

Welaunee a case study on need for better citizen involvement



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Your Turn

Wendy Grey wrote this on behalf of the executive committee of the Alliance of Tallahassee Neighborhoods, which advocates for policies and initiatives that protect and enhance Tallahassee and its neighborhoods.

Recently, citizens spent hundreds of hours reviewing documents, developing data and providing alternative plan language and implementation strategies for the Welaunee Comprehensive Plan amendment. While agreeing to the adoption of the amendment, many participants expressed disappointment and frustration with the process.

That need not have been the case. The following principles are standard practice where local governments successfully work with citizens to make major policy decisions.

- 1. Provide a justification of the need for government action.** Citizens can meaningfully evaluate a plan only when there is a clear understanding of the plan's intended purpose. An entire new community has been authorized, yet elected officials never explained how Welaunee is intended to benefit Tallahassee and Leon County. Stating that an agreement was signed 30 years ago, or that a road is being planned, or that the landowners wish to do estate planning is insufficient.
- 2. Provide early opportunities to involve the public.** Citizens can contribute ideas regarding the goals and scope of the plan if they are involved early in the process. In the case of the Welaunee amendment, citizens were involved after a fully formed plan was presented as part of the Comprehensive Plan amendment cycle. That put citizens in a reactionary position of responding to specific policies and further clouded a discussion of the amendment's overall goal.
- 3. Provide information to help citizens make meaningful suggestions.** In the case of the Welaunee amendment, a significant example is the value of a fiscal impact analysis. This would have identified costs of land acquisition for public facilities (e.g., schools, libraries, and fire and police stations); transportation (both roads and the expansion of transit); and maintenance of roads, stormwater ponds, and water and sewer lines (which are borne by all "users" of these systems). Another example: What is the potential cost/benefit of public investment in affordable housing in Welaunee? Finally, how would the fiscal impact vary under different land use scenarios? Without information, citizens cannot make educated recommendations.

4. Create a dialogue between government and citizens. Staff held many virtual public meetings, posted a survey and was available to talk to anyone who called. The communication was, however, essentially one way – with staff documenting comments but not engaging in discussion. For the most part, citizens learned whether their comments were accepted when a new draft of the amendment was released.

These are proven principles for meaningful public involvement. It is hoped that our local governments will incorporate these principles into future planning efforts.

For more ideas on meaningful public engagement strategies, see consentbuilding.com and 1000friendsofflorida.org.