

The building of a comprehensive plan

By Tom Lindfors, March 11, 2018



Quality of Life Committee Chair Katie Wend, shared her committee's ideas for future parks and trails with a curious resident at an open house, Wednesday, Feb. 28 at Champs Sports Bar & Grill. Tom Lindfors / RiverTown Multimedia

Seven months ago, a room full of curious New Richmond residents volunteered for what would turn out to be a very challenging, time consuming, and ultimately, rewarding adventure planning the next 10-15 years of the city's future.

In November 2016, the city, under the direction of Community Development Director Beth Thompson, began a mandatory review of its comprehensive plan. Dissatisfied with how that review was progressing, the city ended its contract with its consultant and began the process anew some eight months later embracing a completely different process guided by consultant Todd Streeter of Community Collaboration and assisted by Jeff McMenimen of Hoisington Koegler Group Inc. (HKGI).

Thompson's vision for the reboot was a process that would be community driven.

"I researched five to 10 other communities. I researched their process, how they went about it. I researched the plans themselves, read through them to see what I was getting into. What I came up with is, I really wanted it to be community driven. What happened in the end was, it was community lead. So there was a little different process that happened and it happened when Todd came in," said Thompson.

Streeter's unconventional approach required citizen volunteers to do the actual planning as opposed to paid professional planners. It also required the city to relinquish control of the process and trust its community members.

"To step back and let the citizens and community drive the process is not necessarily something cities do very often. It's kind of like doing a dance. People can love to dance but if you don't know what that dance is, you have to learn it and it's always awkward to learn a dance if you've not done it. When the committee members and the city use this approach, they have to learn a different dance. So both the community committee and the city were learning this dance for the first time," said Streeter.

Despite a less than "comprehensive" recruitment effort, Thompson was able to assemble a fairly diverse group of citizen volunteers that included some holdovers from the initial group combined with a number of new faces numbering roughly 25 in all.

"I wanted to make sure that I was getting people who are in the community. They either work in the community, play in the community or they have homes in the community and not people who are on our council or any of our governing boards," said Thompson.

As far as traditionally underrepresented groups in the community, Thompson relied on referrals.

"I took references from other people, people I knew, people from outside the city, people who worked in town and it just wasn't given to me. I tried to get a wide range of people, an eclectic mix," said Thompson.

Streeter's process called for volunteers to divide into five subcommittees: Community Connectivity (transportation), Creating Community (zoning), Quality of Life (parks and trails), Community Pride (infrastructure and facilities), Economic Prosperity

(economic development / downtown revitalization), and Vision and Guiding Principles.

While the volunteers did the research guided by Streeter, HKGI was available to answer questions and formally translate the volunteers ideas into a finished document along with supporting materials including maps and graphs.

All of the volunteer planners began the process by reviewing an 80-page document created during the failed first attempt. The document described the existing conditions.

The document by itself was not enough to familiarize volunteers with all that they needed to know to actually understand the planning process, so city staff helped fill-in the gaps and answer questions.

"We needed people who actually did this in their day-to-day lives to come in and explain, 'Here's the difference between a city and a town, here are the borders, here's what's extra territorial. When New Richmond hits a certain population, the city will control this. Here's why that's important. Here's what we need you all to start thinking about,'" explained Blair Williams, member of the Creating Community Committee.

Both Thompson and Streeter informed the volunteers that this process would require learning terminology and concepts integral to comprehensive planning, lots of learning, and it would require a considerable time commitment. Subcommittees were required to meet independently outside of the every-other-week communal meetings where groups would get together to report their progress and share insights and ideas cultivated during the process.

Bottom line, it was a lot of work.

"None of these volunteers have been in this position to learn about comp plans and community and transportation. This was all foreign to them. So it was going to take three or four meetings for everyone to get acclimated to what the material was. Then they started to find their voice within their subcommittees as to really what starts to be important," said Streeter.

To enable the process to progress with equanimity and fairness, Streeter insisted on a few simple rules.

"We all know nothing. We're all learning this together from day 1, so no question is dumb and all ideas have merit and value," said Streeter.

Katie Wendt, Chair of the Quality of Life Committee which focused on parks and trails, explained what it felt like once you understood what you had said "yes" to and how her committee members acclimated to the task at hand.

"You can't even comprehend how to start something like this. Then you go through a couple meetings. Todd's explaining it and helping us see that our opinions mattered. You begin to appreciate how you go about your day so often not really paying attention to how the city works, or what works and what doesn't. It took a few weeks and few of these meetings to all of a sudden have your eyes opened. We began driving around, asking questions and starting to think in a different way. That inspired our voices, created the perspectives, the awareness of things around us. Then people started to get more interested, more engaged. They started to more clearly communicate their ideas and concerns. It was an awakening process that had to happen. We started with the outside of a puzzle, a framework. None of us knew how any of this was going to look seven months later, but we knew what we liked or didn't like and what we have experienced and that's what we started with," explained Wendt.

Admittedly Wendt's committee was one of the more popular committees. Volunteer Blair Williams found himself on the most challenging committee, Creating Community which focused on zoning, what New Richmond will physically look like in the next 10-20 years. For William's committee, it came down to choosing one approach over another.

"We can attract big businesses and locate them on the periphery, which is what a lot of communities are doing because there's all that farmland, all that space, but that's going to stop growth. Once you build that land up, the city can't grow any more, it's blocked in. Or, we can think about in-fill, which is the concept of growing where you are planted. Looking around we saw there are all of these spaces that are undeveloped and underdeveloped right within the city limits. Part of downtown is ripe for redevelopment. If we want to revitalize downtown, we need to grow where we're planted. We could have a giant cloud data storage plant right next to the land fill in theory. We rejected that approach. When New Richmond reaches 10,000 people, our zone of control extends farther. It won't just be affecting the people of New Richmond, it's affecting the people of Stanton, Erin Prairie, Boardman, all these other towns. Ultimately, we realized we can have the best of both worlds. We can revitalize

New Richmond by focusing on that in-fill development, grow where you are planted, redevelop what we already have, while wisely planning for the future. Once we understood that, that's when we really started getting excited as a committee," explained Williams.

It was the responsibility of the committees to fully ferret out specific projects in detail, figure out who would benefit, who would be interested, and who might provide funding, in order to help the executive committee sell their ideas later.

Seven months of self-directed, inspired research and problem solving resulted in portfolios of detailed projects which the members of each subcommittee presented to the public at an open house Wednesday, Feb. 28, at Champ's Sports Bar & Grill.

For more than two hours, waves of New Richmond residents filed through Champs, elbow to elbow, taking in all the ideas generated by the citizen planners, asking questions and making suggestions to receptive committee members. Judging from the numbers, the hard work paid off in a big way. People left the presentation inspired and excited.

What lies ahead may prove to be an even bigger challenge and one that will either reward all the hard work it has taken to get to this point or disappoint the hard working citizen planners and all the residents they have inspired. Implementing the many projects constituting the community action plan will be the responsibility of the, now forming, executive committee.

"We want this to be an active plan. That's why we structured it the way we did. We started with the large committee then broke into the sub committees. They identified all these opportunities. Next we will have an executive committee made up of some of the same people and other people from the community who didn't have the time to devote to the earlier process, but who have skills, talents, resources, and assets that can now be injected into the process. This smaller executive committee will be taking all of these project portfolios, all the work the group has done, and start to figure out how to make this all happen. They will go through a process which will strategically prioritize projects for the short term, mid term and long term," explained Streeter.

Thompson gets a third chance to constitute another committee, this time to implement the community action plan.

"We want to add somebody from the foundation and we want to grab a couple community members that can help us move these things forward. They'll be responsible for reviewing the projects and determining what's feasible for this year and then moving them through the process with the appropriate agency whether that's the Park Board, Economic Development Committee, Utility Commission or another department. But the reality for these programs is, the City Council has the final vote," said Thompson.

A final draft of the comprehensive plan, including the community action plan as an addendum, is due for review by the City Council in mid March.

It seems certain that everyone who has been involved in this process to date would agree on one thing in particular.

"The greatest asset in your community is the community itself. If cities don't figure out ways to let that flourish and grow and help them do their jobs, then they are making life a lot more difficult. This process gives the city the ability to have a working relationship with community members directly that has structure, substance and roots," said Streeter.