

Collaborative Community Planning

Moderator: **Bruce Boncke**, PE, President, Boncke Mueller Eldred Associates, President, New York State Builders Association; Vice President, New York Planning Federation;
Panel Members: **Helen Budrock**, Acting Director, The Catskill Center for Conservation and Development;
Cheryl Doble, Faculty of Landscape Architecture, State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry;
Bob Wieboldt, Executive Director, Long Island Builders Institute

“The state should identify programs that help communities create a comprehensive vision based on contributions of ideas, skills and talents from as many of its members as possible.”

- *Quality Communities Task Force Report*



Moderator

Bruce Boncke, PE

President, Boncke Mueller Eldred Associates;
President, New York State Builders Association;
Vice President, New York Planning Federation

According to Mr. Boncke, collaborative community planning is crucial in moving forward with quality communities. He said, “I’m kind of tired of the court system designing our communities for us, one side or the other. It doesn’t seem like the community really gets engaged and collaboratively does things in the middle.”

Helen Budrock

Acting Director, The Catskill Center for Conservation and Development

Ms. Budrock gave an overview of the Catskill Center and its pilot program, the Community Empowerment Initiative.

According to Ms. Budrock, since 1969, the regionally based nonprofit Catskill Center's mission has been one of fostering both environmental conservation and sustainable economic development. Their four main program areas are: 1) land and natural resources conservation; 2) community planning, to provide technical assistance, information and referrals to the over one hundred communities in their six-county service area; 3) environmental education, which focuses on both educating the public at large and in the local schools; and 4) regional arts and culture, which puts an emphasis on arts as part of community quality of life. She said, "So we like to think that we have a holistic approach to conservation and economic development."

According to Ms. Budrock, they serve a six-county area, which includes all of Delaware, Green, Ostego, Schoharie, Sullivan and

Ulster counties. She said, "It's a really complicated mosaic of both public and private land, similar to the Adirondacks. One of the common features of the Catskills is the Catskill State Park and Forest Preserve, so we do have a complicated mixture of publicly and privately owned lands." She also emphasized that because over 90 percent of New York City's drinking water comes from its six reservoirs in the Catskills, that "recently the whole concept of sustainable economic development and balancing growth and development with conservation of environmental resources [has been] keyed into drinking water quality."

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According to Ms. Budrock, the center's Community Empowerment Initiative illustrates the whole concept of collaborative community planning. She emphasized the need "to get out there at the grassroots level with the people that are living and working in their community every day and engage them in the planning process any way that you possibly can because without that you don't have ownership of the finished product."

Ms. Budrock described the Community Empowerment Initiative as a hands on, bottom up planning process that they have piloted in four communities in the New York City watershed. According to Ms. Budrock, the communities were small and rural, and she said, "with very limited resources and absolutely no access to professional planning services other than through organizations like the Catskill Center that provides them



free as a service.” The initiative, she said, “focuses really on empowering local citizens to, first of all, develop a vision for the future and then get involved hands-on in improving their community and actually moving from planning to implementation in a very short period of time.”

According to Ms. Budrock, they assisted the four communities over a two-year period, using a three or four-month planning process with each community involving four steps, which were:

- 1) Getting organized, contacting key stakeholders and potential leaders and advertising the process to encourage participation. According to Ms. Budrock, one of their goals was to get to the people that traditionally do not get involved. Part of this step included a leadership development training session, as well as sessions on conflict resolution and collaborative problem solving. The types of things these sessions focused on were being a leader in a small rural community, working together as a community, getting beyond conflicts, and the importance of involving the public and community in decision making.
- 2) A downtown walking tour and assessment. According to Ms. Budrock, this step involved bringing in a team of downtown design professionals to conduct a one-day assessment of the downtown business district focused on main street revitalization. The day started off with a facilitated group discussion with local leaders, business owners, and key stakeholders to gather information on issues and concerns. After the walking tour, a report was prepared with renderings and recommendations focusing on participants’ ideas.
- 3) Working with residents to create a vision for the future. Ms. Budrock used a two-part community visioning process which she said, “utilizes focus group exercises to help residents first and foremost come up

with a vision for the future.” According to Ms. Budrock, this involves asking people to “state one thing that they love about living in their community and one thing, if they had the opportunity, if they could wave a magic wand, what would they want to change.” The next step she explained, is breaking people up into “different focus groups around topics like tourism and economic development, community esthetics, housing and social issues, environment and open space.” The role for each of the focus groups, she said, “is for them to come up with an inventory of the local communities assets, their problems and needs within each of those areas.” The next step she said, “is to generate really specific project ideas that key into those local assets.” This is followed by the community residents voting on the projects that will have the greatest impact on the community in the long run.

- 4) Implementation of local projects. According to Ms. Budrock, once the community has a vision and has prioritized projects, the center helps them to implement a few small projects, she said, “to get them motivated and excited about tackling larger things in the future.” To do this they mobilize volunteers who are then trained in identifying funding sources, writing effective grant proposals, preparing work plans and setting goals. In addition, the center provides mini grants of up to \$5,000 for implementation of a few small local projects. Ms. Budrock said, “I think you’d be actually quite surprised of what they were able to do with just a small amount of seed money.”

In summary of the steps, Ms. Budrock said, “The key here was really to give them the information, to give them the tools and to give them the resources that they needed to really effectuate change in their community and give them a little bit of motivation to tackle some larger things in the future.”

Ms. Budrock described several of the projects:

- 1) Village of Andes, Delaware County. According to Ms. Budrock, Andes used their \$5,000 seed money to hire a landscape architect to prepare a street scape design plan for Route 28, to prepare for DOT's scheduled reconstruction of this state highway. Other activities in the town were a community newspaper to focus on the positive aspects of living in Andes, additional hours and programs at their local library, a summer recreation program for village youth at their community school, and a promotional brochure about the community.
- 2) Hamlet of Phoenicia, Ulster County. The projects they undertook were gateway and main street landscaping enhancements, a logo design contest to better market their community, and an interpretive hiking trail from the downtown business district to a scenic overlook.
- 3) Town of Hunter, Ulster County. According to Ms. Budrock, the Town of Hunter worked with their two villages, Tannersville and Hunter, and the hamlet of Haines Falls in this process. The projects they undertook were the installation of decorative sign pole banners along Route 23A as a means to visually link the communities together, expansion of an after-school youth recreation program, a promotional brochure for a pre-existing local bike path that connected the two villages together, and the construction of a community notice board in the heart of the downtown.
- 4) Hamlet of Downsville, Delaware County. According to Ms. Budrock, they are using their seed money to hire a landscape architect and an engineer to help them plan a pedestrian bridge and a nature trail next to a local river to connect their covered bridge park to their town pool and

a site called Firemen's Field. In addition, individuals are putting together a monthly community bulletin, working with students and community groups to do artistic and informational displays in some of the empty store fronts and putting together some entry signage with a business directory at the gateway into town.

According to Ms. Budrock, after completing the four pilot programs, she has learned several things about successful community building and what really makes it work. She emphasized the following:

- importance of widespread participation from all segments of the community;
- focusing on both the process and tangible results;
- considering the linkages to the resources outside the community that can help make the ideas generated a reality;
- starting with simple ideas and build to more complex activities;
- developing a systematic process for gathering information and analyzing issues;
- early involvement and support from existing organizations, and inclusion of as many people as possible;
- making use of available technical assistance; and
- developing the capacity to support the continual emergence of new leaders to sustain the program over the long term.

Cheryl Doble

Faculty of Landscape Architecture,
State University of New York College
of Environmental Science and Forestry

According to Ms. Doble, the Landscape Architecture Department at SUNY ESF has 30 years of experience working with communities to help them conserve environmental and cultural resources, manage change, and to initiate revitalization. Due to increasing requests from communities for assistance and a growing concern for the condition of communities, primarily in upstate central New York, they reorganized the work they were doing into the Council for Community Design Research to be better able to work with communities to design a process that meets their needs.

According to Ms. Doble, one of the things they found to be critical to this process was developing a participatory process to involve community residents. She said the process is “most effective when members of the community can come together around a shared vision. The process needs to be educational in nature because you really need to be able to give people the confidence and the readiness to be able to make informed decisions as they go through this process.” Ms. Doble stressed the importance of the process leading to some “tangible action.” She said, “if you’re going to

involve the community, you need to provide the possibility of genuine impact. People need to feel that they’re coming and that they’re actually going to have a role to play and that it’s going to lead to something.” She pointed to the challenge of working in communities where this has not happened, therefore making restarting the effort difficult.

Ms. Doble emphasized the need to get as much diverse participation in the community as possible and to the importance of communication between the facilitators, the consultants, and community residents. She pointed to the use of graphics, models, drawings, and images as a way to make sure that everyone has the same visual ideas in mind.

Ms. Doble reviewed some of the steps to getting started in a successful community process:

- 1) **Community Participation.** According to Ms. Doble, every community will be different in terms of the resources available, the time people are willing to give, and the complexity of past history with public participation.
- 2) **Local Leadership.** According to Ms. Doble, “As we come in as a group that’s providing assistance and facilitation, we need to depend on the local leadership being in the community. We can’t bring the community to the table and we need to know that there is someone in the community prepared, that can reach out, that knows how to get people together.”
- 3) **Publicizing the Process.** According to Ms. Doble, it’s a long term process, but the types of things they do are fliers, working in schools, newspaper articles, promotions on table maps and on place settings in diners.
- 4) **Assigning Tasks.** According to Ms. Doble, “Getting the cross-section of the community is really important and helping those



“Kids tell incredible stories of the community.”

people realize that when they come, they're not just to be sitting around on the other side of the table, but they're actually going to roll up their sleeves and start to do some work, and I think we feel it's very important to give them real tasks."

- 5) **Working with Kids.** According to Ms. Doble, they have developed a series of activities to involve kids in the process as an important part of their communities, and have also found it's a great way to involve parents in the process.

As part of the process they conduct a series of workshops. The first series is geared around helping people to get to know their community again, which Ms. Doble said, "is very helpful to us from outside the community, but it's also incredibly valuable to the people that live in the community." In addition, because a lot of the communities they work in are depressed in many ways, she said, they "help them realize what is good and what is valuable and help them understand what they value and they in turn help us understand this." According to Ms. Doble, they always find at the end of this process that almost every one of the issues that the community brings up can be turned into an opportunity.

As part of this first series of workshops they will conduct numerous activities, such as:

- 1) **Walking Tour.** They will ask people to bring along old photographs of what the community used to look like and talk about the things they like, the things they remember, the things they miss, and the things that they hope for the future.
- 2) **Mapping.** They ask participants to map areas in the community they want to protect, and to map if a guest came to your town, how they would tour them through the town to show them the most valued aspects of the community.
- 3) **Time Line and Story Telling.** They ask

Linda C. Coleman



participants to put together a time line of the community and tell stories. She said, "Kids tell incredible stories of the community, and often more so than adults, can be encouraged to illustrate these stories as well, and all of these are a bit about celebrating the community, getting to know and think about who we are and what we can be."

- 4) **Photo Survey.** They ask community members to photograph images that address specific issues. According to Ms. Doble, they encourage people not only to take a photo of, for example, the image that best represents their community, but to explain why they took a particular image.
- 5) **Historical Image Comparison.** Another thing they have found to be helpful in understanding the community is looking to the history of the community by getting people to compare photos of the same location at different points in time to talk about what's changed, why it is changed and which did they like better. According to Ms. Doble, instead of using pictures of changes that other communities have made, this allows the community to "look to what they were like at the turn of the century" so that "they realize that they can find their way back."

At the end of each of these sessions, Ms.

Doble, said that they summarize the work, and then put them in public places so that, she said, “people can see what others in the community thought were important.”

After all these activities, Ms. Doble said that they will then work to create a vision for the future, usually five to ten years out. This involves written descriptions, which are then broken down into a series of actions. These actions, according to Ms. Doble, will often be depicted visually, such as a community drawing changes on facade pictures for a downtown revitalization effort, or a community placing activities on an aerial photograph of a potential nature area. She said that in many cases it's a fairly simple change that people will draw in like removing a guardrail, cleaning up an area, or widening or putting in a sidewalk, but, “it can make a very big difference.”

In addition to photographs, Ms. Doble said that they also use “models a lot because one of the things I think is really important is for people to be able to visualize in their head what these changes mean and with models you can begin to move things around. You can look at alternatives.” Once a community has worked with the models and the various alternatives, they can also create drawings that can be used for funding proposals.

Another key in the process that Ms. Doble pointed to is shifting from being the primary facilitators at the beginning of the process to developing members of the community who by the end are leading the groups, making the presentations and forwarding the project.

In terms of implementation, Ms. Doble emphasized that not all of the actions need to lead to physical change in the communities. Examples of alternative actions that have come out of these processes include:

- 1) The community comes together to establish a nonprofit organization that can begin to carry identified projects forward.

- 2) The community creates a coffee house, a community center or a local newsletter.
- 3) A community agrees to divide a project design for a main street into eight or nine components and finds a different community organization in the village to take on each of the projects.
- 4) Instead of producing a proposal, producing a “How To Build It” book. Ms. Doble said, “so that the Highway Department or local clever individuals can actually go out and build the projects... and it can lead to physical change that they actually recognize without waiting for large resources and funding to help them.”
- 5) Developing materials to support funding grants or to raise political support.

She concluded by saying, “I think one of the things that is truly enjoyable about this work is the process, the people that you meet, at least for me. It's really wonderful going into these communities and seeing the energy that comes from this process, the excitement that comes from it, and I think it's a lot about dialog and that's what I like about this. It's sharing ideas, it's listening to one another, it's not so much about debate, but it's finding the areas where we hold things in common and then learning as a community to move forward on those pieces to make change.”

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Bob Wieboldt
Executive Director,
Long Island Builders Institute

According to Mr. Wieboldt, while a participatory planning process to accomplish things like widening a main street can be extremely exciting, he said, “The question is, when we talk about the bigger picture, the picture of suburban sprawl and finding alternatives to it, of changing a course of development patterns that has gone on for 30 years and making an end to it in specific places, be it a hamlet or a strip or an urban center, that becomes one that we have to get into other questions. Questions of politics and policy and how is it done, and when I look at collaborative planning, it is not a cute nice effort for neighbors and friends to get together and exchange ideas, it’s more of a process of interest groups getting together and to iron out and achieve a common vision for a community, but it’s one that cannot end when the process itself ends, and I think this is my great fear.”



According to Mr. Wieboldt, he has been involved in many projects over the years, and too often, they end up as a “pretty report on a book shelf” or in “some tree planting or a little widening or a pedestrian walkway, but not a revitalized main street.” The key to success he emphasized is creating funding sources and community participation. He pointed to the success of the Long Island Pine Barrens, where the development and environmental community intensely debated the future of 100,000 acres. According to Mr. Wieboldt, by bringing together all the significant interest groups to hammer out a deal, they were then able to

approach the politicians to get the necessary funding, changes in law, and planning to implement the deal.

He emphasized the need to guarantee that same sort of end product as key to getting stakeholders together on smart growth issues. According to Mr. Wieboldt, what’s been missing so far in the smart growth debate is the pre-commitment that “if we can achieve a consensus between all of the major players in a particular area with a lot of popular support, that it will be acted on it in a short and efficient period of time.”

The types of interest groups he suggested need to be at the table in a particular area are business, real estate, local community, neighborhood, church, environmental, and affordable housing. He suggested the idea of a 12-person limit. In bringing together all of the various interest groups, Mr. Wieboldt emphasized that government has to commit to stand back and let the community and stakeholder groups come up with a consen-

sus vision and then enact it. He said, “that’s the key element to collaborative planning, a commitment on the part of the government officials that they will participate, assist, technical resources and the like, help you hire the right consultants and the right mediators and all that sort of thing, but basically, stay out of it. Don’t come in with a pre-designed vision.” He further said, “If government does not agree to act, all the emotion is wasted.”

Once this commitment by the government is made, and the stakeholder groups are brought together, Mr. Wieboldt emphasized the need for a structured process. He said, “A

process that should start with a basic training session on how are we going to proceed, how are we going to get there, [and] 'getting to yes' kind of negotiation training." He further said, "everybody should have the same general training when they get into the room, and then they should work toward establishing some kind of a truth." He emphasized that "something that results in a report, one newspaper story, their two seconds on a TV, and nothing ever again" is not enough, because then "those people do not come back to the table." He said, "Something has to happen with what you do."

Mr. Wieboldt explained why developers are talking about smart growth and pushing community and collaborative planning. He pointed to the growth pressures on Long Island and the lack of affordable housing. He said, "We know that we're going to have to do a thing where we're going to have to use less land, we're going to have to design differently, we're going to have to seek higher densities in order to do that, and suburban development, as we all know, has been based on the issue that density is bad. We're going to have to seek mixed-use development and suburban development patterns and starting with Levittown out, all the way into Suffolk County, from 70 to 80 miles has been based on separation of uses. A mind set that exists in our government officials, and most homeowners whose chief investment is tied up in a house on a lot with a large back yard. Further away from New York, the bigger the lots, the bigger the back yards, the more land we've used and the more highways we've created. You know the litany, we've lost our town centers. We identify ourselves when the franchises begin to repeat." He stressed that changing this pattern of growth will not be easy and will require folks to "come to government and convince them

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that something ought to be tried."

In pursuing smart growth he said, "We have a goose and a gander problem with smart growth and with community collaborative planning." He gave several examples such as the public's support for the ideas of public transportation, compact and clustered housing and brownfield redevelopment, but their unwillingness to use it or live there. He said, "We have studies that show that almost two-thirds of most suburban folks would rather travel an hour and a half a day, 45 minutes additional both ways, than live in an attached house. So there's a tremendous market demand."

He pointed to collaborative planning as the way to "break the mold." He said that government was not going to make the necessary changes, but that it has to "come from the people." He said, "It has to come from real estate interest, planning interest, business interest, community and neighborhood interest and just say, look, let's do it some other way, let's try something else."

In order for builders to be successful in the future he said, "we're going to have to preserve more open space than we've ever wanted to preserve, we're going to have to stop building look alike housing." However, he said, "Right now we are in a climate of hostility to any kind of development, but I say again, development happens." He further said, "This rising height of hostility can be met by principle negotiation in a collaborative planning setting." He added, "This is a society that grows, it has human needs. Needs to be sheltered, needs for many, many things. Even needs for more hamburgers. It's not a question of whether, it's a question of how. How will it look, how will it fit in, and how will it accept and create a sense of place for all of us that we like. Now the time to deal with that is not

when that development is knocking on your door and somebody is walking in with a plan for 199 houses or another strip mall, it's a little late. It's a time to say, these are areas of our community that we think could be different. We could maybe break this 20-mile suburban strip up into little sections that we can do something with. How do we do that? Those are things that require the idea of collaboration between everybody who is going to have a say in that."

Mr. Wieblodt reemphasized that the process needs to guarantee an end product and suggested visioning as a way to understand what the "community really thinks and wants" and to convince a developer to do something he perhaps has not done before. In terms of working with developers, he said, "I think most builders will fight when what you're proposing for their land makes no economic sense. They'll fight less and less as it gets borderline. They'll fight more and more when it comes to a situation where they simply can't make money or get their investment out. The other side of the coin is that when you can

make money and what you're saying makes some sense to them, you're going to have a compromise that can work."

He stressed the need to use visuals, however, he pointed to the lack of good smart growth examples to use on Long Island. He concluded by saying, "So it's hard to say, you know, if you're going to invest \$400,000 and buy a home, you'd like to see what it looks like. So it's real easy for a guy to take you down the street to another gated subdivision and say, look, it's going to be sort of like that, but would you like to come with me to Maryland and see what this can look like here in your town? Not so easy. So I mean, I'm fighting very hard to get a few of these in Long Island, and to get the process underway, and I think there's a lot of common ground here, but remember, keep in mind that government must agree to deal with what you've done and you've got to get that deal up front. If you don't have that, and a lot of time, your consultants are going to make out, you're not."