

# **The Charrette as an Agent for Change**

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## **1 Introduction**

One of the most important benefits of true collaboration in community planning is ending up with a plan that minimizes costly rework and results in a built project. Everyone suffers when a project in which many people have invested time, energy and money has to go back to the drawing board. The citizens suffer because their precious time has been wasted on a plan that sits on the shelf. The elected officials suffer because their constituents have one more reason to distrust government. The developer suffers because of the money wasted in planning costs and in interest paid. But how do you end up with a feasible, collaboratively designed plan and not just a disappointment? One of the most reliable public involvement processes is the charrette that is part of a larger process that we call Dynamic Planning. Dynamic Planning is a holistic approach to land use planning that reduces rework, engages the energy of all interested parties and results in a high quality plan. The transformative event of Dynamic Planning is the charrette.

The charrette is a multi-day planning process during which an interdisciplinary professional design team creates a complete and feasible plan that reflects the input of all interested parties by engaging them in a series of feedback loops. The term “charrette” is derived from a French word meaning "cart" and refers to the final intense work effort expended by art and architecture students to meet a project deadline. At the École des Beaux Arts in Paris during the 19th century, proctors circulated with carts to collect final drawings, and students would jump on the charrette with their work and frantically put finishing touches on their drawings. This intense burst of activity is similar to the atmosphere of the modern charrette. Today’s charrettes offer much more than just a quick fix. The result is lasting, transformative community change.

## **2 Key Strategies**

The following key strategies are essential to a successful Dynamic Planning and charrette process.

### **2.1 Work Collaboratively**

True collaboration is based on valuing each individual’s unique contribution. This means that all interested parties must be involved from the beginning. Anyone who might build, use, sell, approve or attempt to block the project provides feedback to the design team throughout the charrette to create a plan that incorporates their ideas and concerns. The charrette process gives the plan mutual authorship and a vision shared by all participants.

This approach is initially more work, but in the long run, it will save time in rework and most certainly produce a higher quality product with a greater chance of implementation.

## **2.2 Design Cross-functionally**

Dynamic Planning is a holistic approach that utilizes cross-functional teamwork throughout – especially at points of key decision making. Architects, planners, engineers, economists, market experts, and public agency staff are a few of the disciplines represented most commonly. Detailed designs are undertaken individually or in small groups. At other times, larger caucuses occur, and often, simultaneous meetings take place. Periodically, everyone gets together for a public briefing, discussion or presentation. The collaboration of representatives of these disciplines helps to produce a set of finished documents that addresses all aspects and phases of a project.

## **2.3 Compress Work Sessions**

The charrette itself, usually lasting four to seven days, is a series of meetings and design sessions that would traditionally occur over the course of several months. This time compression facilitates creative problem solving by accelerating decision making and reducing unconstructive negotiation tactics. It also encourages people to abandon their usual working patterns and “think outside of the box.”

## **2.4 Communicate in Short Feedback Loops**

Regular stakeholder input and reviews quickly build trust in the process and foster true understanding and support of the product. A feedback loop happens when a design is proposed, reviewed, changed, and re-presented for further review. The shorter this cycle, the greater the level of influence and buy-in by the reviewing parties. In conventional planning processes, the design team presents plans to the community and input is gathered through various methods such as surveys, or small discussion groups. The designers then retreat to their office and return to the public weeks later with a revised plan. Often during these weeks, some degree of misunderstanding and changes in perceptions occurs in the community. People who attended the meeting come away with different understandings. In a charrette, participants are invited to come back the next evening to review the changes. Any misunderstandings are resolved quickly before they have had a chance to crystallize. In conventional planning processes a design and feedback cycle can last up to four to six weeks. The charrette shortens it to 24 hours.

During the day, and often late into the night, the charrette studio is a forum for ideas with the unique advantage of this immediate feedback. At the same time that someone is designing a street, another is locating a tree, and an engineer is determining the effects on drainage. Questions about design problems are answered on the spot. Most importantly, simultaneous brainstorming and negotiation during a charrette can change minds and encourage unique solutions to problems. The number and variety of solutions and ideas generated and considered is far greater than those under conventional planning methods. A better product results from this creative effort.

## **2.5 Study the Details and the Whole**

Lasting agreement is based on a fully informed dialogue. True buy-in can only be achieved by designing in detail; this way, critical issues are brought to the surface and addressed. This can only be accomplished by looking at the details (building types, block sizes, and public space) and the big picture (site circulation, transit, land use, and major public amenities), concurrently. Studies at these two scales inform each other and reduce the likelihood that a fatal flaw will be overlooked in the plan.

## **2.6 Confirm Progress by Measuring Outcomes**

By measuring progress through agreed-upon desired outcomes, the transparency of the decision making process is assured and people can see that the project is being implemented as planned.

## **2.7 Produce Feasible Plans**

The charrette differs from other workshops in its expressed goal to create a feasible plan. This means that every decision point must be fully informed, especially by the legal, financial and engineering disciplines. The success of a community's work to plan and build together hinges on the implementation tools such as codes and regulating plans. Plans that sit on the shelf contribute only to citizen apathy.

## **2.8 Use Design to Achieve a Shared Vision and Create Holistic Solutions**

Design is a powerful tool for establishing a shared vision. Drawings help illustrate the complexity of the problem and can be used to resolve conflict by proposing previously unexplored solutions that represent win/win outcomes. The charrette design team specializes in capturing ideas quickly in drawings that help educate and focus the discussion. One of the most important ground rules used throughout the charrette is "talk with your pen." This applies not only to designers but to all charrette participants.

## **2.9 Include a Multiple day Charrette**

Most charrettes require between four and seven days, allowing for three feedback loops. The more difficult the problem, the longer the charrette. Three loops are the minimum required to facilitate a change in participants' perceptions and positions. Only simple projects with little controversy should be attempted in four days. More complicated projects typically take seven days.

## **2.10 Hold the Charrette On or Near the Site**

Working on site fosters participant understanding of local values and traditions, and provides the necessary easy access to stakeholders and information. The design team sets up a charrette studio either in the neighborhood or on or near the project site. The studio is a temporary office and community meeting space that serves as the headquarters for the process. Close proximity to the site is important to make it easy for people to participate

and for the design team to have quick access to the site. Charrette studios have been located in empty main street storefronts, community centers, high schools, and armories.

### **3 Conclusions**

Dynamic Planning has resulted in dramatic changes for many American cities. For example, in 2001, a seminal change began to take place in the community surrounding the Pleasant Hill BART station in Contra Costa County, California. The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors, the Contra Costa County Redevelopment Agency, BART, local residents, business leaders, activist groups, and area employees, along with developers and consultants got together to decide the fate of their community. They created a shared vision and developed detailed plans and codes to implement it. With a history of failed planning attempts and contentious debates, how did over 500 people get together and come to an agreement about how to develop the Pleasant Hill BART Station Area?

Over the course of a six day charrette in spring of 2001, dozens of possible ideas were discussed and synthesized into a community plan that addressed participants' concerns using. Following the charrette the design team prepared codes to ensure that the designs created during the charrette would actually be implemented. In late 2002, the Board of Supervisors unanimously adopted the plan. The project is beginning construction with very few variations to the original plan.

### **4 The National Charrette Institute**

The National Charrette Institute (NCI) is a nonprofit educational institution. We help people build community capacity for collaboration to create healthy community plans. We teach professionals and community leaders the art and science of Dynamic Planning, a holistic, collaborative planning process that harnesses the talents and energies of all interested parties to create and support a feasible plan. And we advance the fields of community planning and public involvement through research and publications.

The ten strategies outlined in this article are discussed in greater detail in the NCI Charrette Planner™ Certification trainings.

For more information, visit our website at <http://www.charretteinstitute.org>.

### **5 Acknowledgements and References**

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