



Democratic Practices for City Planning

Stephen Medvic & Douglas Smith

In March of 2022, the Center for Politics and Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College received a Seed Grant from the Center for Sustained Engagement with Lancaster to conduct a deliberative forum in partnership with the City of Lancaster. Over the last two years, the City has been leading a Comprehensive Plan effort, the result of which will be a foundational policy document for the City that guides physical development over the next decade. As part of that process, the City of Lancaster has strived to involve as many stakeholders as possible in the process. The deliberative forum, held in the July of 2022, allowed the Center for Politics and Public Affairs to showcase an innovative democratic practice while allowing the City to engage residents in the planning process. The forum focused specifically on land use – how should Lancaster use what little land remains in the City? How can the City accommodate all the needs of its residents, businesses, and visitors? Should the City grow, and how can it do so in a sustainable and responsible way?

WHO

Who was involved?

The planning of the deliberative forum included City staff, faculty and staff at the Center for Politics and Public Affairs and the Center for Opinion Research at F&M, City residents, planning consultants, and other F&M supportive services included photography, videography, and food service.

Who was the target audience / participants of your work?

All city residents constituted the target audience as a deliberative forum is intended to be a microcosm (or “mini-public”) of the entire community. The conclusions drawn by the forum participants are, theoretically, the conclusions the entire community would draw if they had engaged in an informed deliberation about the topic at hand.

A demographically-representative group of 33 city residents were randomly selected to serve as participants. Twenty-four actually participated in the forum.

WHAT

What were the goals?

The key goal for the City of Lancaster was to get feedback from residents about land use decisions in the City. The forum focused specifically on land use – how should Lancaster use what little land remains in the City? How can the City accommodate all the needs of its residents, businesses, and visitors? Should the City grow, and how can it do so in a sustainable and responsible way?

Additionally, the goal was to reduce barriers to engagement. Residents were provided with meals for the day and stipends to minimize financial barriers to participation, and were offered transportation and language access services. Even with these accommodations, nine of the 33 who were selected ultimately were not able to attend. This demonstrates how high barriers to public participation are for many in our community.

For the Center for Politics and Public Affairs, the goal was to demonstrate the value of deliberative mini-publics as a democratic innovation and a mechanism for enabling citizen input in the policy-making process. In addition, the goal was to further perfect the process of conducting deliberative mini-publics for future use in Lancaster (and beyond).

What were the key activities completed?

Participants were divided into six groups, each of which was assigned to a site around the City. The residents were provided with briefing materials in advance of the forum, and were also given a brief presentation by six experts on the topics of regional planning, environment, housing, transportation, economic development, and equity. They were asked to apply each of these lenses to their assigned site, and ultimately to the City as a whole. Participants then engaged in facilitated small-group deliberations about various aspects of land use in the City. Participants were provided a variety of maps and drawing instruments and encouraged to record their ideas and the groups shared their ideas in a concluding plenary session.



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How was the grant money instrumental to your work?

Without the grant money from the CSEwL, the deliberative forum would have been impossible given the costs required to conduct such a forum. The funding and staff expertise offered to the City was critical to accomplishing this project. The event was logistically complicated to coordinate and included food, daycare, stipends, translation, facilitation, video, photography, and more. City staff did not have funding or capacity to plan an event like this and the budget of the Center for Politics and Public Affairs is limited. However, City staff now consider this effort a hallmark project of the Comprehensive Plan engagement effort.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND NEXT STEPS

What were the main outcomes from the project?

We hope the main outcome was that residents felt heard, respected, and appreciated during their time at the event. This builds community trust in public process and spaces.

Other outcomes include the transcripts, maps, and conversations about land use that will guide the City's Comprehensive Plan development. Additional outcomes include media and public relations items, such as the live stream YouTube video of the event, photos for the City's use, and press release.

Finally, the successful execution of this deliberative forum serves as a demonstration of the potential of this innovative democratic practice and can serve as a model for future fora.

What were the top ways the community was impacted?

The biggest impact is the City staff hearing from a diverse group of residents about land use policy and quality of life issues in Lancaster City. This will help create policy that meets residents' needs and also helps build trust with the community.

Looking toward the future, what is the main goal?

Who can be involved?

The main goal for the City of Lancaster is to propose a final Comprehensive Plan document and have it adopted by City Council in October of this year. All city residents, businesses, institutions, and other city stakeholders can be involved in upcoming discussions. Stakeholders can engage right now online here:

<https://engage.cityoflancasterpa.gov/en/folders/planning-our-future-Lancaster>

For the Center for Politics and Public Affairs and the Center for Opinion Research at F&M, the main goal for the future is to regularize the use of deliberative mini-publics as a mechanism for soliciting informed, considered input from the community on critical public policy questions.