

NCI steps up training for sponsors of charrettes

Governments and community organizations see charrettes as a way to generate consensus-backed plans.

Public agencies and community groups are becoming increasingly eager to use charrettes to plan new developments or to guide the redevelopment of areas in need of a makeover. And the National Charrette Institute (NCI) in Portland, Oregon, is responding by offering a growing array of training activities, including a 2.5-day Charrette Planner Certification program.

NCI Executive Director Bill Lennertz conducted two days of training in March for about 20 members of the staff of Baltimore County government, which exercises jurisdiction over a largely suburban area surrounding the City of Baltimore. Lennertz followed those sessions with a half-day program on charrettes for about 100 members of the public.

Baltimore County Executive James T. Smith Jr. "is interested in using charrettes as a tool for getting consensus in the older suburbs," says Jackie MacMillan, a senior planner for the 778,000-population county. The goal, she explains, is to use charrettes to produce redevelopment plans for places that need them, such as decaying industrial or commercial areas.

Each charrette would involve three entities: the county, the public, and a developer. If the Council approves Smith's proposal, perhaps this fall, most existing zoning regulations would be waived in the areas covered by the charrettes. Essentially, the county wants to find out whether charrettes — interactive public work sessions lasting several days — are an instrument the government should use for making decisions about development. "The county executive talks about trying to get good-quality projects in older communities," MacMillan notes. "I don't believe he ever uses the term 'new urbanist,' but the goals are very similar to those of New Urbanism," including a walkable, pedestrian-friendly environment, an interconnected street network, a mix of uses, high-quality architecture, transportation choices, and attractive public spaces in prominent locations. In the past two years, the county took its first steps in the direction of charrettes by having Urban Design Action Teams run planning workshops for two areas: a strip commercial corridor in Randallstown, where nearby residents wanted more of a sense of place, and a declining industrial area in Dundalk.

Lennertz is an old hand at charrettes, having organized many of them for Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. before he and Steve Coyle founded the Portland architecture and town planning firm Lennertz & Coyle (now called LCA). Because of the growing need for charrette training and research, Lennertz and Coyle, with LCA business manager Aarin Lutzenhiser, organized the nonprofit National Charrette Institute in the fall of 2001. This April Lennertz sold his interest in LCA to Coyle and focused his attention on NCI.

MINIMUM LENGTH FOR CHARRETTE

"A lot of charrettes are being done the wrong way," Lennertz says. "People use the term 'charrette' for a session

that lasts from two hours, to one day, two days, or two weeks." He believes a charrette should run from four to seven days. "I only recommend four days with a really easy slam-dunk project," he observes. "The more complex a project, the longer time you need."

The goal of the 2.5-day Charrette Planner Certification course "is to give theory, skills, strategies, and techniques to the people who are out there processing these projects," says Lennertz. Those who complete the program receive a certificate signifying that they "went through a course that tells you how to *plan* a charrette," Lennertz says. Participants are not certified as able to *run* a charrette, he notes. "A lot of the people who take the course are public planners, who are taking it to be good consumers," Lennertz explains. "They need to know how to hire firms that use the charrette process." In July, NCI conducted a certification program in Prince George's County, Maryland, under the auspices of the Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission.

Lennertz views charrettes as an element in "dynamic planning," a form of planning that includes collaborative work with "everybody who is involved in getting a project built and sold."

NCI expects to conduct seven or eight Charrette Planner Certification programs a year, with about 35 participants in each one. The fee is \$665 per person. The next program will be Nov. 17-19 in Oakland, Calif. NCI also offers other programs, including training as public meeting facilitators. For more information, visit www.charretteinstitute.org. ♦