This presentation was created by the National Charrette Institute for the National Association of Realtors to educate people about the features and advantages of a properly orchestrated planning and development approvals process.

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The following presentation will show you how the NCI Charrette System can be used to involve the public and all other stakeholders in the making of sustainable community plans. I will define the word charrette in more detail shortly but it is worth noting now that the charrettes described in this presentation are all multiple-day, collaborative planning events held on or near a project site. I will use the term NCI charrette to describe such processes to distinguish them from other, less rigorous planning processes.

Public participation has become an inevitable fixture in today’s development approvals process. While numerous agencies and developers anticipate this with some degree of dread, many have found a way to turn citizen participation into a win-win. A properly orchestrated process can not only lead to easier approvals, but can actually improve the project’s outcome in terms of marketing position for the developer, and building trust between citizens and public agencies. NCI charrettes have been used on hundreds of projects, resulting in thousands of built acres of smart growth development and redevelopment. They provides a constructive channel for NIMBY interests. The process eliminates the sponsor’s common fear of losing control of the outcome and/or wasting time and money on a failed effort by establishing clear roles within an atmosphere of trust.

Throughout this presentation, I will talk about why many people are frustrated by public involvement processes, and how the NCI Charrette System can provide the missing pieces to facilitate productive community decision making. We’ll examine how an effective charrette works and when it is right to use one. We’ll talk about the increasing interest in Smart Growth in both public and private sectors and how the NCI Charrette System can be used to gain consensus and actually get Smart Growth projects built. We’ll also discuss the charrette in context – what needs to happen before and after the charrette to create a buildable plan.
From the destruction of tea during the Boston Tea Party to New England town meetings, the United States has a great tradition of public involvement. Our democratic form of government was born out of frustration when citizens felt that their voices were not being heard.
An example of a traditional form of public participation is the New England town meeting, a custom of people working together to solve problems and improve their communities. Town meeting participants debate issues and vote on the spot. The town meeting is a fully collaborative decision making process, during which attendees see decisions and outcomes as a direct result of their input.
Today, people who have never been involved in public debate are participating in community planning efforts. Many are doing so in response to development in their communities, based on the perception that growth can only make things worse, particularly with regard to traffic. As people get involved in community decision making, they often become dissatisfied with their options for participation. They have come to expect inadequate involvement processes, leaving them frustrated and on their guard.
As people become involved in public processes, they often find that their options are very limited. They are given the opportunity to participate too late in the planning process or in a very limited capacity or are asked to weigh in after plans have been developed and decisions have already been made.

Even when people are engaged, they can become alienated and apathetic when their input has no visible impact. People may be involved in an interesting, interactive meeting, with high hopes for the results, only to find that decisions are made behind closed doors. This results in apathetic sentiments like, “They’re just going to do what they want whether or not I get involved,” and deters people from further involvement.
When people devote their time to a process only to find that decisions are made outside of that public process, the result can be frustration and distrust. The only option that they are left with is to oppose development with petitions, referendums, and protests. People have begun to use the ballot box to halt growth by voting against development proposals or voting for open space acquisition to forestall development.
When asked, people are actually in favor of the right kind of growth, and developers want to build livable communities to meet market demands. Bringing together a meaningful public involvement process and responsible development is the answer to challenging growth issues.
There is growing evidence that, when given the choice, people want to live in neighborhoods that are pedestrian-friendly. They also would like to be able to live within walking distance of their daily needs and have a variety of housing and transportation options. These are the principles of Smart Growth.

According to a survey by the National Association of Realtors and the National Association of Homebuilders, "A majority of consumers want single-family detached homes in a pedestrian-friendly community that has shopping within walking distance." NAR/NAHB survey
Smart Growth is based on the values of economy, common sense, and aesthetics. It makes effective use of land resources by using a compact building pattern and it makes economical use of urban surfaces by promoting infill and redevelopment. It features mixed-use zoning which provides for a choice of housing and services and provides many transportation options by situating housing near a walkable and bike-able network. Human-scaled design results in attractive spaces where people like to spend time. Great old American neighborhoods are based on these values.

Key elements of the American Planning Association’s definition of Smart Growth include:
Efficient use of land resources
Full use of urban services
Mixed-use zoning
Transportation options
Detailed, human-scaled design
Surveys show that people have value for neighborhoods, both old and new, that are walkable and transit-oriented. The growing number of ballot measures and support of parks and open space as well as the growing use of public transit show that people indeed support the principles of Smart Growth.

In a 2007 joint poll by Smart Growth America and National Association of REALTORS, nearly 90% of people surveyed believed that new communities should be designed so we can walk more and drive less, and that public transportation should be improved and accessible.

60% of Americans would rather walk than drive for wherever they need to go
60% also say they would like to walk more to stores
75% believe that smart growth and public transportation are a better solutions to reduce traffic congestion than building new roads
Public transportation use has increased 32% over the past ten years
The real estate industry, represented by groups including the National Association of Realtors and the Urban Land Institute, have recognized the importance of Smart Growth to the health of communities and the viability of continued growth. These industry groups encourage their members to become more involved in the debate about growth. The NAR and ULI also promote greater citizen participation in planning communities.
As support for good development increases, how do we make it easier to build more Smart Growth neighborhoods? Collaborative community involvement processes, such as NCI charrettes, create win/win solutions through broad public support, acceptance of growth when done right, better design, faster approvals, and public/private collaboration. The charrette minimizes the likelihood of rework and change to the plan, and therefore increases the likelihood that the built project will look like the original vision. This results in increased public confidence in the process and support for implementation, leading to positive participation in future planning efforts.
In this next section I will introduce the concept of the NCI charrette as a means to turn planning for Smart Growth development into a positive, community-building event.
The NCI charrette is a multi-day, collaborative planning event that harnesses the talents and energies of all affected parties to create and support a feasible plan that represents transformative community change. A charrette lasts a minimum of four and usually more days.
The term charrette is overused and abused. It has been used to describe everything from an afternoon meeting to a multi-day meeting marathon. The result has been a widely misinformed and negative perception of the process, causing difficulty for citizens and professionals alike.

A NCI charrette is not:

- A one-day workshop
- A multi-day marathon involving everyone all the time
- A plan authored by a select few that will affect many
- A “visioning session” that stops short of an implementation plan
The French word "charrette" means "cart" and is often used to describe 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 while the students frantically put finishing touches on their work.

The NCI charrette combines this creative, intense work session with public workshops and open houses.
What are charrettes for? Though charrettes can be used virtually any time a product needs to be created or designed, some examples are:

Sustainable Regional / Comprehensive Planning
Redevelopment Projects
New Community Master Planning
Affordable Housing Developments
Sustainable Buildings

Charrettes are best used in situations with real projects when development is imminent. Charrettes are particularly useful in contentious situations that require conflict resolution.
A NCI charrette is like another great American tradition – the barn raising. It involves the entire community, leveraging people’s unique talents to build something that no one person could achieve by him or herself.
The NCI charrette creates a town meeting atmosphere

The whole community is involved in a fun, engaging design workshop that spans many days – a town meeting atmosphere

The whole community is involved in a fun, engaging design workshop that spans many days – a town meeting atmosphere
The NCI charrette provides hours of opportunities for participation. Everyone interested helps out in a team effort that incorporates their unique contribution. During the charrette, a team of professionals provide the design and implementation strategy while community members provide their local knowledge, vision, and passion for their community.
The NCI charrette brings the decision makers together in one place for a concentrated period of time to create a detailed, feasible plan.
Unlike many public meetings, the NCI charrette is expertly facilitated so that everyone can be heard and no one dominates
One of the unique traits of the NCI charrette is the series of feedback loops. There are three major ones, in which design ideas are created based upon a public vision, and presented within hours for further review, critique, and refinement. These feedback cycles foster a holistic understanding of complex problems by all participants and form the basis of a plan that reflects all vital viewpoints. They result in true buy-in by everyone involved, who are thereby inspired to support the plan, allowing it to overcome the inevitable challenges on its path to implementation. The need for three feedback loops spread at least day apart is a prime reason that charrettes last at least four days.
In the following section, I will take you through a sample charrette day-by-day and show you some typical Charrette products.
The NCI Charrette System describes the three phases of work necessary to hold a successful charrette: charrette preparation, the charrette and charrette follow-up or implementation.
Charrette preparation includes project assessment and organization, stakeholder research, education and involvement, base information gathering, feasibility studies, and logistics planning. This phase begins anywhere from six weeks to many months before the charrette.

In order to run a successful charrette, the people must be ready and the information must be ready.

Being “people-ready” means that:
- the key stakeholders agree to participate, with a shared understanding of the project, process, and their roles
- and, that there is an agreement on the nature of the problem and the need to act on it.

Being “information-ready” means that all the information required to make informed decisions is available. The type of information and level of detail required varies with the project.
After the preparation is completed the charrette can begin. There are two basic roles in a charrette: the charrette design team and the stakeholders. The charrette design team is comprised of the project sponsor (city planning agency, developer, or community group, for example) and a cross-disciplinary group of professionals representing the specialties required for a holistic approach. This group is usually staffed at minimum with planners, architects, landscape architects, transportation engineers and economists. The design team sets up a charrette studio at or somewhere near the site. The studio is a complete temporary design office and community meeting space. Close proximity to the site is important in order 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.
Key stakeholders including community members, agency staff, land owners, business owners, and non-governmental organizations, provide vision, input and review throughout the charrette. Stakeholder involvement is solicited through scheduled meetings, large, open public meetings, or dropping by the gallery at the charrette studio.
The charrette involves a series of collaborative design and public input cycles for four or more days. The charrette begins with a public meeting featuring a “hands-on” vision workshop. Following the workshop the design team takes the community vision along with the project constraints and creates a series of alternative plans and then solicits public input at another public meeting a day or two later. This input is used to create a preferred plan which is presented at a public open house. The team then develops and performs feasibility tests before presenting the final plan and set of implementation documents for public confirmation on the final night of the charrette.
Following is a sample of how the work cycles play out in a seven day charrette. The first day of the charrette is all about sharing information. The charrette begins with a team tour of the site and surrounding areas and then a public, “hands-on” workshop where everyone works in small groups to describe and draw their vision of the project. A citizen representative from each team presents their top ideas to the whole assembly. Everyone learns from each other’s work and several alternative themes begin to emerge.
Over the subsequent days, the design team works to develop plans based on the public’s vision. The team meets with key stakeholders and develops concept alternatives.
As the plans are developed, stakeholders are invited to give their input. Stakeholders are encouraged to become involved and to give input while ideas are fresh.
On day 4, the design team synthesizes the input and narrows the number of alternatives, working toward the goal of a preferred plan.
On day 5, the design studio opens to a mid-course public review of the ongoing work. This session is often the height of the charrette. The remaining alternatives are debated by representatives of all major viewpoints. It is often during these sessions that solutions to previously “unsolvable” problems are created. People are often overheard leaving these sessions saying things such as, “Now I understand why alleys are important,” or “I understand now how parallel parking contributes to walkability.”
On Day 6, equipped with the information and input from the public open house, the charrette design team moves forward to investigate the final, preferred alternative in detail. Design drawings at multiple scales are created and statistical analysis is performed. Implementation strategies are also created.
On the final evening of the charrette, the design team presents all elements of the project including master plans, building designs, economic and transportation impacts and strategy, and the implementation plan. Everything needed to move the project forward into implementation is reviewed. Another round of public input is gathered for the next refinement phase.
Here is an example of a seven day charrette schedule.

Three major, public feedback loops are punctuated by public meetings (in orange). The charrette event begins with a public visioning session and ends with a final public meeting. Key stakeholder meetings occur early in the process and the design team meets with all key stakeholders by the end of Day Two. Stakeholder feedback and testing sessions continue throughout the week, giving stakeholders a number of opportunities to participate. Not all charrettes last seven days. A minimum of 4 days is needed for three feedback loops, so charrettes typically range from 4 to 7 days, with particularly large or complex project charrettes lasting up to 11 days.
Here are a few examples of the types of drawings and documents that are created during a charrette, ranging from master plans to economic analysis.
Realistic architectural renderings can be hand drawn or created by computer. All-important environmental analysis and codes are also presented.
The project doesn’t end with a charrette. Following the charrette, the design team analyzes and tests the plans for any further refinements. Additional stakeholder input is gathered. Final changes are made and the plans are presented to the public at a charrette follow-up meeting that occurs no more than a month later.

The goal of the plan implementation phase is to refine and finalize charrette products to guide the project through adoption and development. It is important to maintain political leadership and support, keep citizens informed and involved, and coordinate with approving agencies.
Key differences between the NCI Charrette System and other planning processes

- Compressed work sessions
- Communicate in short feedback loops
- Work collaboratively
- Includes a charrette that is at least 4 consecutive days
- Study the details and the whole
- Hold the charrette on or near the project site
- Produce a feasible plan

The key features of Charrettes that make them different than other planning processes are:

Compressed work sessions
Communicate in short feedback loops
Work collaboratively
The charrette is at least 4 consecutive days
Study the details and the whole
Hold the charrette on or near the site
Produce a feasible plan
Now that we’ve walked through the process, let’s step back and look at the key underlying principles required for a successful NCI Charrette System project. The first key principle is the use of compressed work sessions. Time compression facilitates creative problem-solving by accelerating decision-making and reducing unconstructive negotiation tactics.
The second key strategy is to 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. When people are involved throughout the design process, they see the impact of their participation. They feel respected and that their time was well spent when their ideas are heard, discussed and integrated into the plan.
All interested parties must be involved from the beginning. Having contributed to the planning, participants are in a position both to understand and support a project’s rationale.
There are may reasons to work for at least 4, and ideally 7 days in a row. Most important, getting buy-in and support from all participants requires 3 feedback loops, which necessitates working for at least 4 consecutive days. Another reason is that this continuous work session provides time to study the problem in depth. The charrette is a creative process, which requires sufficient time for a problem to be studied, alternatives to be drafted and debated and for decisions to be made. Working for at least 4 consecutive days allows time for controversial subjects to be aired and resolved. And finally, working in an open studio for at least 4 consecutive days provides the greatest opportunity for the most people to get involved.
An important element of the charrette design process is to study the details and the whole. Lasting agreement is based on a fully-informed dialogue. It is only when you study the details that you get the basis for lasting agreement. Without looking at the big picture as well as the details, you run the risk of missing core issues, about which people often disagree. It is by examining things at a finer scale that helps people gain a shared understanding of what the real impacts may be.
Hold the charrette on or near the site
- Working on-site fosters participants’ understanding of local values and traditions and provides the necessary easy access to stakeholders and information.

Working on-site fosters participants’ understanding of local values and traditions and provides the necessary easy access to stakeholders and information. The charrette 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. Working on site shows a commitment to the community and builds trust in the process.
Key NCI Charrette Strategies

Produce a Feasible Plan

- To create a feasible plan, every decision point must be fully informed, especially by legal, financial, and engineering disciplines.

It is imperative that the charrette result in a feasible plan. This means that every decision point must be fully informed, especially by the legal, financial and engineering disciplines. The focus on feasibility brings a level of seriousness and rigor to the process for everyone involved. 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.
A well-run NCI Dynamic Planning process:
Creates public trust through meaningful public involvement and education
Creates a better plan through diverse input and involvement and
Creates a shared vision by turning public opposition into support
Answers to the Frequently Asked Questions:

1. **When is the right time to use a charrette?**
   - Charrettes are ideal for projects in which development is imminent and/or when there is a real developer to implement the results. Charrettes are especially useful for projects that have significant community impact and contentious situations that require conflict resolution.

2. **How do you know when you are charrette-ready?**
   - The first phase of the NCI Charrette System is all about preparation. In order to run a successful charrette, the people must be ready and the information must be ready. Being “people-ready” means two things. First, the key stakeholders agree to participate, with a shared understanding of the project, the process, and their roles. And second, there is an agreement on the nature of the problem and the need to act on it. Being “information-ready” means that all the information required to make informed decisions is available.

3. **How can you assure that the right people participate?**
   - The public involvement process is based on a diverse group of stakeholders. Stakeholder outreach and engagement is key to the charrette preparation phase. To assure diverse and representative participation in the charrette, multiple outreach methods must be used. Some of these methods include: attending neighborhood meetings, engaging churches and organized groups, one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders, mailings, phone calls, e-mails, handbills, signs, websites and newsletter announcements.
   - Stakeholders should include final decision makers, all people who will be affected by the outcome, people who have power to assist, and very importantly, people who can block a decision. Potential blockers must be engaged early. Often, they turn into the biggest project supporters.

4. **How much do charrettes cost?**
   - The charrette event cannot be separated from the preparation and implementation phases. Therefore, it is not possible to budget for a charrette in isolation. The cost is completely dependent on project scale and complexity, how much preparation work has to be done, available resources, data collection, studies to be completed, and stakeholder outreach and engagement. The price for NCI Charrette System projects with a charrette, including the preparation and implementation, ranges from $75,000 to $500,000. It is possible to reduce project costs through the use of professional volunteers, local agencies and university architecture and planning departments. The National Charrette Institute and other organizations are working to create more affordable charrette models and resources.

5. **What happens after the charrette?**
   - Public involvement and design are not over when the charrette is complete. After the charrette, the all-important implementation phase begins. The design team analyzes and tests the plans for any further...
Charrettes have proven successful for all parties

“... Several League members attended the charrette in February and felt that it successfully encouraged public participation in the design process. They also felt that the charrette increased the understanding of participants when compromises had to be made because some requests could not be accommodated without conflicting with others.”

– Leslie Stewart,
Action Chair, League of Women Voters of Diablo County, CA
Charrettes have proven successful for all parties

“The charrette epitomizes public empowerment in the planning process. By allowing the design team to work with the public (usually reserved for developers), the public is able to combine their unique knowledge of the community with the skill and expertise of the design team.”

– Donna Gerber,
Former County Supervisor, Contra Costa County, California
Charrettes have proven successful for all parties

“Charrettes have taken public involvement to a new level in our community and have become a common way for dealing with contentious planning issues. Our citizens see the results of their comments and feel a part of the decision.”

– Bill Collins,
Planning and Development Director, Teton County, Wyoming
Charrettes have proven successful for all parties

“The charrette process is a community-building and democratic planning process. All participants, whether they are elected officials, land owners, developers, or neighbors, have equal standing in a charrette and the results are better because of that.”

– Bob Stacey,
Executive Director, 1000 Friends of Oregon
Charrettes have proven successful for all parties

“The charrette process provides the forum for a reasoned discussion among all of the stakeholders, representing all viewpoints, both public and private, within a productive framework. The goal of the charrette is a result that melds these viewpoints into a viable project. The most important factor in the success of a charrette is the full participation of all of the stakeholders.”

– Mark Farrar,
Principal, Millennium Partners
The National Charrette Institute is a non-profit, education organization. They offer many resources to help you learn more about charrettes. Explore certificate trainings, publications, including the comprehensive Charrette Handbook published by the American Planning Association, free articles and presentations, and the NCI Charrette Request for Proposal (RFP) Template on their website.