Good Planning and Engagement Requires Knowledge of Process

When it comes to big picture planning, communities need to get the big things right, plan for what is known, and create a framework for responding to the unforeseen. When it comes to specific property investment decisions, communities need to provide predictability in their laws governing development. To do all this, communities undertake planning activities and pass laws that shape development. Residents must understand these processes if they are to meaningfully engage in discussions about development issues that matter to them in their neighborhoods.

Did you know?
The 44th Avenue Subarea Plan is part of this phase in the process of planning and development.

General ◄———► *Specific*

The Comprehensive Plan

At the highest level, cities plan generally using a tool called a comprehensive plan. This is the city's primary and overarching plan for the direction the community wants to go, in view of present conditions and trends and best guesses about the future. In a comprehensive plan a city establishes priorities, budgets for those priorities, determines what generally goes where, what land uses are to be allowed where, and how it all should fit together. In this document, a general future for each part of a city is described. Comprehensive plans are legally non-binding; they are followed and implemented if the elected officials believe in their content.

Example: At a high level, Neighborhood X should
• be mostly residential in nature
• have a park
• be connected to the trail system

Subarea Plans

A subarea area plan further interprets the comprehensive plan and gets more specific about what should happen in a smaller area. A comprehensive plan might articulate that a certain part of the city needs to have a park and some housing and some retail space and some educational institutions. The subarea plan would more specifically describe where in the small area the park should be, and what kind of park with what kinds of amenities. The comprehensive plan might articulate that this is a residential area, overall. But the subarea plan would be more detailed in specifying how much of that the housing should be multifamily and how much might be single family. The subarea plan might go as far as describing the goal that this area have buildings that are modest in massing and height and still allow for the community to see the mountains from most sidewalks.

Example: Within Neighborhood X
• these are the blocks that should remain single-family residential
• these are the blocks that could have higher density *residential such as townhomes or three-story stacked flat* apartments
• this is the type of architecture and design that we desire for higher density residential

The Development Code

It is in the development code (including zoning) that specific height limits and densities and floor to area ratios and setbacks would be described. Development codes are legally binding documents. It is the tool cities use to implement the broad vision articulated in the city's comprehensive plan and further spelled out in a small area plan. The code is the "fine print" of planning. Permissions in the zoning code are considered entitlements, and, as such, mean that an owner is entitled to assume they and the value they confer exist and cannot be taken away without compensation or because of a superseding public interest.

Most development code is prescriptive and nearly black and white. In some cases, however, codes may combine a certain level of flexibility with a higher level of review. For example, special uses may not automatically be allowed but they can be approved by City Council if the application meets certain criteria.

Example: Within the higher density residential zoning district of Neighborhood X
• these are the height limits
• *these are the floor to area ratio limits*
• these are the open space requirements
• these are the parking requirements
• these are the architectural requirements

Permits and Land Use Approvals

Where development becomes real is in the permitting and approval process. At this point, the parameters should be clear. While there are always many details to be worked out for any project, there should be little debate about what is allowed or not. Projects which meet the development code are usually approved "by right," meaning they require little to no review by a discretionary body, such as the Planning Commission. These applications are usually approved by professional staff who are authorized to make such decisions within the code. If any part of the project is subject to a flexible part of the code, the Planning Commission will consider approval within an established process and set of guidelines for decision making.

For a specific development proposal
• does it meet requirements under the development code?
• if anything about the project is subject to discretionary review by the Planning Commission, is the project within the established parameters or guidelines for approval?

Community Engagement

Public discussions are broad, focusing on big issues and priorities. Participation is for everyone citywide. A focus on community values is critical. Engagement is about determining high altitude vision.

Public discussions are more narrow, focused on a smaller area, and the issues are more specific. The range of stakeholders is smaller, more heavily involving those who live or have a business interest in the area. Engagement is about moving from vision to reality.

Developing code is best left to professionals. However, assuming code writing is in support of a subarea plan, it is appropriate to consult with stakeholders who have been involved previously, to ensure that code is honoring the subarea plan as the stakeholders understand it.

By the time a project is seeking approval, it is a technical exercise. The need for public engagement should be minimal. Issues of vision and neighborhood character should have been handled previously. However, informal public meetings to share plans before official review are increasingly a best practice.