

# THE CITIZENS' PERSPECTIVE

Prepared for the West Linn CCI Committee;  
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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

West Linn's land use planning process is currently under review to determine how to improve citizens' involvement in the land use process. Citizens have expressed deep frustration during public meetings which has necessitated the use of airport security screening equipment, and citizens are angered when damage occurs to their property as a result of new development nearby. These two examples demonstrate the necessity to improve citizens' involvement in the land use process. Review of the current planning process has revealed pitfalls, so suggested solutions have been provided herein. The citizens want to:

- 1) Have Mission Statements written to ensure the city's aims and values remain steadfast for the benefit of all citizens, city staff, city leaders and volunteers.
- 2) Be included in reviewing the plan drawings (formerly known as blueprints) of proposed developments with both the city and developer present, with all parties collaborating to resolve issues when identified, early in the development process.
- 3) Make the Neighborhood Association meetings more meaningful by reviewing the developer's plan drawings of a proposed development, instead of discussing concepts
- 4) Minimize the necessity and burden placed upon citizens to testify at Planning Commission hearings, often to be heard for the first time.
- 5) Not be required to identify code violations at Planning Commission hearings because city staff is most familiar with the codes.
- 6) Have city staff advocate for the citizens by putting CITIZENS FIRST always doing what is in the best interests of the city of West Linn and its citizens

## **PURPOSE AND CONTENT OF THIS DOCUMENT**

The purpose of this document is to offer solutions to the CCI committee regarding how to fix identified problems. The Neighborhood Association presidents have also been sent this document for their input because a task has been suggested for their group. The content of this document presents a new approach to the planning process that would work significantly better for the community, from the citizen's perspective.

## **THE WEST LINN CITIZENS REPRESENTED**

Serving on West Linn's CCI committee as an invited citizen by the mayor, this author has served as Past President of BHT Neighborhood Association, testified at least 4 times on land use development issues, is an 18 years West Linn resident, and has administrative experience in identifying solutions to existing problems. The information is a shared perception by numerous West Linn residents, not just the author's perception.

## **PROBLEMS WITH OUR CURRENT PLANNING PROCESS**

West Linn's organization chart rightfully shows the citizens at the top of the chart with city staff below, but frustration mounts when the citizens can't effectively contribute to a process that affects them. Regrettably, tumultuous Planning Commission hearings and City Council meetings have occurred because there is a perception of "us versus them", citizens versus the city and developer. This is understandable because both parties are interested in generating revenue for themselves, but perception is everything. The use of airport security screening equipment to enter meetings is an unfriendly greeting to citizens. When damage occurs to private property by a developer, who advocates for the citizens? When routine turnover of elected positions, city staff, and volunteers occurs, this weakens the continuity of understanding and knowledge of the land use process. Perception can be changed, so solutions follow.

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## **RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS**

Write Mission Statements: It is necessary to agree on the overarching goals and intentions, or “big picture” so everyone has the same understanding. Writing a Planning Department Mission Statement would be very helpful because it includes: an organization’s purpose; scope of its operations; what kind of product/service it provides, its primary customers or market; its geographical region of operation; the department’s values and philosophies; and a business’s main competitive advantages, or a desired future state (the vision). West Linn’s Finance Department and the West Linn Library have mission statements posted online, but there isn’t one posted for the Planning Department, nor is there a mission statement for the City of West Linn posted on the home page for the citizens to read. The Planning Department should consider drafting their mission statement, and the West Linn Neighborhood Association Presidents should also be drafting a mission statement for the City of West Linn because they represent their neighbors and have more time to dedicate to this project on behalf of West Linn’s City Council. Once written, mission statements are rarely changed, so even with personnel changes over time, these mission statements afford a continuity of understanding for all community members.

Create a Development Team: The planning process of a development should be a collaborative effort; its participants being a developer, city staff, and West Linn citizens. For ease in communication, this group shall henceforth be referred to as the Development Team. Any citizen may participate on the Development Team. The Development Team determines how often, when and where meetings shall be held. If no citizens show up to participate in a meeting, then those present do their business and adjourn. Formal meeting minutes are not taken; a form is completed and posted online which reflects in bullet form: the names of the attendees; topics discussed; actions taken; revision date of plan drawing reviewed; and date of the meeting. A minimum of two meetings for citizen input on a proposed development should be scheduled for the citizens’ convenience. Every updated plan drawing requires a new meeting for review.

The roles of each development team group is: the citizens inform and educate city staff and the developer of the neighborhoods issues that need to be addressed; the city advocates for the citizens, ensure code compliance, always keeping what is in the best interests of the community top priority, and the developer is to be accountable for high quality construction, legal compliance, and enhancing our community’s livability.

## **RECOMMENDED PLANNING PROCESS**

Knowing what the citizens want (see the Executive Summary on Page 1) requires process changes. Three phases of progression are suggested for consideration. In each of these phases, the Development Team should convene at *least* once to resolve issues and concerns. A timeline for each step below can be designated to keep momentum moving forward.

- A. Planning Phase: During this phase, several changes to the plan drawings may occur
  1. Pre- Application: The developer’s submission of the application, checklist compliance and concept documentation starts the Planning Phase process.
  2. Call for Blue Prints: When the pre-application material is considered acceptable, the developer will provide plan drawings for the Development Team to review. Each problem and concern identified by the Development Team will be discussed and resolved during Development Team meetings. Determining what testing is needed will also be determined (e.g. traffic study, hydrogeologist, etc.).
  3. Call for NA Meeting(s): After the Development Team agrees that the plan drawings are fully understood and issues and concerns are resolved, the date for NA meeting(s) is agreed upon and notices are mailed by the developer
  4. Summary: Plan drawings are needed early in the planning phase; without them, the staff and citizens have nothing meaningful to address.

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- B. *The NA Refinement Phase:* During this phase only one plan drawing revision *may* be necessary.
1. NA Meeting Review: Updated plan drawings are presented and explained by the developer to the citizens. This meeting shall be informational because due diligence has already been given to the plan drawings by the Development Team.
  2. NA Meeting Feedback: To ensure the citizens' concerns are addressed by the Development Team, the NA President shall complete an online form that summarizes the issues and concerns needing consideration. The documented information is orally read to the meeting attendees before the close of the meeting to ensure all issues and concerns have been accurately represented. The form is completed, then sent electronically to the planning department after the NA meeting. The Development Team convenes to address the NA(s) feedback and writes a response to each item on the form, before posting it online for all citizens to read the actions taken and explanations given. With the final approval of the plans by the Development Team, the application can now be approved, and Administrative Review Phase begins.
  3. Summary: Currently, only conceptual ideas are presented at NA meetings; no official plans are presented. This creates problems for citizens because discussing concepts is not equivalent to discussing the actual plans drawings on the plot of land proposed for development.
- C. *The Administrative Review Phase:*
1. Testimonies: The Planning Commissioners quasi-judicial hearing process is a good forum for resolving differences between the citizens, city and developer on unresolved matters of concern. But West Linn's hearings are really the only forum for citizens to express their concerns and issues, because plan drawings are currently released *after* NA meetings have been held. Preparing testimony, providing evidence, identifying unmet criteria, and attending the hearing is too burdensome on our citizens, when oral discussion would be far more effective and efficient. The current process demonstrates Citizens Last. By including citizens as part of the Development Team meetings early in the review process, then having the neighborhood association meetings would reduce both the need for and number of public testimonies given.
  2. Identifying Code Violations: Developers are required by law to meet building code standards, but expecting the citizens to identify code violations at a hearing is unrealistic because: city staff is very knowledgeable about code criteria; citizens pay taxes for city services, this being one of the services that staff is best at; and citizens do not understand code enough to challenge a developer's attorney about code compliance in a hearing. Therefore it is suggested that this expectation of the citizen be removed.

## **CONCLUSION**

Making these changes is contingent upon acknowledging that the citizens' problems are real, perceived or not. Real change occurs from the top down in an organization, starting with the leadership. West Linn's Mayor Axelrod ran on a platform of Citizens First, which he is thankfully pursuing in this matter.

Since our government has elected officials, city employees and volunteer positions that experience routine personnel turnover, having Mission Statements are very important because they remain steadfast and provide a continuity of purpose through time and during leadership changes. Let it never be forgotten that the Citizens of West Linn come first because the primary role of government is to service its citizens in just and fair manner.