Work from the inside-out

Instead of reacting to proposals for commercial improvements shaped by outside developers, the creation of character plans enables Village residents, stakeholders and officials to anticipate development. Plans that build upon the goals and interests of local residents provide a more attractive framework for assessing and approving future development proposals than plans based solely on developer input. The process started with the interests and expectations of the residents, owners, investors and consumers who live, work and shop in the two districts and moved outward to include Village staff, leadership and residents from other parts of Oak Park. Those who will most likely face the immediate consequences of any planned changes played a crucial, but not exclusive role in shaping the goals and objectives of the plans.

These principles guided the UIC team in designing a process that is transparent, flexible and adaptable to different situations. Conceptually, the process worked to:
- identify critical issues early on in the process,
- listen to many different voices and identify community dynamics,
- clarify value statements,
- review differences of opinion,
- express conflicts, and
- negotiate consensus.

In addition, the principles and the process helped the UIC team find a balance between the temptations of some individuals and groups who sought to turn the process into an end in itself and the desire of others to tailor the participatory process to fit their pre-conceived outcomes.

The UIC team made sure early on to invite as many of the residents (renters and owners) living in or adjacent to each planning district as we could. Additionally, UIC team members actively contacted different groups and organizations throughout Oak Park, inviting their members to participate in the planning process. A complete list of organizations contacted appears in Appendix 7. UIC team members gratefully listened to anyone who would talk about the plans or the process. The UIC team used a wide assortment of techniques to place participation at the heart of the planning effort. These included a variety of approaches to organize and communicate information. We posted handbills, distributed flyers, placed ads in local newspapers, used email listservs, mailed invitations, called on the telephone and spoke face to face. As residents, the faculty team members talked about the project at backyard barbecues, block parties, the gym, grocery stores and other gathering places in the Village. The UIC-Oak Park website was launched the week the project began. The website was designed to evolve as the project unfolded. The website was widely publicized using bookmarks distributed at community events and placed in the library and local bookstores.

Public Meetings

Five public meetings were held at the Village Hall on September 18, 2002, November 5, 2002, January 29, 2003, May 7, 2003, and June 19, 2003. Each meeting typically lasted two hours. During the first hour, we shared project findings with citizens through short presentations and responded to questions from the audience. These presentations were televised and rebroadcast on the local television channel. During the second half of the meeting, we typically engaged attendees in a discussion or activity that was appropriate to the needs of the project. For example, in the first community-wide meeting held on September 18, 2002, we organized citizens into different focus groups so that they could talk about their expectations and concerns. In the last community meeting, held on June 19, 2003, we organized a moderated community forum where citizens could ask questions of the UIC team, stakeholder representatives, and Village staff.

[organizing and communicating project information]