Greensboro's Team Effort

North Carolina hosts APA's first Community Planning Team.

By Christopher Hammond

There are wide streets, and then there are really wide streets. According to one member of APA's first Community Planning Team, East Market Street in Greensboro, North Carolina, is so wide "you can land a plane on it."

The team, consisting of seven visiting planners, arrived in Greensboro at the end of October for a five-day charrette that involved 300 to 400 local people. The ideas put forward during the event ultimately resulted in strategies for revitalizing the East Market area, the city's historically black business district.

Everyone agrees that change is needed. Thirty years ago, when the city widened the two-lane street into six lanes and cleared structures as part of urban renewal, owners of restaurants, shops, a theater, and doctors' and dentists' offices were forced out. Only two blocks of the street now standing are still pre-'60s in feeling.

The rest of the project area, a corridor 1.3 miles long and one mile wide located just east of downtown Greensboro, is mainly institutional along East Market Street and residential in the surrounding area. North Carolina A&T State University, several churches, and a large YMCA border the street. Also on the street are a few professional offices, a post office, vacant or underused shopping areas, a fast food restaurant, and small drug store. Just off the corridor are Bennett

Getting the Ball Rolling

Sue Schwartz says hosting the Greensboro charrette was like planning two wedding receptions a day—right down to making sure that the wrong relatives don't sit next to each other."

Schwartz—a community planner for the city—spent six weeks working full time on the event. The community planning team was picked by the middle of August, and Schwartz began sending the members weekly doses of information, eventually filling a three-ring binder with maps and memos.

Schwartz has worked in Greensboro for 12 years in planning. Earlier she worked for the city of High Point, North Carolina, and the Western Piedmont Council of Governments.

According to Stephen Cochran, AICP, APA's director of council programs, the idea for Community Planning Teams surfaced in 1992, when APA and its California chapter helped fund a charrette in South Central Los Angeles after the riots there that April. The idea was refined and proposed as an ongoing program by Michael Barker, AICP, APA's former executive director.

Schwartz first heard about the program while serving as president of APA's North Carolina chapter. She discussed the idea with Greensboro housing and community development director Andy Scott, and she and other city staff members worked out a four-page proposal within a week. "Once it sounded solid we pitched it to NCA&T and Mayor Carolyn Allen. They jumped on it," she says. The mayor has made the revitalization of East Market Street a priority for her second term.

The five-day charrette cost $25,000, which covered the visitors' travel expenses (their time was donated). The city raised the money from local firms with the help of a professional fundraiser. With institutions like Nations Bank and Lorillard involved, Schwartz says, "it sends the signal it's not just a city project."

Schwartz says she is proud of her involvement. "Look at what we achieved," she says. "People in the community who don't always see eye to eye with the city came and offered solutions. That's a sign we hit the mark."
College, a private African-American women's college with some students, and Lorillard Tobacco, which employs over 1,000 people.

There are few services nearby for the remaining neighborhood residents and nearly 8,100 students at North Carolina A&T. This is in marked contrast to the west side of town, which has several shopping centers and a lively retail area around the University of North Carolina campus.

Getting started
The city selected team members last summer from a list recommended by APA. At the city's request, the team included professionals with experience in evaluating economic development in underserved neighborhoods—and with "sensitive coalition-building skills."

Team leader William Harris, Sr., AICP, of the University of Virginia, and the rest of the team were asked to assess the East Market area's economic development potential, offer ideas to make the area more attractive, recommend land use changes, and develop strategies for creating partnerships to implement their ideas.

The overall aim was not merely to spruce up an unattractive corridor. It was to increase social equity by helping to rebuild a community's culture and bring back jobs and services.

Nitty-gritty
Team members spent the first three days meeting with residents and representatives of businesses and institutions along the corridor. On Friday, the team boarded a Greensboro city bus to tour the district. They took notes at the colleges and walked around a nearly vacant 120,000-square-foot shopping center. Then the team toured Eastside Park, a neighborhood adjacent to the corridor that's on the upswing after considerable housing renovation.

Saturday—day three—was pivotal. More than 120 people turned out for a public meeting held to discuss the East Market area. One lure was keynote speaker Harvey Gantt, the former mayor of Charlotte and a former U.S. Senate candidate.

Gantt told the audience that the East Market area is a prime example of "the fruits of 1950s and '60s planning—superblocks that replaced grids and alleyways." He urged the audience to look forward: "We all want to see the proverbial hole in the donut become a burgeoning inner city. But I'll be the first to recognize that nostalgia can be damning," he said.

The real work began after Gantt's speech. In one discussion group on community and economic development, participants noted that financial help might be available not only from existing banks but also from local churches, self-help groups, small business loan pools, and individuals.

Visiting team member Cynthia Norman stressed the need to tap local resources. "The churches have a wealth of affluent black parishioners who want to help in any way they can. They also have day care and after-school facilities. Those people have a lot of energy. They want to do more," she said.

Team leader Harris added that it was important to hear residents out. "You've got to probe to get to the fundamental issues," he said. "Other-
wise you’re doing what other reports do, smear over the problem. The real issue here is taking back a community."

Results
On Sunday, the team met with the local steering committee, which includes representatives of Nations Bank, Lorillard Tobacco, North Carolina A&T, and the U.S. Postal Service, along with city council members Claudette Burroughs-White and Mayor Carolyn Allen. This meeting was a trial run for Monday’s press briefing, when team members would show off their results.

“We want East Market to have a bit more sense of place,” Harris told the steering committee. “This area is a significant cell in the body of Greensboro. We don’t see it as a cancer. Maybe it just needs cleaning up.”

What impressed the committee members most were the team’s proposed designs. Team member Lee Brown, AICP, vice-president of Teska & Associates in Evanston, Illinois, emphasized that the preliminary sketches were based on citizen input.

Committee members murmured approval on seeing drawings of East Market Street narrowed from six to four lanes. That change would encourage pedestrian use and reduce the barrier between the two sides of the district, team members said. The team also suggested demolishing the vacant shopping center and replacing it with a mix of offices and stores.

The city’s director of housing and community development, Andy Scott, challenged the steering committee to create a constituency that will see the program through. “One habit we’ve gotten into is that people tell us, ‘Here, it’s broken. You, the city, fix it.’ That hasn’t worked for the past 25 years.”

To help with long-term strategies, the APA team will return to Greensboro twice over the next two years if local funding is available, says Stephen Cochran, AICP, APA’s director of council programs. Cochran coordinates the community planning teams and helps recruit potential team members.

Those return visits and an ongoing commitment from team members distinguish APA’s community planning teams from teams run by other organizations, Cochran notes. Any government or organization that invites a community planning team must be willing to work with the team for several years, he adds, noting that that’s one of the reasons Greensboro was chosen as the site of the first team. “There’s enthusiasm in both the community and city government as well as a serious commitment to implement the project,” he says. “Also, Greensboro offers a chance to look at an old urban renewal project and do it again better.”

Sue Schwartz, AICP, who organized local participants, says Greensboro’s commitment is genuine. “By hosting a team of volunteers, we’re saying this is not the same old city meeting,” Schwartz told the team. “I think people realize the team is here to help us be part of something better.”

Christopher Hammond is a writer in Greensboro.

The Team

The seven members of the Greensboro Community Planning Team are:
- Ellen Crain, planning director of Routt County, Colorado.
- William Harris, Sr., AICP, director of the Center for Housing and the Social Environment at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.
- Emil Malizia, AICP, professor in the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.
- Cynthia Norman, executive director of the Belton Corporation for Economic Development in Belton, Missouri.
- James Shelby, planning director of Natchez, Mississippi.