

***Involving Stakeholders
In the Planning Process***



INVOLVING STAKEHOLDERS IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

Introduction

Engaging the public in the evaluation and appraisal of the Comprehensive Plan is challenging. While County staff undertook several specific exercises to obtain input and feedback from stakeholders, public outreach and involvement is really a full-time, year-round activity, requiring the planner to continually be listening in all forums and settings, not just those devised for the EAR.

Described below are the various activities and events used to gain input and insight into the long term desires of Pinellas County's citizens, business operators, educators, regulatory agencies, etc. In addition to those activities which were specific to the EAR, several other methods of obtaining input into the evaluation and long range planning process are described.

County and Departmental Website

In 2004, the Planning Department implemented an EAR information section on its webpage, identified by its *Plan-it Pinellas!* logo. Included on the EAR page was access to a series of online surveys that could be "submitted" electronically. The surveys were also made available directly from the County's home page. Six different surveys covered transportation, neighborhoods and communities, natural resources, public safety, recreation and utilities. Ultimately, the website and the online surveys proved to be an excellent way of obtaining feedback on issues affecting residents and visitors alike. Copies of the survey forms are included in the **Public Involvement Appendix**. In all, over 650 surveys (not including transportation) were received via the County's website.

The EAR webpage also described the purpose and value of the Comprehensive Plan and went over the EAR process, summarized meetings and events related to the EAR, and importantly, provided a location for people to track the list of issues as it developed throughout the public participation (as well as departmental and agency involvement) process.

EAR Surveys

As described above, the surveys developed to obtain public input into the EAR process were very successful, as they were easily obtainable by the public, were taken to several different types of venues over a period of several months and they were short and easy to complete. The surveys were used initially in the five

EAR workshops. In addition, surveys were also made available at the County's three County Connection centers, were available in the County Courthouse lobby and were taken to EAR workshops and several separate speaking engagements over the Spring, Summer and Fall of 2004. A summary of the survey results is included in the **Public Involvement Appendix**.

Overall, the results of the surveys evidenced that citizens continue to feel that environmental protection is essential and the County should do more to further acquire and protect lands. The majority does not feel as if there is enough environmental land under public ownership. Public Safety is the second most prevailing concern with focus on police and fire protection. Other topics that arose from the surveys include having adequate recycling and conservation programs available throughout the County. Citizens also said that the County should be more proactive in educating individuals and businesses about water conservation. The surveys also revealed interest in having better access to public transportation, more parks and less congestion on the roadways.

Meetings with County Departments

Early on in the EAR development process, Planning staff met individually with most of the County Departments. For the entire "life" of the County's Comprehensive Plan, most of the County Departments have been actively involved in the front end of the planning process, including in the development of policies, as well as in implementing the actions, programs and projects that fall out of the Plan. It is the ongoing involvement at all levels of County operations in the comprehensive planning process that have resulted in a Plan that is meaningful and realistic, and can be effectively implemented. Although a formal meeting was arranged with each Department early in EAR development, in actuality, the coordination and collaboration is constant and ongoing. A summary of the Departmental meetings is included in the **Public Involvement Appendix**. In many cases, Departments have recommended specific amendments to the Comprehensive Plan.

Individual Meetings with Municipal Governments

There are 24 other local governments in Pinellas County. In order to share ideas, issues and concerns and to identify potential common themes for the EAR, County Planning staff met with almost all of the other local governments, or had phone discussions regarding issues for inclusion in the EAR. Some of the most common themes shared by other local governments were the need to address the increasing lack of affordable housing, transportation and mobility around the County, reasonable and quality redevelopment, and the protection of open spaces. The County and the cities are all facing the inevitability of little vacant land and consequently share many of the same concerns for a sustainable future. A summary of the meetings with other local governments is included in **Public Involvement Appendix**.

Meetings with Other Agencies

Staff met with the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) to discuss their expectations for the County's EAR. Overall, SWFWMD's big areas of concern for Pinellas County were, as with all local governments, ongoing water conservation and utilization of alternatives supplies for non-potable water uses, and coordination in regard to development and implementation of the Regional Water Supply Plan.

EAR Workshops/Public Meetings

Throughout the spring and summer of 2004, Planning staff conducted 5 workshops around the County. The workshops provided people with the opportunity to look at displays, ask questions about the Comprehensive Plan and the EAR process, to fill out the EAR surveys, and to meet County staff from several different Departments. While turnout at the workshops was not overwhelming, the input received from the public, as well as municipal staffs attending the workshops, was important and contributed to the development and refinement of issues and opportunities.

Environmental Workgroup

In the spring of 2004, Planning staff convened the Environmental Workgroup. The group was comprised of 30 people with an active environmental interest and commitment, several of whom had participated in the previous Environmental Workgroup convened in the mid 1990s to assist in the last major update to the Comprehensive Plan. Over the course of 9 evening meetings, the group reviewed those Elements of the Comprehensive Plan that had an environmental component. At each meeting, different County staff from different Departments were in attendance to provide an overview of the subject for that meeting, their individual Department purpose and operation, followed by productive dialogue, with an outcome of recommendations for new or modified objectives and policies in the Comprehensive Plan. Over 8 months, all aspects of utilities were addressed (potable water, wastewater and solid waste), natural resources, including coastal resources were addressed, as were flood control and surface water management, parks and preserves, and land use. The final recommendations developed by the Environmental Workgroup are included in the **Recommended Actions** section of the EAR.

Scoping Meeting

Based upon the meetings and discussions with the other local governments in the County, other agencies and other County Departments, Planning staff developed a list of major challenges and issues. This draft list was provided to

the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) for review and comment. With some additional revisions to the list, the Planning Department conducted a Scoping Meeting on July 8, 2004, at the Weedon Island Preserve, with area governments, agencies and citizens invited. Following presentation and discussion at the Scoping Meeting, Planning staff further refined the list of challenges and issues, received concurrence from DCA on the list, and the issues and challenges now provide the basis for this EAR. The EAR website continues to post the final list of issues and challenges for the public. DCA issued a letter of understanding regarding the issues on November 12, 2004.

Other Methods of Obtaining Input into EAR Development and the Comprehensive Plan

At the same time Planning staff was soliciting public input into the EAR process, the Pinellas County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) was doing the same for the **2030 Long Range Transportation Plan**. Consequently, the MPO and the Planning Department combined the public involvement workshops, as the public input on transportation, for the public's purposes, was not tied to the particular plan upon which they were commenting. Overall, traffic congestion and mobility remain a significant area of concern for Pinellas County residents. Interest in alternative modes of transportation is apparent, although the cost of transportation and transportation alternatives is also a factor, as well as the protection of neighborhoods from the consequences of road development. In addition, pedestrian and bicycle safety remains a priority, and the entire concept of more livable communities is evidently supported by the public. The results of the transportation surveys are included in **Public Involvement Appendix**.

Recreation, Open Space, and Culture System Master Plan

The Master Plan analyzes recreation, open space, and cultural facility needs countywide in order to provide direction on the role of the County in providing these critical services both countywide and for the unincorporated areas. The Master Plan was approved by the Board of County Commissioners in the summer of 2005. It is the result of extensive public involvement from focus groups, public meetings, surveys, visioning exercises, and assessment of needs and priorities based on data and input from the public, recreation and culture professionals, and consultant efforts. The results of the stakeholder involvement process were invaluable to the public involvement process for the EAR and corroborated much of the data and results from other sources of input.

Pinellas Assembly

Pinellas County, its municipalities, and interested citizens initiated the Pinellas Assembly process in 2002 as a forum for identifying important multi-jurisdictional concerns and issues that affect the provision of public services and facilities and help determine the quality of local communities. After identifying the key issues and concerns, the Board of County Commissioners and the Council of Mayors decided late last year how they wanted to respond to these issues. Several of the issues identified through the Pinellas Assembly process directly relate to the Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan and the EAR, including annexation, recreation, and transportation and it is expected that decisions and actions on these issues will occur over the next year. Feedback from the Assembly process to date has been considered in the development of issues and recommended actions.

Strategic Planning

Development of a County Strategic Plan is currently underway, focusing on several subject areas covered by the Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan (i.e. redevelopment, economic development, housing, transportation, public utilities, recreation and open space, and cultural amenities). The Strategic Plan is scheduled to be adopted by the Board of County Commissioners in the Fall of 2005 or early 2006 and will include its own public outreach and input process. It is anticipated that the relevant results will be incorporated into the EAR-based amendments, and some initial findings have been considered during the development of the issues and recommended actions.

Pinellas by Design

The Pinellas by Design project, including the development of an economic development and redevelopment plan by the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners, Pinellas County Economic Development, and the Pinellas Planning Council has been underway for several years, and has included several economic summits, focus groups and meetings to gather public and government input into developing a long term redevelopment strategy for Pinellas County. Over the coming year, coinciding with the timeline for the development of EAR-based amendments, County staff will be evaluating the Pinellas by Design components to determine what features to incorporate into the Pinellas County Comprehensive Plan, thereby providing the foundation for their implementation.