

Thrive, Connect, Renew: What San Antonio Can Learn from Philly

Randy Bear

on 27 February, 2014 at 05:00



Public engagement is a critical part of any public process, from deciding the best routes for streetcars to discussing park improvements. But unless the subject is controversial, it's hard to get a handful of people in San Antonio to come together and help with the planning, much less lead it.

The City of San Antonio is about to begin development of a comprehensive master plan and the hope is to change that status quo – but how?

District 2 Councilwoman Ivy Taylor decided to look to a city that has brought a record number of citizens into its own process. That city is Philadelphia.

Working with the UTSA Colleges of Public Policy and Architecture, the San Antonio chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the San Antonio River Authority, a group of experts

RIVARD REPORT

Urban. Independent. All About San Antonio.

from Philadelphia came to town to tell “The Philadelphia Story” of how to create a citizen-empowered planning process.

Philadelphia’s comprehensive plan, Philadelphia 2035, was presented to more than 100 people at the UTSA Downtown Campus.



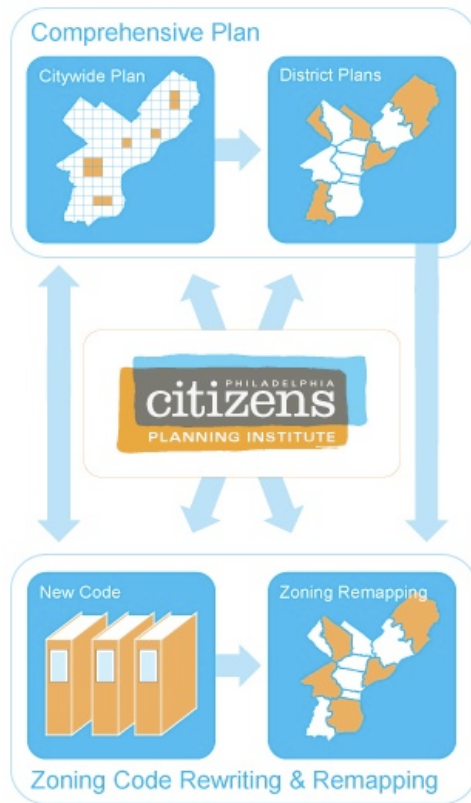
“Citizen Planning: The Philadelphia Story” presentation at UTSA’s downtown campus. Photo by Randy Bear.

Philadelphia 2035 is an effort started by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission to create a citizen-based, action-oriented city plan, spurred by a concern over unmanaged growth along the Delaware River Waterfront and a desire to increase growth in the downtown area of Philadelphia, known as the Center City District.

Thanks to a 10-year tax abatement, the district has seen more than 25,000 new residents, making it the third largest downtown in the country. Radical growth, however, demands management that goes beyond obscure neighborhood boundaries. So instead of focusing solely on the Central District, city planners decided to build a citywide, comprehensive 25-year plan.

RIVARD REPORT

Urban. Independent. All About San Antonio.



Philly planners looked to the success of Battery Park City in New York City and engaged Penn Praxis, a design collaborative at the University of Pennsylvania, to create the Citizens Planning Institute with funding from the William Penn Foundation. They attract, organize and empower “citizen planners” across the city.

Starting with a 13-month process with more than 4,000 people engaging in public discussions, Philadelphia has been able to create a plan for the city with three distinct themes – “Thrive, Connect, and Renew” – and is now developing individual district plans that roll up to and support the Citywide Vision.

In Philadelphia’s case, the Delaware River Waterfront became a test case for the process developed for the plan, said Harris Steinberg, AIA fellow and executive director of PennPraxis.

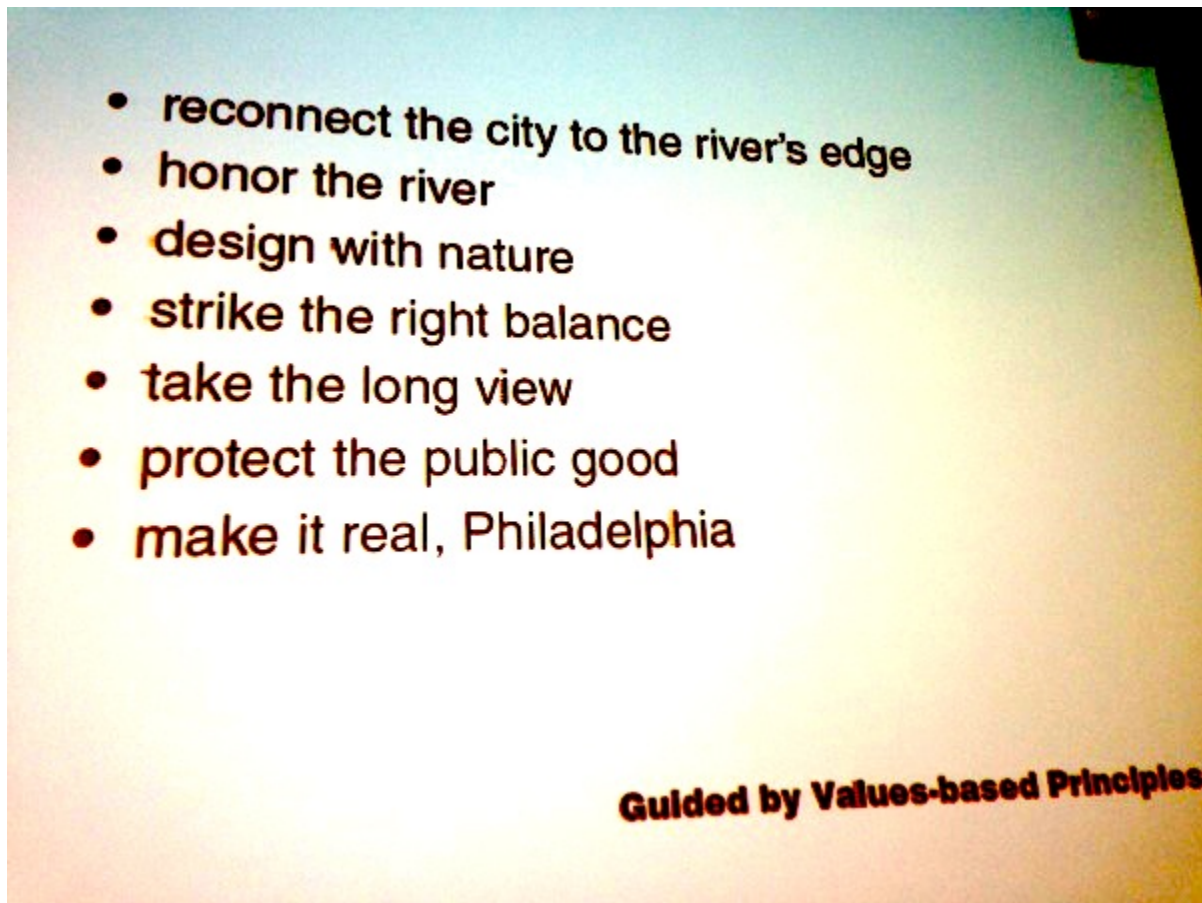
One of the biggest challenges planners faced was working with the plans to build two new casinos on the waterfront. Steinberg said the group wasn’t sure what to expect since the plan would be challenging both the casinos and the longshoremen, the latter have made their living for decades along the waterfront.

What resulted was a highly-engaged, civic exercise that was open and transparent, embraced by the media and ultimately a product that over 1,500 people came to see in a final presentation at the end of the process.

Now, the group is working to develop 18 district plans, each focus on the three core themes but uniquely reflect each district in the city. Five district plans have been completed and are being implemented. Two plans are in progress and two more are planned to start later this year.

Transparency of the process became one of the key principles of success – including having each meeting broadcast online, much like San Antonio’s NowcastSA. Look at the website for the Central District Plan at www.phila2035.org. Public comments from both meetings and emails have been posted. The Planning Commission has created an Implementation Calendar with details about the upcoming meetings and progress of the plan in the city.

All tools to help give citizens eyes, ears, and a voice throughout the process.



A piece of Philadelphia 2035 philosophy. Sound familiar, San Antonio?

There is no shortage of plans for the City of San Antonio. We've a growing library of master plans, sector plans, community and neighborhood plans, and several other supporting documents.

San Antonio adopted its first Comprehensive Master Plan in 1933. According to city documents, "the 1933 Master Plan advocated major proposals in six areas: streets; transportation; transit; parks and recreation; zoning; and civic art." But since then, it's been amended, redone, supplemented

A successive Master Plan was developed in 1951 to help the city become eligible for federal urban renewal grants. That plan "included sections on streets, transportation, utilities, flood control and drainage, recreation and parks, schools, slum clearance and urban redevelopment, civic improvement, conservation, civil defense, and capital improvements."

In 1979, the City amended its plan with a new Forward and Basic Plan document, supplementing the existing 1951 Master Plan. That was followed by yet another planning effort for a new 1997 Master Plan Policies document, once again replacing the Forward and Basic Plan of the Master Plan.

RIVARD REPORT

Urban. Independent. All About San Antonio.

In 2010, the plan was again supplemented with a new Comprehensive Master Plan Framework document.

So what we're left with is a lot of plans but nothing to officially tie them together or technically implement them. But now it looks like the City of San Antonio and its citizens are ready to do some housekeeping –together.



District 2 Councilwoman Ivy Taylor

“One of the key things when we’re done with the process is that citizens feel that they own the plan because they’ve been instrumental and it truly reflects a collective vision for the city,” said Taylor. “What’s happened in the past with many of the plans is that they’ve gone on the shelf or they’re easily dismissed if someone with deep pockets comes along.”

While the process is just starting, one suggested approach for segmenting the plan is to divide it not by council districts, but by watershed districts.

Watersheds literally flow across geopolitical boundaries and provide a natural way to look at the city, said Suzanne Scott, executive director of the San Antonio River Authority. “If we can build on the investment we’ve made already along our waterways, then we’re using the natural elements of the land in building a comprehensive plan for the city.”

Irby Hightower, a principal with Alamo Architects and current chair of the San Antonio River Improvements Project, agrees with this approach, citing the opportunities to help connect the city across several boundaries. Hightower was also optimistic that the same amount of citizen engagement seen in Philadelphia could be replicated in San Antonio.

“We have a great resource with (our) people, but we haven’t been able to tie that resource into an action plan,” said Hightower of the pool of citizens that regularly show up to planning meetings. “One of the things Philadelphia has done really well is get that constant movement through the process and take it back to the community to implementation.”



RIVARD REPORT

Urban. Independent. All About San Antonio.

What many saw as a strength of the Philadelphia approach was the Citizens Planning Institute (CPI). Citizens from neighborhood associations, community organizations, and people interested in community planning received training on how the actual Planning Department process works and where to engage along the way. CPI offers a classroom approach with a variety of core and elective topics focused on planning in Philadelphia. Citing a waiting list of applicants, CPI Director Donna Carney said that neighborhoods across the city were represented in the training.

While nothing definitive has emerged from the discussion about Philadelphia's approach, Dr. Francine Romero, associate dean of the UTSA College of Public Policy, would like to see a "citizens academy" in San Antonio to help improve understanding of and engagement in the planning process.

Having this conversation with other city planners across the nation will help find best practices San Antonio might be able to put in place to raise that level of participation.

The presentation and panel discussion is available for viewing courtesy of NowcastSA.

**Parklet on 44th and Spruce in Philadelphia. Courtesy of www.phila2030.org*