



Retrospective on Subarea A [Olympia Northeast Neighborhoods Alliance (ONNA)] Process

Background

To help subsequent subarea planning in the City of Olympia, the ONNA Planning Team and City staff (specifically Linda Bentley, Senior Planner and former liaison Michelle Sadlier, Associate Planner) thought it would be helpful to take a look back to see what worked well and what we might do differently if we had it to do again. This is a high-level look at the process and structure, both from the City's and from ONNA's points of view. We recognize that ONNA's process was and is "blazing the trail" as the first subarea planning effort in Olympia and that subsequent efforts would not necessarily face the same challenges.

What Worked Well

Skill-set. The subarea already included well-organized, registered neighborhood associations that were actively involved in the Coalition of Neighborhood Associations (CNA) both when the idea of subarea planning was developed and throughout this pilot project. This level of engagement corresponded to a high-level of community consciousness and willingness and time to volunteer with ONNA's pilot. Additionally, those who stepped forward to be part of the planning team had relevant skills including the ability to write, develop and maintain a website, create and analyze an online survey, make presentations and provide leadership. Under the present structure of subarea planning in the City, we believe these types of skills are crucial to the success of subarea planning.

Building Trust and Consensus. The ONNA planning team started meeting regularly in 2013 and completed the plan in 2016. Although that seems like a long time, it allowed time for people from different neighborhoods with different concerns to come together and build a solid foundation of trust and cooperation with one another as well as with participating City staff, which we believe is crucial to not only writing a solid plan but for successful implementation.

Use of Website and Online Surveys. The ONNA website is an affordable, relatively easy way to keep the community informed, both during development of the plan and to announce ongoing activities or meetings. Use of Survey Monkey for short resident surveys is also relatively affordable and easy to use. Both allowed the group to gain input from community members who may not have participated otherwise.

What Could be Improved

More Clarity on Roles. It appears from meeting minutes, folder notes and conversations that both staff and the ONNA planning team had ongoing questions about expected responsibilities for each. The research into other cities' subarea plans found that most followed a "top down" model whereby the city furnished a plan "template," usually had dedicated staff and/or a neighborhoods department, and the final subarea plan would be adopted by the city and, in some cases, become part of the comprehensive or general plan. In Olympia it appears the City expects the community (subarea) to initiate action with a modicum of direction from the City.

Although City Council outlined expectations for the subarea plan contents, it seems that it would be worthwhile, as an option available for use by future subarea planning teams, for the City to develop a brief "how to" manual, including examples, templates, responsibilities, and expectations.

Involve Cross-department Team Throughout Process. Early on in this process Michelle identified a "team" composed of relevant City departments who could assist the subarea in accessing City resources such as including the subarea in the process for capital and/or operational funding and other planning. Michelle met with the team to identify the best ways for the City to systemically include consideration of a subarea's priority goals and actions into departmental goals. The group did not reach a decision on a preferred process at that time. By the time Linda took over the staff position to assist the ONNA planning team with completing the subarea plan, the staff/ONNA team decided to wait until the plan was completed before involving a cross-department team. That way the team could discuss the actual goals and action steps with relevant City personnel.

In the future, to smooth the transition to the implementation phase, it may be better to have the cross-department team weigh in on a preliminary plan – pointing out any "red flags," roadblocks, opportunities, key personnel – so the subarea planning team has an opportunity to adjust its action steps, if desired, before writing the final subarea plan. A staff person (currently at .25 full-time equivalent (FTE)) should continue to act as a contact for new, potential subarea groups, as well as working with existing subareas groups to help them achieve their goals and action steps. Currently, the subarea team is the lead for its implementation efforts, with assistance from the City upon request. We see that process and relationship continuing. However, as more subareas organize and write accepted subarea plans, it will undoubtedly be necessary to increase staff resources.

Plan Contents and Priorities. Although it took a couple of years, it was important for the ONNA planning team to come up with a community-wide consensus for the most important issues on which to focus. Many possible goals were suggested but the ONNA team chose to limit the goals to three to better focus on implementation. Toward the end of the plan writing process, it

seemed both the City and the ONNA planning team were eager to finish the plan, so the team decided not to rank or prioritize the action steps.

In the future, we suggest a planning team spend time prioritizing action steps (at least to a short-, mid- and long-term time frame) and finding volunteers who would lead efforts for each step. This would be very helpful in focusing the group on a few action steps and having regular successes.

Implementation. Although we included a brief section entitled “Implementing the Plan” after the Goals, Objectives and Actions section, we recommend including implementation as one of the goals and define specific implementation steps and responsible parties. We also suggest that the Action Steps be designed as a “pull-out” or an additional separate document, perhaps with added columns for priority status, percent complete, comments, etc., to assist in continuing implementation of the plan and transfer of information to new people. As stated earlier, we expect staff resources to continue to be available to assist with implementation

Summary

- Strive to have community volunteers with needed skills on the planning team.
- Allow enough time for the planning group to form a solid foundation on which to move forward.
- Use social media extensively.
- Encourage the City develop a brief “how to” manual and fund adequate staffing.
- Arrange for subareas to meet regularly with the cross-department team to “check-in” and/or receive guidance.
- Prioritize or rank action steps.
- Include “Implementation” as a goal and develop related action steps.