

A Civic Vision for the Central Delaware
Civic Engagement Overview
November 14, 2007

The civic engagement thread of the Central Delaware Riverfront Planning Process was based on the belief that citizen input – input from both riverward neighbors and residents from around the region – must be an essential element in any effort to design, or redesign, a riverfront that citizens would use and be proud of. Citizens are the experts on what’s important to them, on what they want to preserve or to change in their neighborhoods. This citizen expertise can be best expressed in the form of values which then become the basis for citizen developed design principles.

The challenge in such principle-based planning processes is to balance citizen expertise with the expertise of design professionals – city planners, architects, landscape architects, and others. For while citizens have primary expertise on their hopes, dreams and fears for their neighborhoods and city, the design professionals know best how translate those hopes and dreams into a vision, a plan and designs.

To achieve this balance, the Penn Project on Civic Engagement worked with PennPraxis to develop and implement a multi-stage civic engagement process which alternated between citizen input and expert input. The goal was to make this process open, transparent and co-productive in the following ways:

- ***An open process:*** we worked to be as inclusive as possible in our public forums. While our primary outreach efforts went to the riverwards, we promoted the forums broadly – using email blasts to concerned groups and advertising and submitting op-eds pieces to citywide newspapers.
- ***A transparent process:*** the results of each of the public forums and Advisory Group meetings were available on the PlanPhilly website – both in the form of articles on the process and in the form of moderator notes.
- ***A co-productive process:*** the input of citizens was the foundation of the design process. The values developed in the first round of forums became one of the touchstones for the Best Practices Session on February 3. This combination of values and design ideas became the touchstone for the citizen forums to identify design principles that would express their values. These principles became the basis of the three networks in the vision plan: movement systems, parks and open space, and land development. We held further citizen forums during the design process to ask “Did we get it right?” and “What opportunities does this vision open that you hadn’t anticipated?”

The *first stage* of the process was the Value Sessions, three public forums that asked citizens about their hopes and dreams for their neighborhoods. Citizens went from

individual reflection to small group deliberation to plenary discussion. The outcome at the end of each forum was a list of values citizens wanted for the riverfront.

While the set of values that emerged from these forums might not have been surprising, we were encouraged by the turnout as well as by the response of people who participated. Many participants told us that they had never been asked what they wanted for their own neighborhood before. People from different neighborhoods came together and learned that they have much in common.

The *second stage* of the process was a Best Practices Session where citizens heard local and national professionals talk about precedents in waterfront development. The selection of presentations and discussion topics were explicitly derived from the citizen values in the Value Sessions, distinguishing this session from other expert presentations.

The *third stage* was a set of forums through which citizens proposed a set of planning principles to inform the civic vision. We started by asking citizens to think about what design ideas would best express the values they had developed in the first stage of the process. To make sure everyone had some knowledge in common, we started this session with a broad overview of discussion topics from the Best Practices Session. As citizens talked about design ideas, they were able to identify broader planning principles that incorporated neighborhood values and best practices. Here we were heartened by how easily citizens were able to build on their previous knowledge *and* on what they learned from the best practices session to identify a broad range of design ideas.

A *fourth stage* of forums was held over the summer to ask citizens if the design concepts in the civic vision accurately reflected neighborhood planning principles, and what opportunities citizens see in that vision. We then asked people what opportunities they saw in the vision plan and what steps were necessary to actualize those opportunities.

This work, in all four rounds, confirmed our assumption that when asked, citizens have much to offer and can work together across differences – different neighborhoods, different economic statuses and different interests – to develop common ground principles for action. In fact, the more we engaged citizens, the richer and more nuanced their responses. Their ideas in their fourth stage can be seen as concrete expressions of the values and principles from earlier stages. Perhaps most importantly, throughout the process, citizens were thankful for the opportunity to participate in developing the work.

And in the fourth stage of forums, they came up with a range of ways they might continue to be involved and contribute to the ongoing and emerging riverfront development. Cooperation and collaboration across neighborhoods took new forms as people explored ideas together. In this sense, our three goals of openness, inclusion and co-production became richer and more attainable as the process advanced.