

Executive Summary

The Urban Land Institute is a global non-profit with a mission to “provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide.” ULI has fifty-one District Councils across North America, including Indiana. The Indiana District Council was asked to provide assistance to the City of Indianapolis by bringing together its members to discuss the City’s existing planning documents and help inform its new comprehensive plan, called PLAN 2020.

Two focus groups were held at The Hall, the City’s headquarters for PLAN 2020, on April 15 and 16, 2014. The participants, all of whom were ULI members, included developers, real estate attorneys, brokers, designers, and planners from other communities. The discussion was led by Indianapolis Planning Administrator Brad Beaubien. The following summarizes key observations from both days.

Does anyone use the City/County Land Use Plan?

Most developers and their attorneys admitted that they choose a site first (location, location, location), then check the land use plan. If what it calls for is something close to what they want to do anyway, then they may try to adjust their proposed development accordingly. But in general, the plan is just something of which to be aware, as it will indicate the level of opposition they might face from neighborhood groups.

The neighborhood groups *do* use the plan – and they have expectations that what the land use plan says is what will happen. They think that it protects them. As one person put it, it’s as though the plan exists to “prevent change rather than enable it.”

One person said it is more useful to have a map on which you can see existing land uses, rather than planned land uses.

How could the plan be more useful? / What do you need from a plan? / How would you change it?

Age

Most people agreed that the current land use plan is too old to address current market realities (in one popular neighborhood, it hasn’t been updated since 1979). But they also recognized that any fixed plan very quickly becomes out of date, and addressing current market realities can be an on-going challenge. “By definition it’s a long range plan – the development community moves much more quickly.” The other benefit of newer plans is that they are more likely to represent the current perspectives of the neighborhood groups. Thus, *the*

immediate challenge for the City is to provide up-to-date plan that addresses current market realities and is also flexible enough to respond to new development trends when needed.

Geographic Specificity

The current land use plan provides parcel-specific land use categories. On the other end of the spectrum, a plan could just have goals and objectives, without a map at all (state law does not require it, although it is necessary for some federal programs.) One person suggested that parcel specific info is useful to the extent that it defines how far commercial uses may extend into residential areas. ***Both groups seemed to agree that it would be useful if the plan delineated expectations at the neighborhood/district level.***

Content

The groups tended to agree with the tenet of form-based zoning - form and character change less often than land use. They also felt that the plan can help communicate what the residents of a neighborhood desire (provided that their input is fairly recent). "It's beneficial to know that there is neighborhood buy-in for a particular use." ***A useful plan would explain the desired form and character of a neighborhood or district, so developers can understand and respond to those expectations.***

Standards

As one person said, ***it is not very useful to have a plan that simply exists to prohibit horrible development, but not to encourage great development.*** One person suggested that the plan define acceptable parameters – i.e., you can development X units as-of-right, or Y units if you do A, B, and C. With regard to historic districts, there was some mention that perhaps the focus on minute details such as brick colors and window sizes may be less important than ensuring the character of the neighborhood remains intact. In general, though they liked working with the Historic Development Commission, they would not want that level of restriction county-wide.

Usability

Most people recognized and valued the usefulness of GIS for providing up to date information, but also would like the ability to print off paper maps easily and cheaply.

Planning and Policy

The discussion revealed some important points about the role of policy in the plan, and some policy perspectives that the City may want to consider.

Both groups addressed the fact that a plan is more useful when you understand the policy behind it. On one level, that's as simple as understanding, "*Why were these land uses chosen?*" To that end, they felt ***there is value in a plan that describes desired outcomes or character.***

One person said that, for this reason, in some places they have found economic development plans to be more useful than comprehensive plans. Another said, "If there is an economic reason for the plan, it can be more useful." They felt that private interest should be a consideration in the plan. It was also said that the public should be more educated about the economic impacts of various development decisions.

One person said it seems that in Marion County, engineering decisions are made without regard to planning, and that this is a problem. Another suggested that perhaps the city's planning documents should be focused towards elected and appointed officials (to help them make good decisions), versus towards developers or the general public.

It seems that in practice, the elected and appointed officials provide variances, etc. in consideration of economic reasons, and consequently neighborhood groups feel threatened and unprotected. The economic reality is that the city *must* seriously consider any proposed land uses that add to the city's assessed value. ***Protection of the status quo may be a luxury that the city can no longer afford. To the extent that it can state this as a set of policies, the plan would at least be more transparent and better align expectations and outcomes.***

Discussion of City Resources

The state of the City's resources was interwoven throughout the discussions. The City of Indianapolis currently has only four long range planners. There are zero local tax dollars allocated to Planning – the department gets its funding from Federal programs and user fees.

But the kind of planning favored by these focus group participants – neighborhood/district level and form-based – would require more financial resources. In the absence of those resources, many neighborhoods have tried to do their own plans, but that hasn't been very successful. (They may be uncoordinated with the City or each other, they also tend to be underfunded, they may lack professional planning oversight, and they are difficult to maintain.)

The participants felt this should be rectified somehow. They pointed out that good planning can help improve safety and quality of life, and therefore attract more residents and businesses. In that sense, ***paying for planning is an investment in the future.***