2009 TAPA Planning Award Application

Awards Category: Outstanding Planning Award for a Project/Program/Tool

Project Name: East Columbia Neighborhood Revitalization Plan

Project Summary

As part of a joint effort to encourage reinvestment, enhancement and community pride in the community's revitalization efforts, the City of Columbia, in partnership with the Columbia Housing Authority, has developed the *East Columbia Neighborhood Revitalization Plan*. The partnership is a first for the City and the beginning of a collaborative planning process and implementation effort that will link public and private investments in distressed areas with a community-based visioning process.

Located adjacent to Downtown Columbia, the East Columbia community, including the East Hill and College Hill Neighborhoods, is a historically African American neighborhood at the heart of Columbia. Over the years, East Columbia has experienced disinvestment and blight, even as the City as a whole has experienced significant growth over the last 20 years.

In an effort to revitalize the community and identify specific and strategic projects for the City of Columbia and Columbia Housing Authority to undertake in coordination with the community, the City of Columbia retained MACTEC in the spring of 2009 to prepare a housing and redevelopment plan for the East Columbia area. In addition to other purposes, it is intended that the plan will support applications for grant funding from Federal and other sources.

The process included an examination of the current housing conditions as well as important elements of a community assessment such as demographics, existing land use, and community facilities. Through a series of public meetings with local residences, stakeholders, and community leaders, including a focused planning charrette, MACTEC engaged the community to define a collective vision for the area. The valuable information from this outreach process not only created the basis for the revitalization plan but built consensus and a sense of hope within this impoverished community.

Criteria for Outstanding Planning Award for a Project/Program/Tool

Originality/Innovation
Document how the entry presents a visionary approach or innovative concept to address local needs. Explain how the use of the planning process in this context broadened accepted planning principles within the context of the local situation.

The East Columbia Neighborhood Revitalization Plan has been a focused neighborhood planning effort, and the first of its kind for the City of Columbia, coordinated with ongoing joint countywide comprehensive planning, this planning effort achieved efficiency and speed relative to typical neighborhood plans, A reason for expediency has been the need to be responsive to grant application opportunities, specifically the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, The charrette-based public involvement process as well as the high level of coordination of City planning and Columbia Housing Authority staff has enhanced the value and application of planning principles in the City of Columbia.

The outcome of the planning effort in East Columbia is an action plan that identifies specific policies and projects to support revitalization efforts. The plan will assist the East Columbia Community, the City of Columbia and the Columbia Housing Authority in prioritizing capital improvements, pursuing grant funding for specific projects and establishing public-private partnerships that can leverage private investment with public funding and support to improve the community.

Transferability
How does the entry provide potential application for others and how would the application components and methodology further the cause of good planning?

Because of the partnerships and connections established during the planning process, the residents, city departments, Columbia Housing Authority, civic organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club, and local churches have all collectively developed a vision for the community. The shared vision will help all of those involved in the revitalization efforts to work collectively and strategically towards achieving the long term community vision.

Additionally, the plan includes a revitalization and redevelopment framework that provides a guiding structure for implementation efforts. The framework links existing regulations and public processes with public and private funding opportunities and other programs. This connection will help all of those involved to work collectively towards the community vision. Good planning is the result of not only a good development plan or preservation effort, but of an effective and transparent process. The *East Columbia Neighborhood Revitalization Plan* provides this by clearly outlining the projects that need to be completed to achieve the vision, and also the means to achieve the projects with a community-supported vision and public and private investments.

Quality
To what extent does the entry show excellence of thought, analysis, writing, and graphics, regardless of budgetary limitations? How were available resources used in a thoughtful and ethical process?

The planning process was executed in a short time frame, including public participation and plan development. The need for an expedited planning process was associated with opportunities for grant applications to fund implementation. The planning team was able to meet the schedule expectations with assistance from the comprehensive documentation and analysis of existing conditions from the on-going work with the Maury County Joint Comprehensive Plan, being completed by MACTEC. Existing conditions data and GIS files from the countywide planning effort were updated and used to conduct a more detailed analysis of East Columbia. Additionally, the City of Columbia's Planning Department

assisted in providing additional information, data, files and insight into past and ongoing planning efforts.

The ability to use the data and files already collected allowed for an in-depth analysis that would have otherwise not been possible given the budget and required time frame for completion. A community profile of demographic and economic characteristics, existing land use, existing zoning, housing, natural features, transportation, community facilities and community services were documented and analyzed to inform the community vision as well as provide the City and Housing Authority with information to be used in applying for competitive grant applications. Additionally, the ability to quickly document and analyze existing conditions provided more time, attention and budget to be devoted to creating an illustrative master plan that describes the community's vision for East Columbia.

Comprehensiveness
How have planning principles been observed, especially in consideration of the entry's effects on other public objectives? To what extent does the entry include elements important to the local community?

There were two main identified needs that prompted the investment of time and resources for the planning effort. One identified need was for more detailed planning at the neighborhood level for all areas of Columbia. Through the countywide comprehensive planning process, City of Columbia officials and members of the community identified the need for more detailed planning throughout the City to help prioritize public infrastructure and services investments and to manage growth and development. Additionally, the East Columbia area was identified as the area most in need of investment and improvement because of continued blight, disinvestment, safety concerns, and the area's qualification for newly available community improvement grants from state and Federal agencies.

An overall objective of this planning effort was to establish a model for neighborhood planning efforts in other parts of the City. Because of the overwhelming support and participation in the plan's development, the City is currently evaluating ways to implement similar planning initiatives in other parts of the community.

Public Participation
Explain the level of public participation for the entry. Winning entries demonstrate a strong effort to solicit input from those who have historically been left out of the planning process. Show how the entry achieved/obtained public and private support.

Given the short time frame for plan development and general scheduling concerns, coordinating public participation was an initial challenge. However, the consultants, City officials and the Columbia Housing Authority worked together to coordinate a community-based public participation process that quickly achieved a heavy level of community involvement and allowed meaningful opportunities for input.

The planning team used four main strategies to organize the public participation component of the Plan. Because of the social and economic considerations in East Columbia, the traditional outlets for public outreach were not considered appropriate. The Columbia Housing Authority used its connections with church leaders in the East Columbia community to spread the word about the visioning workshop and open house presentation. Additionally, the City officials and Columbia Housing Authority used their knowledge of the area to make a list of key stakeholders that included large landowners, real estate agents and community leaders. A special flyer was mailed to these key stakeholders to encourage their participation in the planning process. The City Manager also helped with coordinating participation of elected officials and City department heads.

The other public participation strategy was the participation of members of the Boys and Girls Club of Maury County. Many of the boys and girls involved with the organization live in the East Columbia community. In coordination with two mentors working at the Boys and Girls Club, the community's children were asked to participate in the visioning exercises. The children were given the same planning exercise as the adults who attended the visioning workshop and asked to draw what they wanted in their community. Many of the ideas articulated by the children helped inform the revitalization projects and helped include a group of the community that has traditionally been left out of the planning process.

The result of the public outreach strategy was an overwhelming turnout and support for the planning meetings. For the visioning workshop, approximately 100 members of the community attended the meeting, and for the open house presentation of the plan nearly 60 members of the community attended. City officials, local residents and other important stakeholders were all in attendance throughout the planning process. Because the East Columbia area has never had a plan for the area or been heavily involved in citywide planning efforts, the turnout was an overwhelming success story of the planning process.

Role of Planners

Clarify the role, significance, and participation of the planner; for instance, how did in-house staff and consultants work together? Demonstrate the connection between the success of the plan and increased awareness of planners and the planning process.

From project initiation to completion, the planning consultants, City officials and Columbia Housing Authority Director played an integral part in facilitating the planning process and creating the guiding vision and plan. The consulting team, City planners and Housing Authority coordinated, listened, discussed and encouraged participation to create a vision that the different government entities, organizations and community members support.

Because of the positive planning process and participation, City staff, elected officials and the community have established a better understanding and support for planning. The plan has laid the groundwork for a sustained implementation effort and the desire of elected and City officials for additional planning efforts in other parts of the city.

Effectiveness/Results

State how the entry addressed the need or problem that prompted its initiation. Be explicit about how the results have made a difference in the lives of the people affected.

While no physical development has been completed since the plan was completed in July of 2009, the planning process has forged important partnerships between the City, other organizations and residents. The Plan will be used to identify capital improvement projects to include in the annual budget and to support grant applications by the City of the Housing Authority as they become available.

Interest in East Columbia is continuing to build, not only in East Columbia but in the community at large. Recent reports of lower crime rates and residents of East Columbia making improvements to properties are encouraging, and there is clear anecdotal evidence of community pride and improvement as a result of the planning process.