

RESHAPING COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE PUBLIC  
Preliminary Thoughts  
July 19, 2011 draft

A working group under the auspices of the Department of Planning is being formed to assess and focus the means by which Planning information is distributed to the public.

In the last several years, there has been growing frustration expressed by both the public and the Planning Commission. From the public's perspective the problem has been lack of information on issues being worked on by the County at the early stages of the process. For the Planning Commission, there is disappointment in so few of the public not only willing to give time during the process but also at the end when a public hearing is held. The exception has been controversial items which bring out numbers at the end, but not well informed for the most part and very emotional.

There is lack of intent on both sides to cause the frustration. A reduction may be effected by looking at how we can improve not only the means of communication but the numbers of ways the public can participate. Citizens need to know earlier what is coming up in the plan of work, and the Commission needs better informed citizens to be involved. Citizens should also have a way to communicate outside the formal processes, and Planning should have a way to find persons interesting in participating.

The reasons to look at communications are several:

- Current techniques used to disperse information (principally newspaper ads, intermittent news coverage, the County web site and occasional neighborhood meetings) are likely not reaching a good portion of the public or are of insufficient interest to inform citizens of their meaning.

- There are many more technologies today which could be used to attract citizens to upcoming projects, particularly those formatted for working groups (which have been successful for moving projects along), and to invite participation if interested and appropriate.

- Part of Frederick County's population out commutes and for these persons, the routine schedule of evening meetings is mostly untenable. This is also true for busy family households.

- The simple population growth experienced by Frederick County suggests that its citizens have a variety of choices for participation that fits with interests and time available, and that adequate information out in a timely and consistent way is a part of education and inclusion.

## CURRENT PLANNING COMMUNICATIONS:

The techniques used vary depending on what's at hand.

State law requires advertisements in the local paper for the Commission agenda, and a paper copy of the material at the local library. New state requirements deal with electronic copies for changes. Also required are mailed advisories to neighboring properties in rezonings, etc.

Staff engages in mostly on-line communication (i.e. e-mail) with its committees and working groups. Neighborhood meetings are held to discuss a variety of topics, but usually deal with the development of Area Land Use Plans (a recent example is the Northeast Land Use Plan) or a new County policy (a little older example was the getting input on the revision of the Urban Area portion of the Comp Plan).

The Planning web page is a subset of the County's website ([www.frederick.co.va.us](http://www.frederick.co.va.us)). Often a Planning item is featured on the County's website. Currently it is the 2030 Comprehensive Plan. The two major Planning committees' agendas (Comprehensive Plans and Programs, Development Review and Regulations) are also linked under "Planning Agendas". However, to find details on Planning activity not necessarily on an agenda, one has to find it under the download list of "Departments" and then select "Planning and Development".

## SOME ASSUMPTIONS:

- The population is more dependent upon electronic communication for its source of information or as a means to get to that information. It will likely continue to increase.
- There are few funds to spend on more on traditional outreach such as advertising, mailings, document printing, etc.
- More citizens involved in the process add to the skills and talent pool to make a better product.
- There are always citizens for whom participating in Planning issues is not high on their interest list.
- The non-predictability of Planning issues, projects, and applications makes forward looking dispersal of information not easy.

-Changes to the Comprehensive Plan, Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances are different from development applications which likely have sufficient coverage in the committee/meeting process.

#### SOME INITIAL STRATEGIES:

- Piggy back on existing non-electronic strategies to do more than one job.
- Concentrate on improving online communication (including interactive) and the tools to direct persons to the website
- Pursue other existing opportunities as a means to get direct messages out.

#### PIGGY BACK OPPORTUNITIES:

1. Examine how display ads required for publishing meeting agendas may be added to in order to disperse other information.
2. When tax bills are distributed, include an insert about upcoming planning items (bi-annual)
3. Schedule and connect with media (print, radio and TV) to provide specific information on initiation of new work, particularly policy projects (Comprehensive Plan, ordinances).
4. When involved with neighborhood meetings, try display posters, advisories to home owners associations, school associations, fire and rescue, community centers, etc.

#### ON-LINE (E-MAIL USAGE):

1. Develop e-mail address component for a pro-active distribution of information to the public. This could be information by request (agendas, etc) or a news item from the Planning Department explaining a specific policy or proposal.
2. Use county-wide list of Home Owners Associations (HOA) member email addresses to deliver useful information.
3. If something is developed for the website, think about potential benefit of distributing it by e-mail, also.
4. Consider developing and using a monthly email advisory bulletin.

## ON-LINE (WEBSITE):

A cursory review of a selection of Virginia county websites reveals some very attractive sites. Some are complex while others simpler but suspect equally effective. There seems to be a standardization of these sites, both in looks and some content. There is nothing like picking up ideas from the best, one could guess.

However if there is a gradient in terms of the content from

- a) What's happened,
- b) What's happening,
- c) What's about to happen

most land somewhere between a) and b). So for Frederick County, we should first assess where in that ladder we want to be. Then what tools do we need to implement that goal.

There are some initial ideas as to what we might want from the site.

1. The ability to survey. One good idea is a simple table that changes periodically asking for preferences on an issue.
2. The ability to "recruit" for citizens interested in participating on specific working groups. And determine their skills match with the working group subject.
3. An interactive ability to ask questions of the public or have the public ask Planning.
4. Base content on the order of perhaps b), c) and then a) as above so to emphasize what's up versus what we did.
5. Each year post-retreat with the Board, a priority list is developed. That should be on site and serve as the basis for b) and c) and will need to be modified as items are completed, new items added, explained if delayed, or dropped. The point is to give the public some idea as to where the Planning Staff and thus the Commission are headed.

6. Use “social media” (specifically Facebook, Twitter, and You Tube) as a means to drive persons directly to or communicate information from the Frederick County Planning site. Examine how that can be accomplished, with the caveat that none can be maintenance heavy, but could be creative in grabbing the public’s attention. The website will still be the core tool.
7. Think of using the social media tools for conducting conversations, meetings, etc., electronically.
8. Add Commission By-Laws.

#### OTHER EXISTING OPPORTUNITIES:

1. More use of Channel 16. Rebroadcast both the Board and the Planning Commission meetings or use You Tube.
2. Community organizations have newsletters. They are usually looking for news. And more are being e-mailed. E-mail development of contact list for specific organizations might be useful.
3. For those persons who do not have internet access, the Handley Library systems offer it at no cost.
4. For these persons with smartphone access, establish applications and links to county information.

The above is a first go at improving information flow. The goal is more involved persons, early, and better Commission input from the public at the end of the line. Better product, better relations. Can’t beat that. To get there, a plan of communications should be standard operations for Planning.