

AMSTERDAM/CHURCHILL COMMUNITY PLANNING: DESIGNING THE PROCESS

Three major tasks will be required to provide Amsterdam/Churchill with a community plan, all of which occur for each issue: collecting and analyzing information, involving the public in the process, and preparing the implementation documents.

Information

The factual background of the Churchill/Amsterdam planning effort will be half the foundation for your plan policies. Some of the following information has already been gathered; other elements will follow as the process unfolds.

Demographic Profile. Given the fact that the Churchill/Amsterdam planning boundary is not a distinct political jurisdiction, information gathering will be fairly limited. Planning Staff can prepare census and GIS mapping information, and use capacity information from the Churchill community septic system, to help the steering community and community have a reasonable understanding of demographic information.

Public Facilities Inventory. All applicable public facilities (roads, sewer/water, emergency services, schools) will be inventoried and compiled into a public facilities inventory document, along with policy questions, which can guide future work.

Land Use Inventory. The current use – grazing, farming, residential, commercial, public – of lands throughout the planning jurisdiction will be mapped. This inventory will include the location and size of existing subdivisions as well as the location of existing farms.

Landscape Inventory. This step will assemble the natural factors – watercourses, soils, wetlands, agricultural canals/ditches etc. - that may affect proposed developments in the planning jurisdiction.

Visualizing Density. The Planning Department is currently seeking funding to hire Kestrel Aerial, a firm which specializes in aerial photography and photo illustration. The project would seek to demonstrate the consequences of any policies dealing development pattern and density.

Public Participation

The other half of the foundation for your neighborhood plan is public involvement. The kickoff meeting introducing the process and soliciting public involvement was held on November 15 and I have attached a draft packet showing the framework for that meeting. The kickoff meeting will be the first of several public meetings and will be used to guide all future work. Future meetings, such as *education forums* and/or *policy development forums*, during which more specific questions are asked and alternatives presented, will follow. Finally, alternatives of the plan will be presented for public comment.

I recommend the public participation plan consist of the following:

- Flyers, posters, press announcements, newspaper announcements of any meetings;
- Drafting an invitation letter explaining what the steering committee is up to and the kickoff meeting/workshop that is sent out to a majority of landowners (funding was received by the planning board and this was done prior to November 15th);
- Obtaining a schedule of events that will be held in the community over the next few months and preparing materials explaining the process to have on display;
- Developing a simple presentation explaining the scope, purpose, and outcome of the kickoff meeting that can be delivered by members of the steering committee at any gatherings that might happen at the school or community center;
- Developing a phone tree to issue personal invitations;
- Developing a strategy to include people who need to be involved but, for whatever reason, have not been.

Implementation

This is where the rubber meets the road and all the hard work pays off. Implementation of a planning process consists of three parts:

Neighborhood Plan. The Neighborhood Plan generally consists of the following elements: an introduction and preview, a vision statement, background information, and planning policies. As stated above, the factual background (including opportunities and needs identified in the info gathering stage) and the public participation will form the basis of the planning policies. Ideally, the planning policies will be used to guide future development in Churchill/Amsterdam and the surrounding area. *In order to truly implement a community plan, however, two specific tools are needed:*

Requirements. Requirements can take several different forms. The most common type of requirement is a set of development standards which new development or land use change would have to meet (also known as zoning). These standards could include setbacks from canals or ditches, landscape buffers between commercial and residential uses to help compatibility, lighting standards for new commercial buildings, density requirements for new subdivisions, requirements for central sewer/water, etc. Other types of requirements could take the form of plan policy. Examples include planned road connections, trail connections, or sidewalk connections which new development would have to build as a condition of their approval.

Investments. Investments require the residents of Amsterdam/Churchill, the County, or perhaps outside agencies (such as MDT or federal grant programs) to invest time, energy, or money. Investments could include adding a public water component to the public sewer system, sidewalks, or road improvements.

Responsibilities

Seeing the planning process through to the end will be the responsibility of both the steering committee and Planning Staff. I see the breakdown as follows:

Planning Staff: The primary responsibility of the Planning Staff is to collect, analyze, and present information, and to provide a forum for the community conversation by helping design meetings. Specifically, this can be broken down as:

- Collect information and present it to the steering committee and the community.
- Help the steering committee develop a kickoff meeting and be (partly) responsible for summarizing information gathered at this and any other public meetings.
- Present all information to steering committee at bi-monthly meetings.
- Help draft plan and policies.

Steering Committee:

- Meet twice a month to oversee and direct all work by Planning Staff.
- Help develop and implement the public participation program (including help facilitating all public meetings).
- Be responsible for any funds received.
- Run a website (if you develop one).
- Be willing to speak about the planning process to members of the public.
- Ensure the planning policies and possible regulations developed through this process are truly in line with Amsterdam/Churchill values.

Questions

Steering Committee Questions

- Does the steering committee want a fixed membership?
- How do you want to make decisions? Consensus? Voting?
- Do you want to establish a definition of a quorum?
- How do you want to handle people who come for the first time? Do they formally participate and guide decisions?
- Rather than a fixed membership, do you want to have open membership, with decisions being made by those who show up?
- How often do you want to meet? I'd recommend twice a month; is this reasonable?
- Where do you want to meet? Fire Department? Manhattan Christian?
- We will need money for mailings and other costs. How do you want to handle any funds that might be donated?

- How do you want to handle the media?

Process Questions

- Which version of the summary of results should be mailed out? Raw data or report?
- Is the report accurate? Do you reach the same conclusions?
- The map that was created was done so informally. Do you want to adjust the boundaries? I suggest, at the least, moving the boundary north adjacent to the Manhattan Planning Boundary.
- What other information, besides what was listed above, do you need?
- The next community meeting should build on the first. A suggested format could be a brief presentation discussing the kickoff meeting, followed by initial conclusions, followed by small-group work affirming those conclusions and providing policy direction based on those conclusions. Thoughts??

And Finally...

What are the big questions the planning process (guided by the steering committee) need to answer? As I see it, the Amsterdam/Churchill area has two distinct geographic areas to discuss: the Amsterdam and Churchill settlements themselves, and the larger area of agricultural land surrounding them. I suggest thinking of the needs and goals of these two areas as both dependent upon each other but also as distinct areas with different policies. Suggested focus questions for the settlements themselves could be (based on results from the kickoff meeting):

- How do we encourage commercial development that provides goods and services for residents, while maintaining our area's special character and the character of existing neighborhoods?
- What must be done to ensure that future development fits within the capacity of local public facilities and services?

Suggested focus questions for the rural areas outlying the settlements could be:

- What must be done to sustain the agricultural landscapes and lifestyles on which the character of our area depends?
- What must be done to ensure that future rural residential development is compatible with the resources that attract people to live in our area?