

IMPROVING NASHVILLE'S NEIGHBORHOOD  
ENGAGEMENT IN LAND-USE DECISION- MAKING

A PAPER COMMISSIONED BY NEIGHBOR 2 NEIGHBOR

JULY 2019

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A core principle of NashvilleNext states: “Nashville is stronger due to its diverse neighborhoods...” and acknowledges, “neighborhoods reflect our rich history and diversity and will ensure that, as neighborhoods become more complete, they will retain and enhance the basic elements of their character.”<sup>1</sup> The implementation of NashvilleNext over the next few years will have far-reaching and long-lasting implications and will require on-going consideration of our city’s neighborhoods. *As the city continues its rapid growth, how to better involve neighborhood residents in land-use decision-making is becoming a central and pressing question for many Davidson County citizens.* This paper presents the ten-month work of approximately 30 well-known and respected neighborhood leaders from across Nashville to address this question.

The work reflected in this paper was facilitated by the staff of Neighbor 2 Neighbor (N2N), seeded with the technical expertise of the Metro Planning Department as requested, and enriched by the participation of four council members. It is intended for presentation to other neighborhood leaders and Metro departments as an impetus to continue the conversation, to enhance initial strategies with additional ideas, and to form key partnerships to implement the ideas put forth.

**I. Why should neighborhood members be more involved in Nashville’s land-use decision-making?** The rationale for more community involvement put forth by N2N think-tank members is grounded in the following rationale espoused by Stanford University’s International Association for Public Participation:<sup>2</sup>

1. Democratic legitimacy as tied to participatory processes;
2. The historical and cultural basis for participation at the local level;
3. The empowerment and/or protection of marginalized groups as a way to counter prevailing and/or perceived power imbalances; and
4. Practical justifications emphasizing the ability of community participation processes to improve long-term planning and efficiency.

**II. What actions can be taken to help residents better participate in Nashville’s land-use decision-making?**

- 1) Improve notice of new development applications:
  - a) Leverage technology.
  - b) Improve mailed notices and early notification.
  - c) Improve notice sign posting and sign effectiveness.
  - d) Accommodate neighborhoods in ways that can provide meaningful input into the proposed development.
  - e) Mandate a pre-application meeting with the community.
- 2) Address and improve the understanding of the process necessary to change zoning:
  - a) Consider varying the times, locations, and format of Planning Commission meetings.
  - b) Improve staff reports.
  - c) Help neighborhoods follow up on planning decisions and understand the impact of these decisions.

**III. What strategies are needed to enhance neighborhoods’ long-term engagement in Nashville’s land-use decision-making?**

- 1) Lay a firm foundation:
  - a) Engage residents rather than being content for them to simply react.
  - b) Increase opportunities for community feedback.
  - c) Codify enforcement mechanisms for collaborative decision-making
  - d) Create additional training and educational opportunities
- 2) Hold big-picture briefings on future development that impact neighborhoods.
- 3) Assign a full-time staff person to be an ombudsman to neighborhoods.
- 4) Start a Planning and Zoning Academy.
- 5) Take advantage of readily available tools and resources from other cities to build Nashville’s toolbox of best practices.
- 6) Learn from what other communities across our nation have accomplished.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/Planning/docs/NashvilleNext/2017Update/next-volume1-F-Guiding%20Principles\\_Amended2017.pdf](https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/Planning/docs/NashvilleNext/2017Update/next-volume1-F-Guiding%20Principles_Amended2017.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Available at [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community\\_engagement\\_matters\\_now\\_more\\_than\\_ever](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community_engagement_matters_now_more_than_ever)

## IMPROVING NASHVILLE’S NEIGHBORHOOD ENGAGEMENT IN LAND-USE DECISION-MAKING: A PAPER COMMISSIONED BY NEIGHBOR 2 NEIGHBOR

*"I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power." --Thomas Jefferson, 1820*

### INTRODUCTION

A core principle embedded in both the creation and codification of NashvilleNext states: “Nashville is stronger due to its diverse neighborhoods...” and acknowledges

“Nashville has many strong neighborhoods whose residents enjoy rich social connections, opportunities for success in life, and voices that are heard in the decisions that affect them. NashvilleNext is committed to addressing housing challenges and solutions through an inclusive, equitable, and holistic approach that balances the need for more housing, and a diversity of housing, with a commitment to preserving the character of neighborhoods. We recognize that different choices between rural, suburban, and urban neighborhoods reflect our rich history and diversity and will ensure that, as neighborhoods become more complete, they will retain and enhance the basic elements of their character.”<sup>1</sup>

There is no question that the implementation of NashvilleNext will have far-reaching and long-lasting implications and will require on-going consideration of our city’s neighborhoods.

Although much of Nashville’s task of planning for and guiding desirable land development practices falls to the Metro Council and to appointed officials, including the Metro Planning and Metro Historic Zoning Commissions and the Board of Zoning Appeals, land-use planning and regulations should not and cannot occur without opportunities for public input. Land-use planning is a collaborative process that places community involvement at the center. Indeed, public participation and input are a critical part of land-use planning in ways that shape growth, preserve our city’s character, and promote strong and desirable neighborhoods.

In order to effectively provide timely and relevant input, members of the public need to be educated as to which officials have a role in land-use planning and decision making. In addition, it is important that these members know how land-use is being planned and regulated, and how their public input can connect with and influence the decisions surrounding land-use policies. This is particularly true for neighborhood residents.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/Planning/docs/NashvilleNext/2017Update/next-volume1-F-Guiding%20Principles\\_Amended2017.pdf](https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/Planning/docs/NashvilleNext/2017Update/next-volume1-F-Guiding%20Principles_Amended2017.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> ULI—the Urban Land Institute. *ULI Community Catalyst Report Number 1: Involving the Community in Neighborhood Planning*. Washington, D.C.: ULI—the Urban Land Institute, 2009.

As the city continues its rapid growth, how to better involve neighborhood residents in land-use decision-making is becoming a central and pressing question for many Davidson County citizens. This report presents the work of approximately 30 well-known and respected neighborhood leaders from across Nashville. (See Appendix A for a list of the involved neighborhood leaders.) These conversations were facilitated by the staff of Neighbor-2-Neighbor (N2N) and seeded with relevant information and material as needed. The paper puts forth the work of this group to answer the following three key guiding questions:

- I. Why should neighborhood members be more involved in Nashville’s land-use decision-making?**
- II. What actions can be taken to help residents better participate in Nashville’s land-use decision-making?**
- III. What strategies are needed to enhance neighborhoods’ long-term engagement in Nashville’s land-use decision-making?**

The group met and grappled with these questions for over ten months of meetings that culminated in this paper. It is the hope of the Think Tank to present this paper to other neighborhood leaders and Metro departments as an impetus to continue the conversation, to enhance initial strategies with additional ideas, and to form key partnerships to implement the ideas put forth.

## **I. WHY SHOULD NEIGHBORHOOD MEMBERS BE MORE INVOLVED IN NASHVILLE’S LAND-USE DECISION-MAKING?**

Public participation in local decision-making is fundamental to democracy. Over the last forty years, urban planning has transitioned from a technocratic model to a process allowing for increased stakeholder participation (Susskind, van der Wansem, and Ciccarelli, 2000).<sup>3</sup> Multiple authors explain that technocratic urban planning, “dominated by concerns about economic efficiency in the use of space,” shifted from a technocratic model to an advocacy model in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The shift was an effort to “redistribute resources more fairly, increase social equity, and improve quality of life for minority groups and the poor.” The advocacy model, in turn, led some planners facing escalating land-use conflicts to a “third planning model based on consensus building and assisted negotiation.” This consensus building model, created by MIT’s Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, aims to “ensure that the interests of all stakeholders are taken into account along with the best possible technical advice in ways that will mediate the imbalance of power.” Research has shown that consensus-building produces better outcomes that may prove to be more satisfying to stakeholders, leaving them in a better position to deal with their differences in the future. They may feel more empowered to take greater responsibility for the land-use decisions that affect them and gain confidence in the role of local government.<sup>4</sup>

The transition in planning models has been and continues to be propelled by growing criticism of practices associated with common two-party agreements between cities and developers. The criticism is grounded in research studies showing that such practices often lead to ignoring the long-term impacts of

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<sup>3</sup> Available at <https://www.cbi.org/report/mediating-land-use-disputes-pros-and-cons>

<sup>4</sup> Available at <https://www.lincolnst.edu/sites/default/files/pubfiles/using-assisted-negotiation-land-use-disputes-full.pdf>

decisions. Multiple scholars see a trend toward increased community participation as a way in which the land-use regulatory system can and does lead to better long-term decisions.<sup>5</sup>

The efforts of Nashville's neighborhood leaders are not unique to Nashville. Rather, numerous political theorists, urban planners, and scholars offer a variety of theoretical and practical reasons why land-use decision-making processes should make more room for better neighborhood engagement. The rationale for more community engagement put forth by N2N think-tank members is grounded in a number of theories such as those espoused by Stanford University's International Association for Public Participation,<sup>6</sup> shown below:

1. Democratic legitimacy as tied to participatory processes;
2. The historical and cultural basis for participation at the local level;
3. The empowerment and/or protection of marginalized groups as a way to counter prevailing and/or perceived power imbalances; and
4. Practical justifications emphasizing the ability of community participation processes to improve long-term planning and efficiency.

In 2015 Nashville made community participation a central component in the development of our city's twenty-five-year general plan, NashvilleNext, resulting in input from literally thousands of residents. However, as a result of NashvilleNext's focus on density and the city's unprecedented rate of growth, serious changes are impacting Nashville's neighborhoods. These changes are fueling more and more urgent questions about whether or not the pace and scope of new developments are outpacing our city's ability to preserve and protect the character of existing neighborhoods. They are also fueling a desire for more engaged planning that moves beyond participation only when proposed changes or persistent problems arise. Neighborhood leaders seek collaborative methods for ensuring that our city's planning decisions are better balanced and more clearly aligned to the preservation and sustainability of our neighborhoods' general character.

Despite Nashville's outward commitment to community participation in principle, many city departments offer a very limited formal process for community participation that utilizes more traditional methods (mailed notices, ads in local newspapers, notifications on websites, and public hearings). The NashvilleNext process involved thousands of stakeholders and multiple neighborhoods. However, once the process was completed and the final plan documents were released, the level and focus of public engagement returned to the pre-process status quo instead of adapting to continue such engagement as an ongoing process.

As long-range planners within the Planning Department update plans and land-use policies, they have utilized a variety of creative outreach methods with neighborhoods. However, there remains a wide gap between the actual level of neighborhood participation relating to land development, rezoning cases, and entitlement requests and city leaders' perceptions of that participation.

These processes involve other Metro departments beyond the Planning Department, including Codes' Board of Zoning Appeals, Public Works, the Historical Commission, and the Metro Council. Recently,

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<sup>5</sup> Available at <https://extension.psu.edu/land-use-planning-opportunities-for-public-input>

<sup>6</sup> Available at [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community\\_engagement\\_matters\\_now\\_more\\_than\\_ever](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community_engagement_matters_now_more_than_ever)

with the encouragement of the Mayor's Office, the Planning Commission, and multiple neighborhood advocacy groups, the Planning Department has more often required that community meetings be conducted in order to achieve better decisions and outcomes for all stakeholders, especially for neighborhood residents.

NashvilleNext was created to guide how the city will grow in the next 25 years as Nashville is expected to accommodate 186,000 new residents and 326,000 new jobs. The city's unprecedented growth rate is having serious impacts on Nashville's neighborhoods. These changes are increasingly raising questions about whether or not the pace and scope of new developments are outpacing our city's ability to preserve and protect the character of existing neighborhoods. They are also fueling a desire for more engaged planning that moves beyond participation only when proposed changes or persistent problems arise. Neighborhood leaders seek collaborative methods for ensuring that our city's planning decisions are better balanced and more clearly aligned to the preservation and sustainability of our neighborhoods' general character.

In examining the reasons for more robust neighborhood engagement processes, arguments against such processes have also been discussed. These include competitive philosophies of the community's role in land-use planning, limitations of city funding and staff, and questions about what constitutes "community" or what makes a group "representative." There is an acknowledgement among the Think Tank members that collaborative neighborhood planning faces multiple challenges, many of these well supported in an article written by the Aspen Institute in April 2018.<sup>7</sup> Chief among these challenges are the difficulties of attracting a critical mass of community members to meetings where future decisions are influenced and of maintaining the momentum of engagement needed to react wisely to later changes. Another equally important challenge is supporting such engagement as an ongoing practice instead of a series of one-time or short-term participation events.

Grounded in sound theoretical reasoning and sobered by the many challenges inherent in more effective citizen engagement, N2N's neighborhood leaders believe that more of Nashville's neighborhoods should be engaged in land-use decision-making and that such engagement should be both expected by the city and built into any project's plan from the very beginning. These leaders also encourage our city to distinguish between short-term participation around specific actions or initiatives and more permanent engagement structures through well-articulated (often in city code) roles in land-use decision-making.

Short-term community participation efforts are typically focused and intense. Participants are asked to become deeply involved in discussions about a specific topic. Sometimes the local government may have access to enhanced resources (e.g., additional funds and consultants) to facilitate those discussions. The process typically involves intensive dialogue and a concluding point signaled by a decision, such as the adoption of a plan or a zoning change.

Long-term neighborhood engagement differs significantly from short-term neighborhood participation. Unlike such participation's short bursts of interaction, ongoing engagement necessitates building permanent structures through which relationships can be fostered. Like any kind of permanent structure, it

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<sup>7</sup> Available at <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/engagement-really-impact-needs-ongoing-dialogue/>

requires ongoing maintenance and periodic updates to accommodate changes in the city as a whole while capturing the impacts on neighborhoods of such changes. Neighborhood leaders recognize that as we move ever more deeply into a technological world, the traditional methods of neighborhood participation are becoming less and less adequate, especially considering the changing demographics of neighborhoods. The need to engage neighborhoods in more effective land-use decision-making through alternative digital methods should be seen not just as a legislated part of the process, but a necessary aspect of adding value to proposed projects. Participation in planning and land-use decision-making helps to build a sense of community. Moreover, people are more likely to have confidence in the process when they feel that they play a vital role in collaborative planning.<sup>8</sup> Suggestions about how to move from neighborhood participation to neighborhood engagement are offered in Section III.

## **II. WHAT ACTIONS CAN BE TAKEN TO HELP RESIDENTS BETTER PARTICIPATE IN NASHVILLE’S LAND-USE DECISION-MAKING?**

More and better engagement from neighborhoods will need a long-term plan, as discussed above and in Section III. However, there are problems that can be addressed in ways that will quickly impact neighborhoods’ ability and willingness to better participate in our city’s future. The N2N Think Tank, with assistance from Metro Planning Department, will begin establishing what actions may help address the problems and determining who is most appropriate to take a leadership role in working toward solutions.

The regulation of land use and zoning is one of the most important functions of county government. New development can enhance or detract from residents’ quality of life, foster or hinder economic development, and dramatically impact land-use options for individual property owners. It is, therefore, critical that all affected community members have meaningful input into planning and zoning decisions. Our public participation process needs to be more than adequate; specifically, the engagement level needs to be comparable to or better than the process undertaken to achieve a result similar to NashvilleNext. No land-use decision should be expected to please every stakeholder or neighbor, as officials do have to choose among often competing positions. In order to achieve the desired engagement, the N2N Think Tank members have made the following suggestions for improving our city’s public participation process.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN LAND-USE DECISION-MAKING**

- 1) **IMPROVE NOTICE OF NEW DEVELOPMENT APPLICATIONS:** Notices of a new development proposal must come early in the application process, and they must effectively convey the information needed for community members to participate. Meaningful community input is difficult under the current notification procedure and timeline as neighbors and concerned citizens are not involved until late in the process. Developers (and often the Planning Department staff) are intimately familiar with rezoning projects while the general public is not. To address and improve the challenges of such disparity, the following are recommendations:

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<sup>8</sup> ULI—the Urban Land Institute. *ULI Community Catalyst Report Number 1: Involving the Community in Neighborhood Planning*. Washington, D.C.: ULI—the Urban Land Institute, 2009.

- a) **Leverage technology.**
  - i) Leverage technology already in place to improve the notification process with a minimal investment of time and resources.
  - ii) Utilize technology to allow individuals to enlist in notices for new applications via email, allowing that part of the notification process to become voluntary and automated. By being voluntary, such options could provide neighborhood leaders the information they need to keep residents updated.
  - iii) Supplement traditional notification methods, such as early notice postcards and street signs, with new technological methods. Traditional methods on their own are neither efficient nor effective in providing notice to the widest audience interested in possible changes to their neighborhoods.
  - iv) Address language barriers by including a link to an online tool such as Google Translate for both printed and online notices.
  
- b) **Improve mailed notices and early notification.**
  - i) The recommended radius for providing a mailed, written notice should be increased to accommodate the differences between urban, suburban, and rural settings.
  - ii) Send out notifications as early as possible to inform residents and neighborhoods. Pulling neighbors together requires time since most community members are not working full-time in land-use jobs, as are developers; thus, they need as much advance notice as possible. Many neighborhood residents are not versed in policies and processes involved in land-use changes; thus, any additional time that may be granted in the notification process will be beneficial to the desired result of quality decisions.
  - iii) Include renters in the notification process. Currently, Metro departments utilize the Assessor of Property's database that only includes property owners. Perhaps another database could be used, such as NES, that would include multiple property addresses (such as at apartment complexes) and renters. Where a physical address and a mailing address differ, both should be included in the distribution.
  - iv) Utilize a format that allows the most important information on the notice to be highlighted. Highlighting the most important information, adopting less 'technical' language, and adding a web address to provide additional context and/or links to translations for those not fluent in English are ways to improve the effectiveness of written notices.
  - v) Create a central database where neighborhood associations and HOAs can register to receive notifications. These registered organizations should receive the same notifications the Planning Department sends to Metro Council Members. Notification should be sent to registered neighborhood organizations if they are within their boundaries.
  - vi) Promote the use of currently available online tracking tools that show requests for development proposals shortly after the Planning Department receives applications. This tool is available at <https://maps.nashville.gov/DevelopmentTracker/#>.
  
- c) **Improve notice sign posting and sign effectiveness.**
  - i) Ensure that street signs are readable to passing vehicles and that the necessary information is provided on the sign.
  - ii) Ensure that signs are placed at appropriate locations per the regulations.



d) **Accommodate neighborhood and community members in ways that can provide meaningful input into the proposed development.**

- i) Mandate a pre-application meeting between applicants and affected neighborhood groups regarding development proposals. Some developers do this already, and the Planning Department recommends that every applicant talk with affected neighbors and neighborhood groups; however, it is not mandatory. See additional details in item I.e. below.
- ii) Lengthen the six-week planning review cycle. Once neighborhood leaders become aware of a rezoning that may have a significant impact on an area, it may take four to six weeks to organize community meetings and gather appropriate feedback. Increasing the amount of time from the initial application filing to scheduling a public hearing (along with improvements to the notification process) will allow for better engagement within a community
- iii) Provide neighborhood leaders and other stakeholders with direct contact information for the planning staff member assigned to the case including the staff member's email and direct phone number. While letters and emails are provided as part of the staff report to the Planning Commission, phone calls should also be noted along with a notation identifying whether a caller supports or opposes the case.

e) **Mandate a pre-application meeting with the community.**

- i) Mandate a pre-application meeting between applicants and impacted neighborhood groups regarding rezoning that encompasses a significant change to the property in question. Other criteria could also be determined when pre-application meetings should be mandated. Whenever possible, such meetings should be held during a normal or specially called neighborhood meeting and include a staff member to record community response and answer technical questions about the process, the definitions, and the allowances of the proposed zoning district change.
- ii) Set criteria to determine when pre-application meetings should be mandatory. It must be remembered that a good public participation process begins long before the public hearing is even scheduled. Louisville, Kentucky, offers a good example of criteria for determining when pre-application meetings are required.<sup>9</sup>

2) **ADDRESS AND IMPROVE THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROCESS NECESSARY TO CHANGE ZONING:** Once notification requirements are fulfilled, the process and timeline for the rezoning request begins. Aside from achieving a decision on the request, the goal of the process is to allow both the applicant and the general public to contribute input. However, the current process and timeline can be confusing, is often misunderstood, and may lead to frustration. Addressing and improving community engagement in this process may realize better and more productive decisions, leading to a more efficient and credible result. Regardless, it should be acknowledged that dissent about any decision may still occur and should be expected. The recommendations listed below are intended not only to improve community engagement but also to compensate for the disparity

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<sup>9</sup> Available at <https://louisvilleky.gov/government/planning-design/citizen-user-guide>

between professionals such as developers, realtors, design firms, etc. and laypeople such as neighbors and neighborhood leaders.

**a) Consider varying the times, locations, and format of Planning Commission meetings.**

Considerations should be given about varying the time of Planning Commission meetings so more people can attend and be involved in the deliberative process. Several cities have taken actions to make public hearings more accessible and credible.

- i) Consider holding public hearings in multiple neighborhoods for some development proposals, particularly those located in outlying areas.
- ii) Examine holding meetings at varying times (morning, afternoon, and evening) so working residents can attend. For example, Seattle, Washington's Planning Commission meets twice monthly; one meeting is held 3 to 5:30 p.m. and the other is held 7:30 to 9:00 a.m.<sup>10</sup>
- iii) Evaluate the implications of deferrals. Deferral of a case is a frequent cause of frustration and disenfranchisement for the general public. Both the applicant and any engaged neighbor and/or neighborhood leader should only grant use of this procedural delay when there is a just cause or agreement. There are numerous anecdotal examples of community members who make arrangements to attend a meeting only to learn after arriving that a case has been deferred generally without a justifiable reason. These types of delays can put undue burdens not only on the general public but also on Metro employees.
- iv) Explore giving neighborhoods more time in the public hearings. During public hearings, applicants and their representatives are given considerable time (ten minutes) to present their projects and any applicable justification that supports approval. However, individuals who wish to comment are limited to only two minutes. Commissioners may ask for applicant(s)' answers to specific questions, but there is no such opportunity afforded the opposition. Allowing both sides not only to present their position but also to field questions will permit much stronger engagement by both sides and build credibility in the process.
- v) Study best practices from other cities on utilizing technology to allow more public comments. Currently, people send emails or letters and can speak in person at the public hearing. Consider the possibility that people could videotape their comments or provide live comments by remotely accessing the public hearing, which would be livestreamed on the Web.

**b) Improve staff reports.**

- i) Include a synopsis of any public comments received prior to a public hearing. Staff reports contain information provided by applicants and/or developers but do not include a synopsis of any public comments received prior to a public hearing. While copies of the mailed and emailed comments are provided to the Commission, there is no summary that can provide the Commission with an indication of general opinion. In addition, any public comments and synopses should also be included as part of the public record forwarded to the Metro Council for their deliberations. It is a common perception that developers and their colleagues have the 'ear' of various government officials. Including such summaries of public opinion can

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<sup>10</sup> Available at <https://www.seattle.gov/planningcommission>

and will communicate to the general public that their comments and statements are given appropriate attention.

- ii) Explore providing options for decisions in staff reports. Typically, staff reports recommend approval, disapproval, or approval with conditions. In many cases, the applicant is prepared to accept the staff recommendation, because the applicant has worked with staff beforehand. This is a normal practice across the country, but to the residents it can appear that the decision is pre-set from the beginning. In some cities, the staff report makes a comprehensive recommendation, but also explains other decisions the body could make in response to community concerns. Nashville's planning staff has at times included options in the staff report. If this became a more regular staff addition, it could show our citizens that there is more than one possible outcome.
- c) **Help community members follow up on planning decisions and understand the impact of these decisions on their neighborhoods.**
- i) Request a staff debrief session. The community could request a staff debrief in the days following the decision. Land-use decisions involve legal understandings and technical concepts that often exceed most residents' knowledge. These debriefing sessions could be used to explain to the neighborhood exactly what was decided by the Commission, what the next steps are, what the applicant must still do before beginning construction, and how a resident can monitor the applicant's progress toward building, such as grading, building permits, stormwater improvements, and infrastructure requirements.
  - ii) Teach neighbors to utilize online tracking tools. The status of permits, including their issuance or reasons for potential holds, and other relevant documents are available for public view through Metro's online development activity monitoring system. Another online system provides tracking for the Board of Zoning Appeals cases.

Section III below moves the suggestions for improving neighborhood participation in land-use decision-making to a deeper level. It also recognizes that participating in decision-making is not the same as committing to neighborhood engagement over the long haul.

### **III. WHAT STRATEGIES ARE NEEDED TO ENHANCE NEIGHBORHOODS' LONG-TERM ENGAGEMENT IN NASHVILLE'S LAND-USE DECISION-MAKING?**

The task of better planning for Nashville's future depends on the willingness of our city's leadership to engage neighborhoods in meaningful ways *and* on our neighborhoods' willingness to be equipped for such responsibility. Without both full dedication and determination, any collaborative decision-making process will fail. Listed below are strategies for enhancing decision-making mechanisms and capabilities for planners, neighborhoods, and elected officials. These strategies build on work done over the years to advance educational efforts and build stronger neighborhood relationships and are informed by the Urban Institute's report, *Involving the Community in Neighborhood Planning* (2009)<sup>11</sup> and by *Promising*

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<sup>11</sup> Available at [http://uli.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Report-1-Involving-the-Community-in-Neighborhood-Planning.ashx\\_.pdf](http://uli.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Report-1-Involving-the-Community-in-Neighborhood-Planning.ashx_.pdf)

1) **Lay a firm foundation.**

- a) Engage residents. The foundation for enhancing neighborhood engagement in land-use decision-making is for our local government to feel urgency to engage residents rather than being content for them to simply react. Instead of depending on the reactions of community members, the goal should be one of proactive engagement.
- b) Increase opportunities for community feedback. Community engagement in land-use decision-making will need to be viewed as promoting administrative efficiency by facilitating information-gathering and enhancing the quality of community feedback. “The goals of such a feedback process should be to provide intentional and consistent community meetings and forums that give residents ways to identify their own needs, to establish strategies for meeting these expressed needs, and to offer accountability that these needs are being seriously considered in the planning decisions.”<sup>13</sup> The planning staff often offers these activities now, but they are not institutionalized in a way that makes them administratively efficient for both planners and neighborhoods.
- c) Codify enforcement mechanisms. Enforcement mechanisms for failing to follow neighborhood engagement procedures must be codified. As an example, Oregon has recognized that “A legalistic view of citizen involvement is often too narrow. Factors beyond the minimums set by law need to be considered.”<sup>14</sup> If neighborhoods do not step up the task or planning professionals do not codify collaborative decision-making, the efforts will fall short of their intended outcomes.
- d) Create additional training and educational opportunities. More training, such as the Planning and Zoning Academy discussed in III. 4 below will also aid in building a strong foundation for increased community understanding and awareness.

2) **Hold big-picture briefings on future development.** Each area of Davidson County faces different conditions and different real estate trends. Staff could hold public evening meetings at a central, accessible location within different geographic areas of the County (perhaps based on Community Plan areas or Council Districts) to present a summary/status of all active major applications in that portion of the County, discuss real estate and market conditions, and answer basic process questions.

3) **Assign a full-time staff person to be an ombudsman to neighborhoods.** This person should view the role as an ombudsman. An ombudsman is a legal representative, often appointed by a government, to investigate concerns raised by individuals in the interest of the citizens or employees.

4) **Start a Planning and Zoning Academy.** All land-use decisions are improved when the community understands the basics of how land-use and zoning work, including what the decision-makers can and cannot do under the law. Our city could create a seminar series offered on a regular basis to interested residents and business owners. These seminars would focus on the nuts and bolts of the land use and development review processes, but not on pending development proposals. Neighbor 2 Neighbor has

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<sup>12</sup> Available at <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1133&context=metropolitanstudies>

<sup>13</sup> Toms, F.D., & Toms, Z. L. (2011). Community engagement: A multifaceted framework and process. In Toms, F.D., Burgess, S. W. (Eds.), *Lead the way: Principles and practices in community and civic engagement*. (pp. 7-24). San Diego, CA: Cornella.

<sup>14</sup> Available at <https://pages.uoregon.edu/rgp/PPPM613/CitizenInvolvement/chapte~4.htm>

expressed an interest in assuming some responsibility for helping to birth such an academy. Other cities, such as Philadelphia, PA,<sup>15</sup> Denver,<sup>16</sup> CO, and Lakewood, CO<sup>17</sup>. have created similar programs.

5) **Take advantage of available tools and resources to build Nashville's toolbox of best practices.**

Engaging neighborhoods in the planning process does not require sophisticated tools and technologies. Sometimes even the simplest tools can be quite effective. There is a need to identify successful tools and resources for collaborative planning processes and to provide these models for knowledge and potential replication. A variety of tools and resources that can facilitate better engagement with neighborhoods in the planning process may already be available through our city's government agencies or non-profits. Other cities can serve as models of effectively using tools and other resources to better engage neighborhoods. Several of these are listed below:

- a) The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) is an NYC nonprofit organization that uses the power of design and art to increase meaningful civic engagement, particularly among underrepresented neighborhoods. CUP projects demystify the urban policy and planning issues that impact communities so that more individuals can better participate in shaping them. More information is available at <http://welcometocup.org/About>.
- b) Genesee-Finger Lakes Region uses technology tools to increase community engagement in its efforts to better tie land-use decisions to neighborhoods' social and economic vitality. More information is available at <https://www.gtcmppo.org/28>.
- c) The *Scottish National Standards for Community Engagement in Land Use* is a good example of using measurable standards as a foundational building block in the country's desire to more effectively and efficiently engages citizens. More information is available at <https://www.communityplanningtoolkit.org/sites/default/files/Engagement.pdf>.
- d) Multiple jurisdictions have created guides to planning and zoning. The following link provides examples of the types of information Nashville might provide in such a guide: <http://www.lakesuperiorstreams.org/citizen/citizensguide1000friends.pdf>.

6) **Learn from what other communities have accomplished.** Although our city may feel it is embarking upon unknown territory in terms of growth and its pace, the fact is that other communities have experienced similar changes. Our city should study both success stories and failed attempts at collaborative planning with neighborhoods. Listed below are four cities that are diligently and successfully increasing community engagement:

- a) Rockwall, Texas' Dept. of Planning and Zoning is building and maintaining a Neighborhood Notification Program. This program aims to identify and enroll local Homeowner's Associations (HOAs) and other neighborhood groups in order to provide them with ongoing accurate contact information for the purpose of providing notification of zoning cases that could potentially impact their neighborhoods. For additional information regarding the "Neighborhood Notification Program see <https://dcra.dc.gov/neighborhood-notification-program>.
- b) Winnipeg, Canada, is bringing different perspectives together to make a stronger democracy, a stronger community, and a stronger city primarily through the use of technology related to land use. More information is available at

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<sup>15</sup> Available at <https://citizensplanninginstitute.org/citizen-planners-in-action>

<sup>16</sup> Available at [https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/community-planning-and-development/planning-and-design/how-we-plan/Citizens\\_Planning\\_Academy.html](https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/community-planning-and-development/planning-and-design/how-we-plan/Citizens_Planning_Academy.html)

<sup>17</sup> Available at <https://www.lakewood.org/Planning/Citizens-Planning-Academy>

<https://winnipeg.ca/ppd/PublicEngagement/DevelopmentApplicationNotificationReview/default.htm>.

- c) Chicago started and has consistently helped grow its own Chicago's New Communities Program operated by Chicago LISC. This program offers ongoing educational opportunities pertinent to neighborhoods. More information is available at <http://www.lisc.org/chicago/>
- d) Minnesota's The Streets.MN program offers positive connections and inclusive conversations about better neighborhoods, especially land-use issues throughout the state. More information is available at <https://streets.mn/about/>.

## SUMMARY

Citizens' experience in the engagement process can color their attitudes toward government as a whole and affect their participation in the future. With the right experience, this can be highly beneficial for Nashville's land-use decision-making process. For the neighborhoods, such engagement can provide an avenue for a wider cross-section of the city, including those who are traditionally difficult to engage, to access correct information and to allow a realistic representation of their desires and needs, thereby ensuring the best outcome for all stakeholders, rather than just for a vocal minority. Additionally, community engagement offers hope to residents who are presently disengaged from our city's civic life that their voices matter and that they can contribute to our city's future. This diversity is an essential element of our democracy. Meaningful engagement means that participants learn new concepts, gain a wider understanding of the land development process, and increase their skills in evaluating proposed development projects. Effective engagement recognizes that citizens will add value and that their input may lead to new options going forward.

For the land-use planners, neighborhood engagement strategies provide a platform where they can provide accurate project information to the wider community and to manage and correct misinformation. Such strategies ensure that costly, time-consuming negotiations with a vocal minority can be minimized, and that instead, the planner is hearing more fully from the community. It also provides a higher level of job satisfaction for the planner, knowing that they have prepared plans for the vitality of ALL our citizens.

For elected representatives, neighborhood engagement enhances transparency for their decisions, which otherwise often come under hostile scrutiny and opposition. Community engagement also provides decision-makers with insights into what their neighborhoods are thinking and enables them to make decisions based on a wide range of data and community input. Making a sincere effort to engage with a wide cross-section of the community and actively seeking neighborhood involvement in decision-making will promote less opposition and better decisions.

This paper offers suggestions and strategies to begin creating more robust citizen engagement strategies. The goal is for Think Tank members to take this paper to their respective neighborhood groups for further discussion and to generate additional ideas. As previously mentioned, the N2N Think Tank, with assistance from the Metro Planning Department, will begin to work on what actions may help address the problems and to determine who is most appropriate to take a leadership role in working toward these solutions.

## Appendix A

### Members of Neighbor 2 Neighbor Planning Think Tank and Other Contributors

| Name (alphabetical)       | Organization  | MNPD Precinct  |
|---------------------------|---|----------------|
| <b>Think Tank Members</b> |   |                |
| Dede Ashton               | Quailtrail Crime Busters                              | Madison        |
| Ruby Baker                | Bordeaux Hills Residential Association                | North          |
| Tom Cash                  | Hillsboro-West End Neighborhood Association           | Midtown Hills  |
| Twana Chick               | Cane Ridge Community Club                             | South          |
| Jim Damato                | Historic Edgefield Neighbors                          | East           |
| Bill Durkin               | Glenclyff Neighborhood Association                    | South          |
| Winnie Forrester          | Haynes Heights Neighborhood Association               | North          |
| Jason Garrett             | Shelby Hills Neighborhood Association                 | East           |
| Gordon Stacy Harmon*      | Highland Heights Neighborhood Association             | East           |
| Sonya Link                | Historic Germantown Neighborhood Association          | North          |
| Cheryl Mayes              | Cambridge Forest Homeowners Association               | South          |
| Ronnie Miller             | Edgehill Coalition/ Organized Neighbors of Edgehill   | Midtown Hills  |
| Billye Sanders            | College Hill Neighborhood Association                 | North          |
| Janet Shands              | Edgehill Coalition/ Edgehill Neighborhood Partnership | Midtown Hills  |
| Blake Taylor              | Old Hickory Commons Homeowners Association            | South          |
| Cynthia Tieck             | Donelson-Hermitage Neighborhood Association           | Hermitage      |
| Irwin Venick              | Woodlawn West Historic Neighborhood Association       | West           |
| James Wallner             | The Nations Neighborhood Association                  | West           |
| Tim Weeks                 | Donelson Hermitage Neighborhood Association           | Hermitage      |
| Omid Yamini               | Cleveland Park Neighborhood Association               | East           |
| <b>Contributors</b>       |   |                |
| Burkley Allen             | Metro Council (District 18)                           | West           |
| Fabian Bedne              | Metro Council (District 31)                           | South          |
| Nancy VanReece            | Metro Council (District 08)                           | Madison        |
| Brett Withers             | Metro Council (District 06)                           | East           |
| Mike Thompson             | Nashville Civic Design Center                         |                |
| Lucy Kempf                | Metro Planning Department                             | Ex Officio     |
| Anita McCaig              | Metro Planning Department                             | Ex Officio     |
| Pearl Sims                | Metro Planning Commission                             | Ex Officio     |
| Jim Hawk                  | Neighbor 2 Neighbor                                   | Co-Facilitator |
| Valeri Otey-Nellis        | Neighbor 2 Neighbor                                   | Co-Facilitator |

\* Co-author of this paper

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