

Study on Public Participation for Comprehensive Planning of Small Cities in the US: A Case Study of Denton Plan 2030 in Denton City

Waseda University Student Member ○ Pan Qiaoyu

1. BACKGROUND

After decades of development, public participation has been proved as an effective and important part of the mandatory process of decision making in urban planning in the US. With institutional protection and flexible methods, public participation is currently a very active part for different types of planning, and has a real impact on governmental policies. Public demands and interests are implemented into planning through various movements of participation. A number of NGOs will be involved in the planning process, including citizen advisory committees, volunteers from the local, and different stakeholder groups. These organizations are established by community residents on their own initiative and are highly autonomous, enhancing the city services and relieving the pressure on the government.

2. OVERVIEW OF DENTON PLAN 2030

Denton is located on the northern edge of the Dallas–Fort Worth metropolitan area in the US, which is also known as the "Golden Triangle of North Texas" formed by the three cities in the area. The city is 35 miles northwest of Downtown Dallas, and 38 miles northeast of Ft. Worth. It's benefited from regional growth extending outward from Dallas and Fort Worth for the last decades. The city has a total area of 231.33 km², with a population estimates 141,541 in 2019.

The purpose of Denton Plan 2030 was to set a course for the future of the city, including managing growth, promoting reinvestment, and improving quality of life for the next two decades, inspired and motivated by the citizen values and aspirations expressed in the Community Vision Statement. It provided a guide for Denton to retain its character, define its identity, improve the quality of life, and enhance the economy. Denton Plan 2030 was initiated in early 2012, to revise the City Comprehensive Plan based on 1999 Denton Plan. It was drafted and reviewed in 2014, and finally approved by the Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council in 2015.

3. PARTICIPANTS OF DENTON PLAN 2030

The participants of public participation in this plan were the Planning and Zoning Commission and various groups of NGOs, while other citizens could register for information and participate in community forums. The Planning and Zoning Commission is the organizing body for the plan. Key groups were formed to provide guidance during plan development, including the Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), Denton Plan Ambassadors (DPA), and other related groups.

The CAC consisted of 32 members appointed by City Council, to represent a variety of community interest groups and constituencies. The CAC was established to advise the policy direction of the comprehensive plan from the perspective of key stakeholder groups within the community (e.g. districts, universities, organizations, departments, and companies), building consensus among diverse constituencies throughout the planning process. The CAC met regularly to work with City staff and consultants to provide feedback and direction.

The TAC consisted of a group of approximately 20 senior staff of City of Denton departments. These staff members were chosen because of their different professional skills, and each of them provided technical advice for a particular field of the plan in the planning process. City staff and consultants met with the TAC at key milestones and the TAC also reviewed all deliverables created throughout the plan development to ensure accuracy and feasibility.

The DPA program was established at the beginning of the planning process, and was open to all community members as long as they agreed to attend the planning meetings regularly. This program was to give all community members the opportunity to serve as leaders and advocates for Denton Plan 2030, and to engage more neighborhood and interest groups. The group met every other month throughout the Plan's development to provide input and share information with the community groups they represented.

4. PROCESS OF THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Denton Plan 2030 was developed in 5 phases and 11 key community outreach events, each of which included significant community involvement.

(1) Kickoff Open House: The Kickoff Open House was an introduction to the Denton Plan 2030 update process and a venue for the community to get acquainted with the project team. Nearly 160 citizens participated in the Kickoff Open House to formally start the update process. While the primary purpose was to raise public awareness of the importance of Denton Plan 2030 and the various opportunities for citizens to participate and provide input, participants were encouraged to express their likes and dislikes about Denton on notes attached to display boards.

(2) Stakeholder Engagement: Stakeholder interviews were conducted with community groups, municipal government departments and leaders, major employers, and NGOs to collect a wide range of opinions from the community and key

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Contact address: 3-4-1 Okubo, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 169-8555, Japan, Tel:08041161666 Email: panqiaoy@toki.waseda.jp

decision makers. The interviews before the Community Forum 1 provided a deep understanding of various views on the key issues of the city, and let the partners get in the planning process and further plan implementation.

(3) Community Forum 1: The first Community Forum provided a venue for the community to voice their opinions about Denton and what should happen in its future. A complete feedback list of the city's strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities was formed. The results and information of Community Forum 1 came from various support and promotion activities (Kickoff Open House, stakeholder interviews, informational community meetings, Mobile Meetings, website and social media, and community surveys), and were used to develop a 15-20 year Community Vision Statement that would guide the entire plan, including plan implementation procedure.

(4) Community Forum 2: Community Forum 2 provided citizens with four types of comparable growth scenarios, giving residents the opportunity to vote on what they believe is the best model for Denton's future development, as well as the approaches to be taken and a vision statement for the community. This vision statement would guide every aspect of the plan, and would be followed by a draft Community Vision Statement divided into four directions: Denton's character; the people, institutions and government of the city; the economic development of the city; and the growth of the city.

The Compact Growth Scenario received the greatest number of votes in Community Forum 2 (33%). The public's preferred scenario was a conceptual vision of the form, character, and general location of development in the city, which reflects the surveys and expressed expectations of community involvement. The Planning and Zoning Commission and CAC used the consensus results of favorite Growth Scenario from Forum 2 to form the Preferred Growth Concept that would reflect the way the public desires Denton to grow and develop in the future. The general location of new development areas would become the basis for future development of the city's land use plan.

(5) Community Forum 3: Prior to Community Forum 3, the CAC and TAC developed a complete draft comprehensive plan document, including an identification of the general strategies, and a strategic supplement to the priority development of short, medium, and long term stages, as well as a monitoring mechanism to anticipate the formation of the plan. Community Forum 3 (Draft Review) was held to receive citizen comments and feedback on the draft plan, and the CAC accordingly examined the draft document to reflect the results of the review process.

5. EFFECTS OF THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Public participation has played an important guiding role in Denton Plan 2030, and a systematic public participation model suitable for Denton has been formed: the government appealing; community residents and groups participating; the government establishing a tracking mechanism and planners evaluating and feedback on the implementation effect; voting to select the preferred Growth Scenario; public hearing and adoption of the planning results; public monitoring of implementation; feedback on opinions. This model can provide timely feedback on public opinions during the implementation of the plan, and avoid unnecessary waste of resources and repeated decision making.

Each event shaped Denton Plan 2030 as a better form. The Kickoff Open House determined what Denton Plan 2030 will need to preserve and improve, as well as the issues planners would need to address in Denton throughout the update of the Denton Plan. SWOT discussion in Community Forum 1 established the consensus of Denton Plan 2030, and formed the base of what the plan would maintain, promote, address, improve and expand. The Community Vision Statement stood for the "final destination" for Denton Plan 2030, and determined the Character of Denton, so that throughout the Denton Plan 2030 document, each of the policies has its foundation in the Vision Statement. In Community Forum 2, the result scenario provided a strong basis for the development of the Preferred Growth Concept, and led to the final Land Use Plan. Public input and advisement in Community Forum 3 also helped to improve the details of the plan.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The public participation of Denton Plan 2030 was well designed and organized throughout the whole plan. The process was greatly transparent to the citizens, the plan was widely publicized, and the information about the plan was shared in a variety of ways. Public participation methods were highly practicable, including websites, social media, community forums, telephone meetings, community surveys, and expanded public meetings. In addition, the unique characters and cultures of Denton as a college town and a small city with a dynamic culture were respected. The Community Vision Statement was formed from local voices to identify what the broad range of citizens considered to be the most important qualities of the city, and was applied for guiding the direction and content of the plan. While potential improvements can still be made for more humanitarian approach in some stages of public participation, Denton Plan 2030 is qualified to serve as an excellent example of a comprehensive plan, which can inspire the plans of other similar small cities.

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