OCL Community Image Steering Committee meeting
Jan 11th 2011

Attending: Chris Capella-Peters, Barbara Carranti, George Curry, Bob Doucette, Nell Donaldson,Therese Driscoll, Bart Feinberg, Karen Hanford, Joe Hucko, Tony Malavenda, Sarah McIlvain, Maude Morse, Don McLaughlin, Aaron McKeon, Fran Nichols, Clyde Ohl, Donna Rohde, Sheena Solomon, Merike Treier (co-chair) Rachel Pollack, Sandra Barrett

Agenda: Subcommittee Reports

Public Policy Subcommittee Meeting Report: The group is deciding how to do outreach to surrounding communities. Focus continually seems to be coming back to the city. Group needs to think about suburban areas.

Group looked at which townships touch the city of Syracuse and from that list chose Dewitt, Salina and Geddes. Decided to reach out to their planning authorities (chairs of the the three planning boards) to discover the townships' guiding principles and guiding document laying out requirements, what is expected from design work, landscaping. The group is asking the planning board chairs how they envision the main streets of their areas looking; how they view the city as a neighbor. Group reached out to chairs of those three planning boards, have spoken with one, hope to speak to all of them before next full committee meeting.

Group contacted Megan Costa of SOPCA to understand how that agency relates to village and town planning boards. SOPCA has own county board and the agency never actually works one on one with the applicants. The process works in this way: Applicant fills out town planning board application; SOPCA has limited area of commentary. The agency looks at transportation and mobility, drainage concerns. There is a limited review of community character and quality of placement, a gray area. They are limited in terms of what they can make recommendations on. In a three week period, the county planning board gets 30-50 cases to review, returns recommendations on those cases to the towns. The towns either follow recommendation or overturn recommendation by supermajority vote of the town board. It is a process with many limitations.

It would be useful to have Megan Costa as a participant on a panel with members of town planning boards. Costa suggested that since many of our recommendations relate to right of way issues that we should talk to the Transportation Department and also speak with city Engineering Department. In NYSDOTs view trees can pose hazards—and this may impact general attitudes toward tree care and planting.

How do we involve business leaders more and create additional stake holders?

Discussion:

What are limitations in terms of Onondaga planning board? Is it a legislation issue? Is it state?

Focus of study is not to look at all 19 towns and villages, but to recognize the city for what it is is, to focus on the gateways, important to have this committee agree that this is the right focus. How do visitors, residents from the municipalities, get into the city? We need to agree on the focus.

What is our focus? Might it be better if we moved our focus onto the subject of "Public Space," as opposed to "beauty? Public space is a piece of the nomenclature. It is a known and identifiable quantity.

Public Space includes right of way.

Is "Public Space" too broad?

Public Space is owned by the voters, all of us. People understand the concept.

There is a handicap in not having a map on hand we all can look at to determine what the Public Spaces are. "I only know the Public Spaces I use."

All streets and sidewalks are Public Spaces.

If we had a map of major streets and Public Spaces, it would help.

How about building codes and zoning as they relate to Public Spaces? What about zoning of a building next to a beautiful public park that may affect our view of the park?

For instance Syracuse University campus is not Public Space.

A sidewalk is Public Space. A vacant garage or lot, isn't

Buildings around it would define a particular "Public Space." They form the walls of public space, the enclosure, and depending on various factors people feel more or less comfortable. These really form basis of what you get when you move through a township, city. This forms the image. You can control not through zoning but through design guidelines, but that control is very limited.

Back to the question: Has city decreased budget for Public Space to the point where it is deteriorating?

Meetings with township officials/representatives: Does it make sense to get two or three representatives together, so none of them feel pressured?

Sandra had conversations with Megan Costa and mentioned that we are hoping to pull in some towns. She mentioned Dewitt but their planner has retired. They do have a sustainability committee. She mentioned the two towns that do have professional planners heading their planning and development offices. They are Clay and Manlius. (Clay: Mark Territo and Manlius: Dave Tessier.)

In talking to town planning entities, is the goal to find out how they handle image at the town level or is it to ascertain their view of the city's image, and how it relates to them? Or is it both? (This question goes back to focus of study.)

Answer: Both. Overlap between them. Do they think of themselves as a gateways?

There may be a more manageable way to handle topic. It might be more manageable to deal solely with the public realm. Ostensibly, government can control the public realm through a budgeting process. Tackling zoning, which deals with private property, would be highly difficult. It might be too much for this study. If we talk about image in terms of the different components that government can control, related to the public realm, there are recommendations that can be made, without tackling the design guidelines.

In terms of the Case Study Subcommittee, all the examples we have worked on, all the most successful examples involve public/private cooperation. We haven't found any that are purely municipally driven or purely privately driven.

Case Study Subcommittee Meeting Report

Group picked five cities.

1) Madison, Wisconsin

2) Toledo, Ohio.

3) Albany, NY

4) Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

5) Manchester, New Hampshire.

If you looked at these on a map, they would all run on the same parallel. The similarities of these cities to ours are based on fiscal elements. The goal is to compare apples to apples, and discover practices that can be duplicated. Climate was considered, as was population and square mileage of both city and metro area; population density in city and metro area; concentration of government, higher education and medical institutions; airport accessibility and highway crossroads; proximity to water (because we have Onondaga Creek); year of incorporation for similar sense of downtown infrastructure.

Each subcommittee member has gone ahead and taken a city and looked for what we consider to be best practices. The idea is "If they could do it there, we can do it here."

Are these successful?

Yes, they are taking steps.

Manchester has the best tax environment for business of any city in U.S except Juneau. Alaska.

Collection of data for each of these cities: GDP data; crime data, census data. Does the steering committee have other ideas about what we should be looking for?

Rather than find sexy, glamorous cities to look at, the goal was to find cities facing similar issues. (With the understanding, no city could match us for snow conditions.)

All of these cities have local programs, are involved in national programs, public-private partnerships. We are thinking of contacting people that are running the programs we think are most successful.

Comments:

What we are trying to do is to look at how they developed their uniqueness and broadcast it, and to look at how they did it. Programs alone do not create an image.

Most of these cities are cities we think of as a bit downtrodden, except for Madison.

The stumbling block on both Harrisburg and Albany, is that they publish their plans but don't publish their outcomes. (Two subcommittee members have found this.)

Syracuse Connective Corridor: We should look at latest on Connective Corridor.

"Walkability" was a term that kept coming up in connection with improved image.

Demographics and Statistics: median home value, population gain and loss. (Can anyone propose others?) In trying to figure out which cities are successful, those are the acid tests

One of questions that came up in previous meeting: As far as spending trends, we wanted to know what the bench marks are. If you were going to correspond with any officials, maybe you could find out something about their budgets for purpose of comparison. (A sample question might be, "How much do you spend on tree planting?") We need to make sure we are comparing the right numbers to those in the Syracuse budget.

Sharon Owens will gather budget-related information from the city of Syracuse, but first we need to be more specific about what we want to know.

Are there measures of density of cities? Population versus square miles.

Commentary on Email Received from Brian Liberti, currently Rochester City Forester

Liberti was previously with Syracuse Parks and Recreation. Committee Member Jessi Lyons emailed Liberti regarding a talk he had given and brought up OCL committee discussions regarding Parks and Recreation funding. Lyons asked a question of Liberti, about his "time with the City of Syracuse and why support and improvements to the physical landscape of Syracuse are so challenging. What were the major challenges you faced, and what was helpful to you?"

Quote from Liberti's emailed response:

I don't know if there is any one reason why staff and funding has diminished for Parks and Forestry in Syracuse. I do know that Syracuse as well as all upstate cities are struggling with some pretty difficult budget decisions. When faced with cutting staff and services Parks and Forestry isn't viewed as a necessity such as fire, police, trash collection, snow plowing to name a few. Parks and Forestry has to fight for the same dollars that every other department does as there is not an unlimited bank account. Rochester has had a very long standing tradition of trees

and that has carried through to today.   It is one of the reasons I chose to leave Syracuse and take on the opportunity here.   The residents of Rochester value their Urban Forest and as such when it come down to budget time the administration and council recognize this and make it a priority.

Until the public in Syracuse is educated on the value of the Urban Forest and makes it known to the decision makers that it is a priority to them I suspect little will change.

The way we were able to accomplish more with less was though outside funding sources and collaborations such as the one we had for years with CCE Onondaga County. I don't know if with all the changes if Syracuse still has a contract in place with CCE but we were able to do a lot of education, tree planting, and young tree maintenance using very little financial resources. It is collaborations such as that that has kept the program alive and I hope that it continues.

I hope some of this information helps and that Urban Forestry in Syracuse continues to grow and be successful.

Establishing priorities: In Rochester, Parks and Forestry officials have to fight for the same dollars (as in Syracuse) but have a long tradition of trees, and that the residents of Rochester value their urban forests. The Rochester administration and council recognize that people value the urban forest so they keep it in their priorities. Until the public in Syracuse is educated on this, then we can't expect much to change. In Rochester they were able to accomplish more with less, to find outside funding sources and collaborations, such as the one they have had with Cornell Cooperative Extension.

In Rochester, is it afunction of their initial planning that they accommodated urban forests? (The term Urban forest includes park trees, backyard trees, street trees.)

Alliance for Community Trees is the organization in Madison, an umbrella organization that makes sure everyone is using the same resources and standards.

I think in town of Dewitt they have at tree commission, as does Fayetteville.

What is the tree commission responsible for?

It would be interesting to find out what they do. In the 1970s or 1980s the city of Syracuse passed a tree ordinance; we should see if it is still on the books.

Should we get the Parks and Recreation people in next time?

Steve Harris is City Arborist. He may be a good person to speak with. We will ask for Sharon Owens input.

"Public Spaces" Decision

A motion was made to focus study language on "Public Spaces." Most people seemed to be in agreement, though there were several strong objections. It was made clear that public-private partnerships, as they relate to public spaces would be a part of the study.

Public-private partnerships are a mechanism to achieve something and can be studied, but the policy being studied would be policy of the public realm.

We can be expansive in our thinking about public spaces but we will stay away from issues regarding private land.

But wouldn't this group want to encourage good use of private spaces?

If you survey people in the city, people will bring up private spaces such as vacant lots, because this is impacting their world, making their neighborhood ugly. These are the eyesores.

Mission statement language reworked to accommodate "Public Space" language, with the understanding that the group will remain fluid in considering the impact of private property on our public spaces.

There was additional concern expressed about limiting discussion of "Private Space" in the study, as all types of space affect our perceptions of beauty.

Local governments, certainly in the city, and to a lesser extent outside the city, choose not to worry about design. Short of actually developing design guidelines, the recommendation is limited.

If one of the things we want to say is that the quality of private development contributes to the public image, we can say that and give examples of that (perhaps using our case study cities). (Madison likely uses design review.) We can then give examples of cities that use design review, which is traditionally tied to zoning, as a way to work toward high quality private development.

The only design review in our community is tied to preservation.

Should we look at communities (such as Baldwinsville) that have a master plan?

Do we have to drop private from the language?

The question comes down to how broad we want to make the study.

Do we really have more control over public policy? For instance, people tour a private garden and go home and imitate what they see. Over time, this has an effect.

What is this committee trying to say to community? We agree that this community has abandoned the idea of quality public space and right of way, in terms of budget, in terms of lack of policy, in terms of almost anything. We also don't have an administrative structure that would enhance our public image.

For case studies, we could look at the policies of the communities, what kinds of controls are in place, and how it is administered.

Consider Franklin Square and the work that was done there 20 years ago.

Public Participation Subcommittee Meeting Report

Group talked about doing a visual preference survey, generating ideas of what kinds of things we would want to assess people's visual preferences on. We went back forward between private space things like gardens and litter and public space things like streetscapes. Group needed this direction toward "Public Space."

What do we want to survey people about? How do we keep from offending people with images? Should we look at Public Art? Snow removal? Signage? Historical Preservation? Neighborhood Pride? Neighborhood identity? Way finding?

Syracuse has a parks conservancy that is actually interested in putting up signage at city parks. There are few parks that have signs. It is hard to get into parks. Thornton Park has no signage on how to get in and out. If you are here as a visitor you don't know it is Thornton Park. Talked about, landscaping, maintenance graffiti, litter, how to engage people in community.

Mini-grant program through Gifford Foundation (pilot program) making resources available to residents, community groups, not just nonprofits. Money available for neighborhood cleanup.

Whose responsibility: Do we think it is city's responsibility or personal responsibility? (Clean up, care.)

What do we mean by image, in the sense of the contrast between what is simply acceptable and what is superior?

Importance of educating the community on what their options are, for instance people may not know what an urban forest it.

There is something called design review for the city of Syracuse, and we should get whoever is responsible for it to come and talk to us. (Landmark Preservation Project. (?) They do it not just for preservation projects but for all projects.)

If we want to do a survey, we should touch base with someone who does this professionally. The current list is unwieldy.

There is something called project site review(?not sure if correct terminology). If you look at the mechanism, it is not how you do effective design review in most communities. It is a nod toward that but it is quantifying rather than qualifying. It measures rather than looks at aesthetics. It says things like

a new building should be compatible with the buildings around it. That is not how you do design review. There would generally be more direction. And that was purposely left out here.

Physical Environment Subcommittee Meeting Report

Subcommittee looked at DVD done in mid 1980s by urban sociologist William Whyte, photographing how people used space. It looked at what elements make good spaces, talked about both physical, social, cultural and maintenance issues. This has become a classic in architecture, urban design and landscape architecture programs.

The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces

Subcommittee not convinced that 50 minutes of watching this is worth taking public, or even to the whole group. It might be something that certain members of the group would be interested in, might be as an extra session. Basic principles are there. Many of questions we were talking about today were addressed by Whyte.

Public presentations could start out with something that is a broad overview of why this whole topic is important. Why community image is important, what are the ramifications for economic development, etc.

For background on those topics we might rather look to the work of Kevin Lynch, (Image of a City.) We might support a presentation along those lines.

We might come up with a series of elements of good design, and when we get off track we could consider that list.

We might ultimately come up with a series of elements (from the study) that seem to be the things that must be incorporated if you want a successful space. Success is all based on how people use the space.

Consider Orlando. We might need to include a city like this. Jessi Lyons accidentally found herself in downtown Orlando. She mentioned that no building can go up without contributing to public art. Garages have to have some type of public art on them. The idea of someone taking a public space and having a vision, and saying "This can be something different," that might be a good model for us, even if the climate is so radically different.

Even having Disney World in your vicinity doesn't mean that you are going to have success in your downtown.

We need to find a place with vision, but we need to find it in the rust belt.

One thing that is important about case studies is that if this is major part of final document, we have to convince people that these places we pick are places with good image. I understand wanting to look at places that are similar to Syracuse but if they are success stories already, it is easier to use them as examples. I would say Albany would not be a good example, because people there don't view their own city as a success story. We need to show a success story,

Bruce Katz, of the Brookings institute, might be someone who would know.

How about Columbus, Ohio?

It depends on the population and demographics. Once you get to about 2 million people, we are comparing two very different types of cities. We (as a city) don't have what it takes to do it.

Think about Pittsburgh, though it may not work in terms of population and tax base, some of the concepts could be studied: Look at their park system, their signage system. They changed their image

Jan 25th, next meeting

Coyne Laundry representative will come in and talk about privately maintained spaces (? is that correct)