

**Pinellas County Quality Communities Code
Stakeholder Focus Groups: Summary of Meetings
October 21-22, 2010**

Stakeholder Focus Group meetings were held on October 21-22, 2010 at the Pinellas County Planning Department conference room. Focus Group meetings will be held during each of the three project phases, in October 2010, May 2011, and November 2011. In October 2010, thoughts were heard about the current conditions of the County. In May 2011, a draft zoning portion will be discussed. In November 2011, a final draft of the complete QCC will be discussed. Meeting invitations were sent by Pinellas County staff. The consultant, Jacobs, serves as facilitator for each meeting.

The four Stakeholder Focus Groups are:

1. Citizens and Civic Organizations
2. Environmental Community
3. Businesses and Institutions
4. Real Estate and Redevelopment

These stakeholders play an important role in garnering opinion regarding the QCC. The purpose of the Focus Group meetings is to learn firsthand challenges and opportunities. Comments and coordination collected will lay the groundwork for future outreach activities and project recommendations. Information gathered will also establish a line of communication that allows the project team to respond quickly and accurately, ensuring the views of all appropriate constituents are considered.

General Consensus Comments

- All participants seemed concerned about the amalgamation of municipal boundaries, the uncertainty of annexation, and the proliferation of Codes. Some said that the biggest obstacle is the large number of jurisdictions – 24 municipalities, the County, and all the State agencies – too many Codes to deal with.
- One said, “without a clear understanding of what will be annexed, this is an exercise in futility.”
- County Codes and County staff are easier to work with than most of the municipalities’ Codes, but “planners can make it go smooth or not smooth.” Staff could be better advocates of the development process.
- Most participants agreed that the County is built-out, and so redevelopment at higher density is all there is. However, as one person said “Concentrated developments are there, but we need to leave everyone else alone.”
- The Code is inflexible for redevelopment. Developing sites is becoming more expensive and more constrained. Stormwater and parking requirements are hard to meet when having to assemble large lots.

- Green development is considered to be like the “new normal.” People expect it.
- Codes need to strongly promote (incentivize) green places to live, work, play in centralized area. Incentives range from tax breaks to fee reductions to fast-tracking
- Transit is one of the most important keys to improving quality development and there is very strong support for transit oriented development, and mixed-use where it has a close relationship to transit.
- Most respondents felt that mixed-use development was going to be hard to achieve without a strong economic center or regional attraction to anchor it, such as a large commercial and employment center, a college, or other major institution.
- Many comments reflected the view that the next generation of redevelopment would be targeted to two groups – youth and the elderly. There was not much attention to the traditional family as a market segment.

Key comments for selected topic by each focus group are as follows:

Quality Development and Redevelopment

Citizens and Civic Associations

- On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) quality of development in the County scores a 5 to 6.
- Redevelopment would be the thing since Pinellas is almost built out.
- We would like to see more “shopping streets” to support businesses with people who can walk instead of taking cars.
- The larger challenge is to get people out of cars.
- Need to maintain neighborhoods. Residents are interested in maintaining quality of life and open space.
- Quality is the comfort of the people who live there – their happiness.
- We need to have individual plans prepared with citizen input for each neighborhood, then the Codes would reflect those plans.

Environmental Community

- The only kind of development left will be infill and redevelopment. We are too built-out for greenfield development. Rebuild abandoned strip malls – new Code should provide for easy retrofit.
- Quality means fixing the mix – Codes should emphasize less buildings and more natural environment.

- The key problem in Pinellas is transportation. Multimodal connectivity is essential – pedestrian and bike come first.

Businesses and Institutions

- The beaches are our greatest asset, but we need to figure out how to incorporate good paying jobs.
- There are not many large pieces of land available, so it will be hard to entice businesses to relocate here, especially large companies that need land.
- Ultimately, it is not important whether to locate your business in the cities or the unincorporated areas of Pinellas County, except that it is easier to build in some places than in others.
- It is particularly hard for the unincorporated area because there is no main economic center to build around.

Real Estate and Redevelopment

- The problem is that there are too many cities and multiple regulations. Does it make sense for the County to have a separate set of Codes or should they adopt Codes that reflect the various municipalities?
- The unincorporated County is doing better than the cities and it's more predictable.
- It does not make sense for the process is set up to need planning approval first, and site design isn't considered in the application to begin with, and a zoning change isn't accompanied with architecture.
- Some like homes and neighborhoods the way they are.
- When people feel good – that is quality development.
- A quality development should be oriented to people. Here the closest store is not walkable.

Housing

Citizens and Civic Associations

- There are affordable housing options now because of foreclosures.
- We don't want apartments over stores. Maintain space in communities with room to park cars for guests.
- Where do we see ourselves when we are 60 years old? Parents are stuck in a house in Countryside. There is no bus in Countryside.

Environmental Community

- People will live in smaller homes if they are in the right location.
- Cottage industries are on the way back. We need a Code to make telecommuting (working at home) legal. This will also relieve our transportation and energy problems.

- Affordable housing is essential for mixed-use development to perform as truly walkable.

Businesses and Institutions

- People look for homes that are in close proximity to general employment.
- The difference between Pinellas and Ft. Lauderdale is that in Pinellas there is space - the homes are not so “jam-packed.”
- Build housing for the full lifespan – consider if residents can stay in the home through different periods of life.

Real Estate and Redevelopment

- Old communities like Safety Harbor and downtown Clearwater are attractive.
- Pinellas County developed with subdivisions and small lots and now redevelopment is needed and the process needs to be made easier.

Mixed-Use Development

Citizens and Civic Associations

- Neighborhoods need to be protected.
- Stores are needed in the local community.

Environmental Community

- Live-work- play will not work (e.g. places like Celebration) unless people can afford to live in the same community clusters or mixed-use developments where their jobs are located.
- Mixed use development needs more density but it also needs to result in saving more green space.

Businesses and Institutions

- Parking can be in the middle of blocks, placed behind, under, or over shops.
- Parking garages should not look like garages, but like buildings.

Real Estate and Redevelopment

- Large sites should be mixed-use developments.
- Concentrated developments are there, but need to leave everyone else alone.
- Compatibility issues are performance based, not land use based. Retail is compatible with multi-family, so those uses should be put together. The market does not have a problem with it – let the market dictate.
- Why are there no mixed-use developments in Pinellas County – the DRI process took too long.

Transit Oriented Development (TOD)

Citizens and Civic Associations

- Youth want a rail system and places for them to live. They want TOD, high density development, lofts, and upscale places. We will need that to get youth to come back to Pinellas to live.
- TOD might out-price people who need reasonably priced housing.
- Where are you going to put the tracks?

Environmental Community

- Provide a “rich mix” that offers every class of individuals affordability and access to business around the transit hub with an attractive environment for everyone to live there.

Businesses and Institutions

- The principal features of transit oriented development are density, critical mass, and diversity.
- Provide easy pedestrian access to shopping, education, etc. We need sidewalks.

Real Estate and Redevelopment

- Development should be occurring around better mass transit, like in Portland, OR.
- Don't require green building – the market will take care of that.
- Provide incentives to build green- like fast tracking. Pinellas County should be a role model.
- Mixed use would be more salable if it is on a transit line.

Environmental Sustainability and Low Impact Development

Citizens and Civic Associations

- Residents stopped the concrete channelization of creeks in Pinellas County, stopped the dredging, stopped the incinerator, and started recycling.

Environmental Community

- QCC needs to focus on what we (and young people) will want for the future, 10 to 15 years from now.
- Code should keep development out of the ‘low places’ in the County and after 50 years existing development should be moved out also.
- The natural resources on the site must be conserved. We cannot move wetlands to make room for development, and then expect to build new wetlands that will replace the function of the wetlands we destroyed.
- There are ways to accommodate redevelopment and improve stormwater management at the same time.

- There must be more education for builders and engineers about low impact design (ponds that connect, bioswales, green housing, etc.).

Businesses and Institutions

- Businesses are interested in green building because it enhances their image.
- Support green building with tax incentives, but don't drive business away by making it mandatory.
- We have to think vertically if we want to save green space.
- Pinellas has some wonderful green spaces but they are fenced for security purposes.
- Use pervious paving for water quality, visual quality and making use of land that may otherwise not be usable.

Real Estate and Redevelopment

- Green doesn't cost any more now. The industry is changing, the mystique is over.
- Green building should be high-performing – use less energy and water, smaller parking lots, more grass areas, stormwater integrated into the site and not a big pond in the back.
- Need incentives to do it – fast-tracking and reduced building fees. Portland has a “fee-bate” that you pay the City if your building is NOT green certified. The fee is equal to the cost premium to build to a LEED Silver standard. If you build to Gold then you get money back.