

Charrettes: Not Always the Right Answer

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A charrette is a **carefully managed, collaborative design process aimed at providing a proposal that reflects the input, and, it is hoped, the approval, of all participants**. As helpful as community-based charrettes may be in developing a good design, charrettes are not a miraculous cure-all for all entitlement and “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) problems. Before committing yourself to a costly or lengthy charrette process, consider the following:

- When all interested parties agree that they want a new town center, a new campus, or a new pedestrian mall, a charrette can be a useful tool to help shape a common vision. But when people are debating whether any change should occur, then the “leave it untouched” camp will rarely cooperate with the “pave it over” camp to formulate a new plan. Design charrettes, in other words, are not the best way to resolve whether a community wants change or wants to preserve the status quo.
- **Charrettes are effective only if you’ve got the right people sitting at the table.** If key activists or public officials refuse to participate in the charrette or community representatives cannot “deliver” the concurrence of their constituents, then concessions made as part of the charrette process may simply be the first step in the design process. It is possible that once nonparticipants get their hands on your proposal during public hearings, they will dismiss the collaborative design plan or view it as little more than the starting point for additional community negotiations.
- **People are more likely to devote their time to protect the existing quality of their lives** rather than consider the benefits that future development might bring. This is why time-consuming charrettes are more likely to attract project opponents than project supporters
- Design charrettes are enjoyable for rational thinkers who like focusing on facts and evaluating the merits and demerits of different scenarios. Charrettes are also attractive to linear thinkers who appreciate the constant refinements and revisions of the design process. Unfortunately, thoughtful design charrettes often fail to meet the emotional or cognitive needs of young adults or senior citizens, who tend to engage in more subjective, kaleidoscopic thinking rather than in objective, linear analysis.
- By giving less intense, less vocal citizens a greater role in the planning process, charrettes can help **disempower the squeakiest wheels in the community**. However, the ultrademocratic design workshop may fail to meet the ego and emotional needs of self-designated community leaders who often feel that they deserve special attention or else worry about justifying their leadership roles to their constituents.
- While a “ground up” community-oriented planning process can help define what type of development citizens would like to see in their community, the charrette is not a cost-effective advocacy tool to generate support for a **specific plan already in mind**.
- Even when participants end up adopting positive attitudes toward the charrette’s ultimate design plan, a supportive attitude will not necessarily lead to supportive actions such as offering favorable testimony at public hearings.
- A lot of opposition to land use projects can be resolved by making non-land use concessions that do not involve compromising critical project elements. Helping a citizen to appreciate how much social approval he stands to gain from endorsing a project can be much more effective --- and less costly --- than eliminating valuable square footage, reducing height or units, or changing uses. Charrettes often focus overly on design related concessions and not enough on emotional concessions and the non-land use resources of parties not actively participating in the charrette process.

Charrettes can play an important role in the development process, but they cannot substitute for conventional community relations activities. **When strenuous NIMBY opposition threatens to derail your plan, a charrette can be just part of the ultimate public outreach solution.**

