

Strategies for Addressing Common Concerns during Planning Processes

Residents often raise similar concerns during planning processes regardless of where the planning process is taking place. “Our schools are already at capacity.” “The traffic would be terrible!” “We must preserve community character.” Sometimes these are justified concerns that require a technical solution or an adjustment to the plan. Sometimes they are based on false impressions or misinterpretations and can be resolved with information or extra analysis. And sometimes they are just excuses used to maintain the status quo.

What follows is the Metropolitan Area Planning Council and partners’ attempt to identify the concerns most frequently raised during planning processes as well as the best ways to address them. We hope this material will support residents and practitioners in their planning processes. We will continue to listen for new concerns and responses and we will update this document as that information becomes available.

Another Plan, No Action



The concern that this will just be another plan that sits on a shelf or that ignores resident input.

Increased Demand for Resources



The concern that housing will increase school enrollment, strain municipal services, and increase property taxes.

Increased Traffic and Limited Parking



The concern that new development will increase traffic congestion and decrease available parking.

Analysis Paralysis



The concern that implementation is inadvisable without further study.

Displacement and Gentrification



The concern that new investment-attracting policies will price out residents and businesses.

Loss of Community Character



The concern that new policies could negatively affect the built environment, demographics, recreation, and amenities.

Best Practices: Strategies that can be used regardless of the concern

Recruit and engage plan champions. Plan champions are residents or stakeholders who support the planning process and the recommendations. Recruiting them, actively engaging them in the process, and having their support at meetings adds credibility to the project and encourages others to get on board.

Organize an Advisory Committee or an Implementation Committee. Local committees also add credibility and create accountability for carrying out recommendations and next steps.

Publish Frequently Asked Questions. Providing a FAQ (in a variety of formats) that details the process, anticipated outcomes, partners, common myths, the implications of current policies, etc. can advance a common understanding of the issues and the project.

Collect concerns, make them public, and produce a plan for addressing them. Concerns are a part of any planning process. Ignoring concerns, or neglecting to seek them out, just puts off dealing with them till later in the process. Identify concerns as soon as possible and plan how to address them. Present and publish this plan to as many stakeholders as possible.

Engage as many residents as possible before a public meeting. The more relationships you can develop before decisions have to be made, the better the chance for having constructive rather than obstructive dialogue.

Begin a meeting with an Open House. Display the effort you’ve made to address concerns and offer residents the opportunity to discuss the findings during a conversation rather than at a podium.

ANOTHER PLAN
NO ACTION

INCREASED DEMAND
FOR RESOURCES

Who has this concern?	Why are they concerned?	Strategies for addressing the concern before it's made	Meeting activities to address the concern	Addressing the concern when it's made
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Folks who have been part of previous planning processes that were not implemented People whose views haven't been reflected in previous planning processes Underserved communities Long-term residents Advocates for change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They have seen plans, or been a part of plans, that don't get implemented Planners ask for their opinions, but don't incorporate their recommendations Their municipality does not have the resources to implement recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge previous plans, study them, and incorporate them where appropriate. Reach out to key decision makers and ask why plans have not been implemented. Seek to understand public perception of why work hasn't begun. Document what you hear and provide a FAQ about what the municipality is doing and how this process will be different. Convene an Advisory Committee (AC) or Implementation Committee (IC) that is responsible for acting on recommendations. Be transparent about what resources the municipality has available or can access. Work with the AC/IC to create an implementation plan that identifies potential resources or additional processes for making change happen. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide visuals of any changes that did result from previous processes, but also acknowledge what didn't happen and why. Explain how you plan to integrate implementation into the process. Show the anticipated outcomes of the process as well as its timeline, scope, and deliverables. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask those stating their concern why they think previous plans failed to move forward. And be sure to have your own opinion in case they ask for it. Identify who is responsible for the plan being implemented. Ask those responsible for implementing this plan to be present whenever possible. Tell them beforehand that you might acknowledge them and ask if they would be willing to comment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residents Property owners Municipal staff Elected officials Teachers and school administrators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worry about the potential strain on municipal finances and resources Concern about the fiscal health of property owners and the community at large Financial self-interest Worry over financial insecurity Worry over displacement A desire to maintain the status quo A lack of empathy for those who have less 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide public school enrollment data and capacity of schools, as well as which family types usually occupy the suggested housing typology. Communicate that new schools serve as anchor institutions that bring economic investment and social cohesion. Advocate for creating a 4OR District that would benefit from 4OS funding. Gather teachers, educational administrators, and housing advocates for a focus group. Create and share information on local programs that help seniors to find tax reductions like the CPA surcharge exemption Make sure residents are responding to accurate, unexaggerated facts. Present data and information in local newspaper, on local websites, and on social media (but don't respond to internet trolls!). Engage in a pre-meeting process to identify concerns, and make a plan to address them with engagement and data. Present and disseminate case studies about how this type of development has affected similar cities and towns. Create a FAQ and make it accessible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Display findings from research on schools and housing typologies and have facilitators available to interpret them. Provide information about various government programs that would mitigate impact on residents. Report out or display data from engagement effort and focus groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide personal stories and testimonials from residents new to the municipality or folks who want to live there, but can't find places to live. Identify plan champions from the educational system or from the school committee who can answer questions with more authority than you. Look for empathy, highlight how much the community has to offer to new residents.

Who has this concern?	Why are they concerned?	Strategies for addressing the concern before it's made	Meeting activities to address the concern	Addressing the concern when it's made
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residents who live in, frequent areas, or drive through where development is being proposed Entrepreneurs who own businesses in the target area Politicians who represent growth areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The belief that development will add to already-severe traffic congestion The worry that parking will become scarce The concern that access to businesses will be more difficult Suspicion of planning processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share information about what could happen if the current zoning does not change. For instance if a place is zoned commercial, permitting residential would stop commercial growth (high traffic demand) for residential growth (lower traffic demand). Share information about current traffic, and information about potential traffic impacts both if zoning changes and if it doesn't change Communicate how housing built around transit and amenities results in fewer additional cars. Share information about various transportation initiatives (both public and private, local and regional) that might address capacity issues. Provide information about how online mapping platforms (Waze and Google Maps) affect traffic along major routes. Monitor for and correct misperceptions or misstatements about proposals. Identify changes to local ordinances that could restrict traffic, such as instituting parking fees and enacting parking regulations like banning overnight parking. Identify ways to provide incentives for residents to use public transportation (E.g., requiring a developer to subsidize public transportation use, or requiring that new apartments come with a transportation stipend). Use toolkits like MAPC's Perfect Fit Parking model. Identify other communities that have successfully engaged citizenry and gotten policies passed. Run a pilot program to demonstrate possibilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a gallery to display what different scenarios and trade-offs would look like, and engage residents around what the scenarios mean. Engage in exercises that encourage residents to shape change that is inevitable. Show residents where similar changes are happening successfully. Create traffic FAQs and cheat sheets that show different estimates by location. If there are opponents who dismiss data and scenarios, put the burden on them to get counterfactual. When discussing specific routes offer visuals of roads of interest. Invite plan champions to attend the meeting and support recommendations during meeting activities. Determine when it's best to have local planner present rather than a consultant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide visuals of where this is happening and successful. Include graphics and pictures and even people from those places to advocate for that kind of change. Discuss the contrast between what you are proposing versus and what would happen if nothing changes. Respond that the region is growing and this is their chance to control it Discuss how commercial activity can offset property taxes. Advocate for the regional perspective. That growth is happening in our region and that everyone should "bear their fair share."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residents who are reluctant to endorse change Politicians and government officials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear of losing traditions Skepticism about a poorly defined implementation process Risk aversion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a clear scope that details key deliverables, anticipated outcomes of the planning process, and potential implementation strategies. Communicate with key decision makers during the process to better understand their concerns, get in front of future objections, and to make them aware of potential fallout from lack of action. Make your plan multimedia. Put it online and make it interactive so people can use it as they prefer Convene an Advisory Committee or Implementation Committee responsible for acting on recommendations. Make past plans and outcomes publicly available, as well as current decision-making structure Organize pilot programs that let cities and towns test solutions with lower stakes. Meet people where they are and engage them in a variety of ways. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start the meeting with visuals of the process to date and of the implementation strategy. Open-house-style meeting so planners can address concerns before an open forum or voting occurs. During open house, be sure to ask, "why?" to get down to the root problems attendees have with planning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A municipality that delays action or takes no action is extending the time needed to course-correct trends identified during the current planning process. For example, if residential property taxes are rising and it will take 5-10 years for new commercial developments to offset the rise, every year without action pushes that 5-10 year timetable further and further into the future.

Who has this concern?	Why are they concerned?	Strategies for addressing the concern before it's made	Meeting activities to address the concern	Addressing the concern when it's made
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underserved communities • Middle- to low-income residents • Community advocates • Community oriented non-profits • Small business owners • Seniors • Those living on fixed incomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residents are familiar with historical examples of displacement • They don't want their life uprooted or their community to disappear • The rising cost of property and rents in Greater Boston threatens their ability to live where they want 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect with affordable housing advocates to learn more about their work and their challenges. • Engage concerned community members. Reassure them that gentrification and displacement are never planning goals, and that anti-displacement policies are. • Put concerned community members on Advisory Committee and/or create other roles for them to serve in. • Develop an inclusionary zoning ordinance and show how it's worked in other places. • Ensure that the message is "investment" not "revitalization." • Suggest that specific concerns could and should be included in the planning document along with actionable implementation strategies. • Research tenant protection ordinances such as notification periods, notice of sale, availability of legal assistance, etc. • Complete an inventory of tools (tenant rights, homebuyer assistance programs, anti-displacement financial aid, legal assistance, etc.). Discuss tools that don't exist and how to make more tools available. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuously acknowledge the seriousness of displacement, the challenge of preventing it, and the effort this process will make to address it. • Highlight locations and policies where investment occurred, but displacement was avoided. • Provide analysis on possible housing shortages. Ask residents to identify locations they know where a resident or business has been recently displaced. • Ask individuals to share what resources they have used to help remain in their home. • Have individuals identify ask individuals what types of resources they would be likely to use if available. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge, with empathy, how complicated and stressful the issue is. • Discuss locations that has maintained affordability for current residents. • Invite people from the Advisory Committee to share the responsibilities of addressing the objection. • Explain how limiting local housing supply so that it cannot meet demand contributes to rising home prices and increases the risk of displacement.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mid-size to small, mostly suburban or rural, municipalities • Residents who prefer the status quo • Residents who fear change • Often times wealthier, civically engaged residents • Older generation of residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They don't want what they're familiar with and what they enjoy to change • They don't want the demographics of the municipality to change • They fear that a small change, might lead to bigger changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize a community driven process, perhaps through a visual preference survey, to objectively identify what community character is in that place. • Organize neighborhood walk-throughs with community members. • Conduct one-on-one conversations with key stakeholders. • Research historical rates of change to show that change has indeed happened and it's not always a bad thing. • Build models of current neighborhoods to contrast with potential neighborhoods. • Describe and publicize your positions and anticipated outcomes of the planning process along with what zoning and by-laws currently allow. There's a chance that residents don't know what's currently allowed and actually would support your efforts if they knew about them. • Publicize known objections along with responses in newspapers and on social media. • Organize field trips or "site walks" to places that have successfully implemented current proposals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have an open house or start the presentation with what people have identified as local community character. • Show how expensive it will be to maintain community character and how it might limit progress on projects the community values. • Display how good planning practices can maintain most aspects of community character. • Make a place for objections and then in the meeting create a plan to address them. • Invite plan champions to attend the meeting and support recommendations during meeting activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining community character can be expensive if it means excluding commercial development. • You can proactively maintain community character by planning responsibly. • Discuss the issues that make up "community character": don't try to address it as a tangible thing that anyone can directly affect.