-friendly and business-friendly environment.

- Multiple communities make it difficult—lack of common vision, lack of common process make it difficult for people/businesses.

- Initiatives that prove successful in some places may not be successful here because of the many levels of government—can never be better because of the County Charter.

- Developers are dependent upon tax credits to build things such as affordable housing, with having to deal with the many levels, have to figure out where it is easiest to get things approved.

- Businesses have moved to Hillsborough County because they can't deal with the complexities of Pinellas County.

- Need incentives to stay profitable, and if they can't get them here, the businesses will go elsewhere.

- Hard to fix the problems because the County policies cannot be changed easily.

- No plans are really being followed because there are too many.

- We need one strategic plan for the whole County—determine what we are trying to do (improve economy, deal with having no land left to develop).

- Pinellas County, City of Clearwater, and City of Largo are updating their Comprehensive Plans together (St. Petersburg would have but they had already started theirs) – in the future, may see more communities doing their Comprehensive Plans together.

- Need to figure out how to keep the young educated people here (high school and college educated).

- There have been instances where the cities' and County's economic development departments cannot communicate.

- Lack for a common vision among all communities – difficult to build one but it is possible.

- The County is small enough that we should be able to agree on something.

- It's particularly difficult for the unincorporated parts of the County to build a vision because there is no economic center; cities have done a great job revitalizing.

Why should someone choose to live here?

- If given a choice between this area and Ft. Lauderdale, the choice to come here is based on quality of life better (not so "jam-packed", felt normal, housing more available, segregated communities (in S. Florida), environment of the County).

- People look for homes that are in close proximity to general employment.

- We need to figure out where the jobs are and where the central location is to live.

What are the ingredients that will get us to quality development? For example, physical things that make a good business environment and quality development pattern.

- We need to make it a safe place for pedestrians—pedestrians are good for the community.

- In the past the downtown areas were the economic centers, this changed to large shopping malls which eroded the environment, local mom and pops were killed off, now some of the larger chains are getting killed off by the mega chains.

- Need a downtown/community center—harder to bring that to the unincorporated areas.

- Palm Harbor has a great little downtown, but it's difficult to get the traffic down there to support the businesses, Dunedin is same.

- Jolley Trolley will start to serve Dunedin and Palm Harbor.

- There needs to be a critical mass. This as to do with density, transportation, and access to a quality economic center.

- The Codes in the various plans do not reflect "quality" development.

- A good example to use is San Antonio—downtown area has beautifully planned communities "Dominion" was one community—it was denser than expected, there are green spaces, walkability, sidewalks, homes are close together but don't feel too cramped because of sufficient green space, accessible to transportation due to proximity to highways, no place there to grocery shop yet but one is close by and another is coming soon in the community—can we do that with our redevelopment here?

- Pinellas County has physical beauty but it is unattractive until you get to the beaches.

- Pinellas County in general is too focused on the automobile and not pedestrian-friendly; even though things are within walking distance, conditions are scary for pedestrians so they choose to drive.

- Communities want their neighborhood schools—schools are being rezoned—we need to look at municipalities, keep communities together, and don't break up neighborhoods.

- The County does not have a central downtown where everyone goes to work.

- How do we benefit from the high speed rail going between Tampa and Orlando—where do we go in the future with connecting to the High Speed Rail—where can we put Transit Oriented Development (TOD) that makes sense, bring neighborhood centers back—plan around the transit system.

- Development will follow the light rail stations (in regards to the Alternatives Analysis underway).

What are some of the features that make a place transit oriented?

- Density

- Diversity (business, people, residents, "rich mix"—offers opportunities for every class of individuals to access businesses around those hubs, attractive environment for everyone to live there).

- Easy pedestrian access to shopping, education, etc.; we need sidewalks.

- Housing and businesses should all face the street to make the areas safe (example is areas where houses face the street with a park or green space right across the street).

- Mix of ages, affordability for all ages, children bring a factor that makes us cogent.

How could we change US 19 to make it more transit-oriented?

- Let it be, we need to be able to get north to south in this County efficiently.

- Need a very efficient network (such as US 19) to get people where they are going quickly, use the areas off of the major thoroughfares for the communities.

What are some characteristics about parking that need to be considered?

- Put the parking behind, on top, or below the shops.

- In the past, business owners needed the expansive parking lots, but it may be possible to convince them to put their businesses near the street so they are visible and accessible.

- As we run out of large pieces of land, it may become easier to convince companies that they can build up and put the parking above the stores.

- Example—multi-level bus depot with the maintenance facility on the bottom, and levels above for the unused busses.

- We need to think vertically—haven't had to in the past, but if we want green space in the future, we need to build closer together and build up.

- If building parking garages, make the outside not look like a parking garage, and make them easily connected to where people want to go.

- Physically challenged people cannot get around except by car—if they can't drive they are dependent on others or transit.

Considering TOD from a business perspective, would you want to be on ground floor with residents above you?

- Absolutely

- Where is the parking? Who builds the parking garage?

- The parking and costs could be shared between the businesses and residences.

- Example—in resort areas where condo towers exist, transportation is not an issue—people can walk to businesses, and vans allow circulation to other areas.

- Could put the parking in the center (businesses on bottom, then parking, then residences on top).

- Many businesses would like to have residences above for security purposes—having people around makes the area safer for the businesses.

- This County has historically not planned for the future.

- Sufficient pockets of blight in this area are good ground for redevelopment and in good areas— could be built up and made to be very attractive.

- Lealman has potential as a redevelopment area because it is in a good location (center of County, access to transportation).

- Palm Harbor Downtown—could have the Loft Rehab type of development—what can the County do? May be able to give density bonuses and tighten up the requirements for development.

- In Palm Harbor, they are building new bike trials and sidewalks right next to the existing Pinellas Trail —why? The State is not communicating with the County.

- The Pinellas Trail could be used as transportation/commuter route if there was adequate lighting and increased security.

- Connecting to the Pinellas Trail is sometimes difficult and trail is not complete, so there are dangerous areas that people need to use to connect between sections of the trail.

- Roads are too narrow for bicyclists—the County needs to make better accommodations for bicycling in the streets.

- The Trail was built on the advantage of the available rail bed, and recreation—not so much as a use for commuter transportation.

- Pinellas is reminiscent of communities that don't use their amenities to make a community better (such as water, or in this case the trail is surrounded by chain link fences and separated—makes it unsafe).

- Successful trails have hubs where there are shops and restaurants so that riders can have somewhere to stop, this also makes it accessible to everyone (not just riders)—Dunedin has done this well.

- Pinellas County has built wonderful green spaces, but they are fenced for security purposes so there is no advantage to living near a park because they are not accessible.

- Some schools are not accessible due to liability issues, but some are accessible.

- Many recreation departments in the municipalities work with the schools to jointly use the facilities, this should be done more in the unincorporated area.

- Example—Rochester, NY made a strong stand to not build separate recreation centers from schools if they already have those amenities—taxes are paying for both, making it a waste of money—some local hospitals built wellness centers in or adjacent to schools, it can become a hub for the community—issue is often liability, so this would need to be addressed.

- St. Petersburg College is working with the local schools to use their facilities when school is out.

- The area around Countryside High School is dangerous because the intersection is so large with a large number of the students walking—the mentality of students is that they are invincible, need to be careful about that.

Should the County be encouraging sustainable practices?

- Solar panels are important but can be unattractive.

- A company (maybe 3M) is developing technology where the windows or roof materials are solar conductors.

- Businesses are interested in green spaces because employees are encouraged to come to work; this is becoming more common because proud/positive business images now have green spaces and green buildings.

- Green is good—in regards to color and the environment.

- Kids are more environmentally conscious and will be looking for that as part of their workplace and residences.

- Being sustainable cannot be cost prohibitive for businesses (initial cost is often very high).

- Promote sustainability with tax incentives and have Codes support it, but don't drive businesses away if they cannot or choose not to comply due to cost.

- Pervious parking helps with water quality and drainage, can use it in wetland areas.

- Consider incentive levels—use of pervious materials for walkways, use of pervious materials for extra parking, use of pervious materials in all areas for parking.

- This area has water issues—water quality and drainage concerns—mainly due to density, may need to talk about extensive pervious materials in parking areas to make the community sustainable in the future.

- The Green Curb design might be useful in the County.

- Pervious surfaces give more capability for aesthetics/visual quality, can use land that may otherwise not be usable.

Are there examples we can use?

- Naples for streetscaping (parking, visual aesthetics), sidewalks are shaded by arcades that make them more inviting when walking in the elements.

- Sarasota has worked hard to make the downtown area walkable.

- Portland (although climate is different) has done a great job with green spaces.

- Seattle has an excellent transportation system.

- Vancouver is dense but doesn't feel it, the different communities are unique but each has an identity—can we create different identities in the communities here, making them unique?

- The Villages is a good concept, however the disadvantage is that it is built around the elderly—people are able to drive golf carts around (similar to pedestrian access, but being able to use golf carts) and that is a desire of residences (and visitors) in Pinellas County.

- St. Petersburg has done a nice job of taking advantage of the bayfront—walkable near and in the downtown, great atmosphere.

- Southern Methodist in Dallas and Texas Christian University in Ft. Worth are great areas to look at for college (walkable) development.

What are your thoughts on housing?

- Most people don't have basements, not many second floors, therefore the square footage is all on one level, taking up more space

- Build houses for a lifespan—consider if residents can stay in the home through different periods of life.

- Need every price point—low income, workforce housing, and up.

- Mixed housing stock makes for a much more vibrant community (although there is a fear factor to that).

- Example—cities in Minnesota have a good mix of housing styles and are still inviting.

What can we do in Pinellas?

- Much of the development here was done without a plan, we need to make sure that changes in the future.

- We need to define the goal of the future.

- Economic development brings in the youth and working age population.

- There is a large retiree community that needs to have more amenities pedestrian-accessible.

- Need more green/open space and mix of uses.

- Residential areas are walkable in means that they can walk around their neighborhoods but cannot walk to other uses (shops, schools, etc.) because the major roads are too dangerous.

- The northeast area of the County has created a series of gated communities—is there an opportunity to put a mix of housing to diversify this area.

- The County needs a combination of transportation, commerce, and residential.

- Make the neighborhoods and commercial properties accessible to one another without using major roads.

- In the unincorporated area it would be advantageous to take a whole new mindset.

- The County needs to be affordable, with access to amenities.

- Both young people and older people want to live in TOD-style areas because there is access to everything without a car.

- Pinellas County has the advantage that it isn't as expensive to build here as it is in major metropolitan areas.

- By giving each community a different identity, people have more reason to visit the different places—let them keep their identities.

Other

- The young people are the ones we need to be talking to, because as much as we do or don't want something for the future, the young people are our future and have certain needs.

- If we want youth to choose to live here, we need to be careful about how we develop in the future.

Gary thanked the participants for their input and announced there will be two more focus group meetings, in May and November next year. There will be a draft zoning portion to discuss in May, and a final draft of the complete QCC in November. A summary of this meeting will be sent out to the participants, and if there are things you want to comment on, please let contact Liz Freeman.