

Program Excellence Award for Citizen Involvement

POPULATIONS OF 10,000 TO 49,999

KENT, OHIO

This year ICMA presents two Program Excellence Awards for Citizen Involvement in the 10,000-to-49,999 population category. The first goes to the city of Kent, Ohio, City Manager Lewis J. Steinbrecher [now with Moline, Illinois], and Community Development Director Charles V. Bowman for the city's Bicentennial Plan.



LEWIS J. STEINBRECHER



CHARLES V. BOWMAN

In 2002, the Kent city council directed the city administration to come up with a community-wide, comprehensive bicentennial plan. The community development department was charged with administering the planning process in accordance with principles of sustainability.

A crucial part of sustainability is the concept of inclusionary planning: because any comprehensive plan for Kent would guide the future planning for the city, it was crucial to reach out to citizens and gain their trust and involvement.

The Ohio State University (OSU) Cooperative Extension Service's Sustainable Communities Program was approached to construct, facilitate, and guide the inclusionary decision-making process. The first step was to form a 45-member steering committee comprising citizen representatives from the various neighborhood and community organizations. Staff believed that having a steering committee member facilitate the neighborhood meetings would help put the residents at ease, as they would be more likely to talk with a fellow citizen than with a government employee.

The steering committee, the OSU team leaders, and the community development staff agreed that the best way to gain citizen input was to reach out to the community. Meetings were planned in each neighborhood or district and held in familiar places, including churches, model homes, neighborhood recreation centers, social service food centers, and neighborhood schools—again, because residents would be more comfortable speaking inside their community gathering places than in the potentially intimidating environment of a city council chamber. Meetings were also scheduled at different times for residents' convenience, and invitations were sent out to each citizen about a month before each meeting.

Four rounds of neighborhood meetings were held. The first round was a brainstorming session: participants were asked what they valued about the city and what they would like to see different in the future. In the second round, they were asked to take the statements from the first round and prioritize the issues. The third round focused on three specific areas in the city that needed some extensive planning, and residents were asked what they would like to see happen at each site. The fourth round consisted of a focus-group approach. Using the priorities from the second round, the community development staff drew up a draft of the plan and asked residents if it reflected their vision of the Kent of tomorrow.

In all, nearly 50 meetings were

held over a 14-month period, and a total of 450 citizens participated—well over the 50 or 60 people who would normally participate in a public hearing at council chambers. Many attendees had never participated in any government meetings or public hearings before. Participants reflected a wide cross-section of residents from different racial and economic backgrounds. Such meetings would have been impossible without extensive community outreach.

This inclusionary approach proved to be key to the success of the planning process. The location of the meetings and the personal invitations worked well, and residents were comfortable stating their opinions among neighborhood and community organization representatives. At the end of the meetings, many residents stopped to talk with members of the OSU team, steering committee, and development department, expressing their pleasure that the meetings were held with their comfort and convenience in mind and that their comments had been recorded and taken seriously.

Citizen participation in community planning is possible if citizens are provided with the opportunity and environment for an interactive process. The inclusion of a constant and consistent feedback mechanism via the four rounds added to the residents' positive assessment of the experience. They could see and experience the Bicentennial Plan not just as a government tool but as a plan written by and for them for the betterment of Kent and its future generations. ■