

Unpublished letter to the Editor, Richmond Times-Dispatch
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By Jim Ellis

I commend Rachel Flynn, Director of Community Development for Richmond, for her visionary approaches to establishing responsible plans for Richmond's future. By holding design charrettes in which citizens directly influence the city's plans to asking simple questions and thinking outside the box, she has the potential to break the region's creative logjam identified in the recent Crupi report – and to do so with common sense and concern for community. The design charrette facilitated by Dover, Kohl and Partners produced a vision for a more walkable city with emphasis on green design and public areas benefiting the whole community. No wonder – the design sprang from citizen's minds and their hopes for the future. But after the ideas were publicized, some developers and property owners said that their property rights were being violated.

I suspect their actual unvoiced complaint is that they see change coming to the cozy system for land development by which they have profited for decades. What do I mean by “cozy?” For one example, take Hanover County's recent Comprehensive Plan update process. County officials met with developers and asked for their input, and received a memo with a map showing requested new land for development. This occurred several months before citizens were allowed to start to participate in the process. The memo was uncovered through a Freedom of Information Act request.

Citizens' ideas for the Comp Plan and their concerns that the process was not fair were brushed off throughout the entire process. As a result, we had just one plan for the county's next 20 years to talk about during the process – a plan that essentially featured the map drawn by the developers.

By choosing to re-designate more than 15,000 acres for new development over the objections of unprecedented numbers of citizens attending public meetings and refusing to think creatively about changing how we use our lands, the county deferred a crucial discussion on sustainable growth in Hanover County for at least a generation. I guess we will just add that to the tab that our children will pay tomorrow, which is being run up for the political convenience of those in power today. That's what the traditional cozy system looks like.

Let me be clear that I am not anti-business. I know property rights are the foundation of our system. I know we benefit from the hard work and financial risks taken by developers, their employees and contractors. But I also know the pain of citizens watching their quality of life decline as poorly envisioned development impacts traffic congestion, school enrollment, water quality, community identity and sense of place. I know their confusion as they find that the “public” process of land deals is for all practical purposes conducted under the radar.

Elected representatives rarely come back proactively to ask citizens about development concepts while those ideas are actually in flux. Scheduling a public hearing with a few weeks' advance notice that happens months or years after the real planning has already occurred is not adequate to involve citizens. It makes a mockery of the idea of citizen engagement.

Within this context, I note the irony in the developers' reaction to Richmond's plan, created under a new model of citizen engagement. Citizens in Richmond came out to express their wishes in a week-long, well-advertised charrette; their shared vision was committed to paper and publicized; and somehow developers are now victims?

To be fair, many developers adjust their plans to minimize negative impacts. They proffer improvements to infrastructure and donate land to public uses. It can take them years to realize the benefits of their initial investments. But land speculation is risky by definition. The business community uses its risk-taking to justify their influence over public affairs. I agree those stripes have been earned. But they can't have it both ways now. Citizens should have no obligation to compensate developers for speculative lost profits, just as developers have apparently had no obligation to compensate citizens for lost peace, tranquility and viewsheds. The ultimate irony is that there is ample evidence that the community-based planning model used in this instance provides win-win solutions, reduces citizen opposition to development, satisfies the profit motive that makes our capitalist system tick, and provides better solutions for everyone – including developers.

We must implement community-based planning and proactively involve citizens as partners to meet the challenges of the 21st century, as Richmond did thanks to Rachel Flynn's leadership.