

What's Next Alexandria
Community Dialogue, January 29, 2013
Meeting Evaluations

1. What are your concerns?

- Housing/affordable.
- I am concerned that these meetings are academic, and do not address real work the City is doing. A “hands-on” problem for the attendees to work on solutions while exploring the dynamics of community dialog would provide a better experience.
- The question of who is missing or not represented in the room – and why? What new modes of outreach can we pursue?
- Facilitator was excellent. Not enough time – a good concern.
- An informed leadership and citizenry who make decisions.
- Need to reach groups that are not traditional participants in this type of meeting.
- Laborious process that is over quick made as thoughtful and expedient as possible.
- I think too many Alexandrians have felt left out of decisions shaping their city.
- Good efforts.
- The extent to which ‘citizen participation’ is purely window dressing.
- That none of this will make a difference with city staff.
- That we stay focused and don’t dwell on past frustrations.
- The discussion is too abstract. A case study of a controversial city event would be good.
- A city that involves every citizen; a government that respects and supports its citizenry; a city that is desirable.
- I feel good about the process this evening and thought we did well as a group to come to consensus, listen to one another, share and be supportive. Tonight was more focused, but also our second one.
- To some degree feels like reinventing the wheel. Alexandria already has many mechanisms and processes in place that promote civic engagement, e.g. commissions, board, committees, kinds of changes needed to truly expand public engagement take a moral commitment that may not be an outcome of a process like this.
- Lack of diversity.
- That we are really not coming to grips with our real problem.
- How do we know we’ve heard from a sufficient sample of Alexandria’s residents, not just the usual suspects?
- One member of the table commented that looking at the people in the room it looked like every other city meeting. If, somehow, more people that don’t normally engage with the city could come, that would be useful.
- Informing public about project scheduled for final decisions so that public has ample time to be heard and to have influence on planning process.
- I think the process is going well. It’s good that the process has been so transparent. I appreciate all the effort.
- Being informed during the decision-making process, not after the fact; opportunities for input and feedback should be frequent enough to consider my schedule and/or utilize technology virtual tables, etc. to facilitate my involvement.
- Framework was a little ??

- Much of these exercises appeared 'skewed' to theoretical thinking; include more practical lines of thinking.
- Just that we keep to evening agenda time framework.
- Ability to consolidate ideas – material and immaterial – will be extremely difficult.
- Prioritizing and weighting all the input.
- Not enough time for Exercise #1.
- Half the city is still missing. Civic Associations do not cover all citizens.
- I am not concerned myself, but I am concerned that Alexandria citizens feel excluded.
- That the process we are going through won't really change anything.
- Financial solvency of the city.
- The city needs to use outside of the box methods to communicate with its citizens. Civic associations and enews are very effective, but not the only communication methods looking at the dynamics in demographics at the first and second discussion. It is not reflective of our community.
- That this is all 'nice' talk, and nothing will come of it. I don't trust my city council.
- Common sense collaboration.
- This work is taking serious and feedback will be use.
- Getting more people involved (who aren't already).
- To improve the efficacy of citizen participation in the city planning. To create more trust of the staff and council.
- I'm mainly concerned that planners come up with plans and present them as 'done deals.'
- My concern is that participants have trouble understanding how the activities and processes work. Some may not feel satisfied or it may not feel 'real' enough for them.
- How to do better job as city staff.
- That there are individuals who can undermine this process.
- That the planning for development is simply a sham. That the planners make the important decisions before they ever hold a public meeting.
- That my very thoughtful, i.e., mental investment, in submitting another principle was never acknowledged or explained how it was integrated into the 8 principles. This is an excellent example of a process failure – learning an individual (there were 30) feel the futility of their participation – but I will not give up till I see improvement.
- That all citizens are able to receive information about city projects via media, email, posted notices, school backpacks.
- It seems that knowledge of city regulations and statutes play a large role in decision making and community members are not generally aware of them which is a disadvantage.
- Not sure where this is headed, but I trust you.
- Nothing.
- That the city is engaging in a closed loop system that spends too much time limiting outside influence/informative/science from the discussion. How the civility that used to prevail has been replaced with shunning of people who do not buy into the narrative the city espouses.
- We as a city are not reaching the people. We have to bring the meetings to the community.

2. Do you have suggestions for improvements?

- More information in the community in the languages we speak.
- West end venue for meeting?
- It appears the small group approach does not allow every participant the same experience, and allows too much divergence. It is too confusing for different groups taking different paths and finding different alternatives without the benefit of hearing all the alternatives provided by the group as a whole. The final solution turns out to be something no one recognizes, and many people can feel left out in the end even though their participation in the small group was a positive experience.
- Not really.
- Problem needs to be broken down into components – there is too much to discuss in part 2.
- Too abstract – make more realistic.
- Dialogue, education, input; whatever the decision in a particular case, ensure that citizens and stakeholders understand that their perspectives have been heard and considered.
- Way too little time for part 1 and feedback. Way too much time for part 2.
- The need for a more structure approach to citizen participation – look at Arlington, look at best practices.
- Take concerns seriously and acknowledge there are problems.
- Strong facilitation is key.
- No.
- The less read from the podium the better. The engagement is where it's at – 2-way and multiple interactions.
- Maybe more emphasis on values along with principles of engagement. Disability community didn't seem to be here, but they may well be. Perhaps participants could be informed re: who is participating in the discussion. There was some representation of Latino community.
- Provide a bus to pick up these folks who don't usually attend.
- Need to be more realistic.
- Lots of them, including deliberative polling of a random sample of Alexandria residents on major issues or priority setting.
- Staff/volunteers have done a great job with short amount of time involved!
- Have a rule that any document relevant to a project be issued and made available well before a public hearing is held on a decision or a project is made. There have been occasions that a new relevant document has not been made public until the day before a hearing was 100 pages!
- It might be helpful during a future meeting to ask participants to take the dialogue out to their communities (outreach led by participants) with consistent process and goals.
- Good process. I like the virtual table! Maybe re-balance the time to give more to principle development.
- No.
- Encourage citizens to participate, regardless of previous events.
- You did well. Thanks.
- Explain better up front how results will be used in each succeeding steps.
- Emphasize education of current city processes.
- We have a fine staff, but the staff ?? a large percentage of each group meeting for listening.
- No.

- Would it be possible to educate our citizens in the financial process (e.g., setting the tax rate, etc.)?
- Reach out and engagement hold meetings in neighborhoods that we are not reaching.
- Imaginative, informative, monthly internet updates.
- We had both a staff and volunteer facilitator. That was useful.
- Advertise it in major languages used in our city.
- None.
- No Alexandria newspaper that is widely used. Please put notices in local section of Washington Post on Thursdays.
- If different tables have different focuses, it should be displayed somehow so that people can more easily choose a table.
- Better time allocation.
- Keep trying to engage diverse participants representing different neighborhoods.
- Our next meeting should be a town hall style meeting.
- See #1 (That my very thoughtful, i.e., mental investment, in submitting another principle was never acknowledged or explained how it was integrated into the 8 principles. This is an excellent example of a process failure – learning an individual (there were 30) feel the futility of their participation – but I will not give up till I see improvement.)
- Better time management to allow for more whole group discussion.
- Not at this time.
- Respecting citizens instead of literally telling them to shut up. Try to create an open loop system that is accepting of outside input. Staff takes lead from council which makes engagement with public frustrating and superfluous; shorter, productive and far fewer meetings.
- Bring meetings to the community, revolving city council meetings, not just at city hall.

3. How would you explain in 2 sentences what we have accomplished at this meeting?

- I am happy with the progress the City staff is making toward “livestream” and chat participation. Kudos, Justin! This is a tremendous tool, and can fulfill the needs of many persons with disabilities like me. I have confidence you are going to work out all the bugs.
- Work more for our community. Be more engaged with community/city issues.
- I wouldn’t ... yet.
- Bonding. Building consensus. Hopefully will encourage political leaders to be courageous.
- Good ideas on how this process should work.
- Helped people learn to talk to each other civilly.
- Able to complete tasks assigned.
- We established both the need for greater citizen involvement and for transparency in the decision-making process.
- Not sure.
- The discussion at my table was interesting. We won’t know what was accomplished until the completion of the process.
- Trying to engage citizens is good. Let’s see results.
- We refined our ideas and clarified our thinking on several issues. We attempted to take our hopes and frustrations with process and our love of our city, and tried to formulate a better way forward.

- Food for thought.
- Great participation.
- Opened a dialogue with a diverse group of committed citizens. Excellent collaboration.
- There was a good faith effort and lots of energy and engagement at our table. [Redacted] and [redacted] were fabulous facilitators!
- At our table we made some new acquaintances that were enjoyable and discussed ideas for expanding engagement of language minority families.
- We've taken the next step. We've made earnest progress.
- Good progress on principles but not much on Question #2.
- More ideas documented to move toward a more democratic Alexandria.
- Provide input and ideas in how to tackle city processes. Learned what others felt was important to the public process.
- We came up with several good suggestions for information the public about proposals and getting public comment (citizen feedback) in a timely manner.
- We developed principles for public engagement and a framework for civic engagement.
- Bundle thoughts and ideas from previous events into a concept for operation principles. Take a concrete example where civic engagement is low (or could be improved) and discuss how to operationalize and principles.
- Got some ideas to improve public input and engagement.
- Well organized yet not as well attended.
- Moved the process one step forward.
- We combined our thoughts about the principle successfully.
- Achieved table consensus. Great fusion of ideas.
- Better understand where the disconnects are.
- Great discussion among thoughtful people.
- We have written descriptions of what we want to accomplish with the basic principles. We had a worthwhile discussion of civility.
- Working together as a team in a civilized manner provides results.
- Community dialogue, hearing different perspectives; coming up with new ideas and propose to city leaders, planners and policy makers.
- Nothing.
- Synthesize.
- Be able to hear and know more about this process.
- We defined the principles of civic engagement and brainstormed a civic engagement framework.
- Helped refine the flow of information gathering for city planning.
- You've given some residents a say in future planning, given us an opportunity to meet other concerned citizens and learn about city processes.
- Clearer idea of how complex the problem is.
- We shared our viewpoints and, with the assistance of the facilitator, were able to agree on many ideas. We crafted a principle!
- Our table came up with some good suggestions, but will remain to be seen if any of them are acted upon. We discussed 'Transparency.'
- Networking – I met 2 persons with whom I exchanged cards – so that we may continue to collaborate on other issues – and potentially this one.
- Initiated process for improving communication within all city groups.

- Participants have gotten better informed. Participants are more aware of processes for civic engagement and the responsibilities for involvement.
- Identified/refined principles. Engaged citizens in very useful discussions.
- Discussing how to implement an uncontroversial element like a park does not convey problem this effort is trying to deal with.
- Simplified what it is we need to do to improve community involvement. I also met new neighbors that I never knew I had.

4. Please list one idea that occurred to you as a result of the exercises and presentation.

- One idea: Get rid of the small groups, and use facilitators (Planning staff) who have the talent to lead a large group.
- There are problems as community engagement that keep our community not get involve.
- Process and engagement are important.
- Let our elected officials lead.
- Can't think of something that hasn't already come up.
- Starting with the community – asking what they want – using technical people to explain what is practical and what isn't and why. Explaining decisions in order to achieve maximum buy-in.
- Education is critical, along with open participation. We need to act to improve our planning process now.
- City should provide developer with a 'wish list' so they know what to offer in return for development.
- Just the idea of keeping the processes as simple and clear as possible. And having clear communication.
- New immigration policies may make it easier for some of our immigrant families to become civically engaged.
- We need to find ways that will keep those under ???. Please provide the agenda and the exercises beforehand that we will do at the actual meeting to save time and make us more thoughtful in our discussions.
- Training for both staff and some citizens in the New England Town Meeting style of government.
- That participation should/could be broadened.
- See my comment under #2 above (Have a rule that any document relevant to a project be issued and made available well before a public hearing is held or a decision on a project is made. There have been occasions that a new relevant document has not been made public until the day before a hearing – one was 100 pages!).
- City staff (at table) tend to dominate discussion and have too much input in process.
- I just appreciated all the contributions made by our group.
- How can virtual table idea be expanded to other areas of government processes in a way that is not just accessible, but usable, by John/Jane Q Public. Let's move the bar/standard from accessible info to usable info.
- At least 50% of city methods should be public input.
- That writing of assignments be made on a computer (typed) – so it would be clear and understandable. But not very realistic idea!
- City processes need to be simplified, better codified and made transparent!
- People need to be educated about what is actually going on.

- Increased use of the internet is an option.
- We don't have the 'end-game' identified.
- The difficulty of reaching out to 'everyone.'
- We need to publicize the meeting in different languages.
- Need to get all constituents involved at the outset.
- I need to read the Alexandria papers.
- No clickers that are tied to a particular person's voting.
- There needs to be a more well-defined relationship or balance between citizens and city staff. For example, many people only feel satisfied in a process when they get their way. Why does the city hire educated, trained and experienced city staff if they are not trusted to make decisions? Compromise is a responsibility of citizens that staff can help them reach.
- Importance of face-to-face assessments.
- Need for Title VI Compliance (fairness and accessibility).
- Across the city from east to west the issues are very different.
- I may apply for the Citizen Academy.
- City council members, board members and city commissions would benefit from participating in the Citizens Academy.
- Trust and openness is at core of problem. Citizens and city alike would be less like to be more open and less stressed and thereby, hopefully, less belligerent and more respectful.
- The importance of having engagement in a variety of languages to gain diverse input.