Tanilba Bay Planning Workshop

The Benefits of Community Participation in Achieving a Better Urban Outcome

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INTRODUCTION

Urban Design Workshops or Charettes, although not new in their thinking or use, have been rarely trialed or road tested by many communities or developers outside of those associated with large high profile projects in Sydney. However, the new roles for developers and communities prescribed by the workshop or charette process is quickly being adopted, embraced and moulded by both parties to create a new and unique method of reaching common, desirable, and achievable development goals. The recent Urban Design Workshop held at Tanilba Bay is the focus of discussion for this paper. While the town planning, development, community and economic issues surrounding and resulting from the workshop are varied, complex and diverse, this paper will limit its discussion to that of the relationship between community and developer as it evolved through the workshop process. This paper attempts to illustrate how an urban design workshop operates, highlighting some of the pitfalls, and just what does happen when 'the developer comes to town'. It will also demonstrate the positive and fruitful results that can be achieved by careful facilitation, responsive designing, communication and teamwork.

BACKGROUND and PRINCIPLES

Community workshops and public participation are an integral part of the planning process. In built into the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 (New South Wales) are provisions to provide for input by the local community into the planning and decision making process via communication of intended development and reasonable rights of objection. This process has its limitations and the arguments for and against greater community participation is much debated. In the context of the urban design workshop process, developers find themselves taking the foreign approach of asking for community input prior to any formal application. Likewise communities find themselves in the again foreign and very awkward position of directing, instigating and verbalising just, what they want.

Although most communities are quite vocal in telling developers "what they don't like", "what won't suit the area" and "how it really is", the opportunity to be innovative, creative and considered 'important' in the conceptual stage of a development is rarely extended. The challenge to take up a pencil and draw what they would like to see developed on a site is something most don't count on when the masses attend, yet another community meeting. They are there merely to stand behind the nearest charismatic community leader, put up their hand, vote, and chase the developer out of town.

Developers are also not known for lending themselves to the sympathies of a tight knit community protective of their patch. Most fulfil any legal obligations by leaving community consultation to Council. Others hold token community meetings, hoping to steam-roll the development through Council under the pretentious farce that they really

do care about what the community thinks. Others still are at a loss at just how to please everybody, the Council, the community, their deadlines and financial backers.
Landcom in its corporate capacity sought to ensure quality urban design and better communities by involving the community in the planning and design process. The decision to facilitate an urban design workshop for Landcoms development site at Tanilba Bay was supported due to the high number of self-interested groups within the community likely to influence the development or cause undue tension or disruption to the development assessment process. The diverse physical, social, and economic issues associated with the site and general area also prompted a greater degree of consideration in the design process, dictating the need for some sort of facilitated community input.

All participants were required to TRUST each other. It was essential that the following Principles were adhered to without variation so that a level of trust could be developed with all sections of the stakeholders:-

- Open access to all information
- Transparent design process that is open for everybody to see what is happening
- Public and community input
- Expert site analysis
- New Urbanism principles
- Ecological Sustainable Development
- Economically viable development
- Development that benefits Tanilba Bay and Mallabulla

THE SITE

Tanilba Bay is located on the Tilligerry Peninsula in the Port Stephens Local Government Area, approximately 40 minutes north of Newcastle. The 26 ha. site is situated between the townships of Mallabula and Tanilba Bay, Lemon Tree Passage Road and the foreshore.

The site is generally flat and covered with insignificant coastal heath vegetation. There are a few isolated pockets of mature trees, following an old dunal system that runs parallel across the site. Several Koala Feed Trees (as identified under SEPP 44), mainly Swamp Mahogany were identified in the north-east corner of the site.

The Tanilba Bay Primary School and a public cycleway, which divides the site from the Tilligerry Habitat area, bound the site to the north. To the east, standard residential lots fronting Fairlanes Road bound the site and to the south, Lemon Tree Passage Road, the main arterial road servicing the Peninsula. To the west, the Tilligerry RSL Sports Club, a small parcel of community land and standard residential lots fronting President Wilson Walk, bound the site.

Surrounding the site were several fragmented parcels of under utilised land, including land reserved as buffer zones to the RSL Club and main road. Four user groups hold Crown Land Reserves over the parcel of 5(a) Community land, being the Peninsula Community Preschool, the Tanilba Bay Bush Fire Brigade, and the Tanilba Bay Scout and Girl Guide Associations. Also adjacent to the site is the Tilligerry Habitat, an area of community owned native bushland. This area was previously sand mined and is now being replanted with Koala feed trees to support the small Koala population.

OBJECTIVES and PURPOSE of a WORKSHOP

There are many reasons for holding a community workshop of this type. Previous to the Tanilba Bay Urban Design Workshop the community had been involved in the development of a 'Community Economic Development Program' coordinated through the Tilligerry Precinct Committee. A SWOT analysis of the Tilligerry Peninsular was prepared and a number of issues and initiatives were identified. Of these initiatives, residential development was recognised as a vital part of the rejuvenation, especially in economic terms, of the area.

The number and variety of adjoining stakeholders and, subsequent issues and conflicts arising required detailed and cooperative consideration. The workshop process accommodates an open system of communication between the Developer and Community. It provides a forum for community input into development and acts as a strategic platform for consultation between adjoining landowners, local community, citizens' and resident action groups, individuals, Port Stephens Shire Councillors and staff, and Landcom.

To focus the participants in the Workshop, the facilitators, Chip Kaufman and Wendy Morris from Ecological Sustainable Design Pty Ltd proposed to investigate 10 major issues. These issues all started as "How might the Landcom Project".... and detailed the following:-

- Mitigate the loss of habitat for native species including Koalas, birds and other species.
- Improve the urban stormwater quality as it flows into Tanilba Bay.
- Benefit its Aboriginal neighbours.
- Integrate with its neighbours, and what benefits would result.
- Best respond to the surrounding built heritage (gives a place an identity), natural environment, climate and way of life of the Tilligerry Peninsula
- Strengthen the Tanilba Bay Centre to improve its
  - image, amenity and safety
  - choice of retail and service business, its social facilities and local jobs
  - access to them
- Improve housing diversity and choice on the peninsula

- Make the Peninsula a better place for young people via
  - access
  - activities
  - Jobs
- Make the Peninsula a better place for those of us who are retired or elderly health facilities
  - security
  - access/walkability (no cars and close to facilities)
  - places to gather
  - places to live
- Strengthen and create new employment and business opportunities that suit the peninsula including tourism and the post-industrial economy.

"No urban area will prosper unless it attracts people who can choose to live anywhere they wish – these people will be the job generators of the future"
by who?

The process also allows the evolution of concept plans that provide visual amenity, and local facilities that reflect and enhance the local community. The dynamic nature of the process also promotes creativity, responsiveness and innovation from the designers themselves.

The cooperation and participation by multiple parties, including Council staff helps to streamline the development assessment process within Council itself. The underlying philosophy is that if all major issues and negotiations have been dealt with in principle at the conceptual stage of the development, these are unlikely to dislodge the formal Development Application within Council. The exercise is also undoubtedly an excellent opportunity to build community relations and Landcoms corporate image as a leading developer.

THE PROCESS - How it Worked:

The three-day workshop was held adjacent to the site in the local RSL club. An extensive and comprehensive advertising strategy involving newspaper advertisements and articles, a letterbox drop and signage, publicised the workshop to the general community, inviting them to participate in the public forum. The public forum was held on the Wednesday morning (Day 1) and a final presentation held on the Friday afternoon (Day 3).

In addition, approximately 30 invited participants and stakeholders were asked to make brief presentations to the forum outlining their views and positions in relation to the site. These selected participants including Council staff, expert consultants, adjoining landowners and representatives of local groups, were then invited to assist the core team in designing preliminary concept layouts for the site.

On Day 2 the core team made up of urban design consultants Chip Kaufmann and Wendy Morris, the Project Manager, specialised consultants and Landcom staff continued the design work, based on the preliminary designs of Day 1. Extensive site analysis, mapping of vegetation and clarification of concepts occurred as part of moving towards a single overall concept plan. An interim review of design work occurred on Thursday afternoon in order for invited participants to assess progress and address any outstanding issues. The final presentation involved an extended verbal and visual presentation of the final concept plan.

PITFALLS

Due to the highly open and dynamic nature of such a workshop the process can also be highly volatile and emotionally fuelled. There are a number of potential pitfalls, which can threaten the success of the workshop process from its original intent. The need to keep the workshop focused on the actual development site, rather than side issues or general community complaints is imperative.

The possibility of having the workshop railroaded by a select group concerned with a single issue, be it greenies, economists or whoever is highly likely, having disastrous results. The Tanilba Bay workshop involved some highly emotive issues, mainly concerning the proximity of a small Koala population on adjacent land. Conflicting views even within the community, concerning the environmental merits of the development caused intense debate and disputation.

As a counter to this, the stakeholder presentations, at the public forum on Day 1 allowed a civilised statement of expression from all major players. Although lengthy the limited, controlled and fair discussion that arose from these presentations, assisted in keeping the workshop from being swayed, unfairly lobbied by, or biased towards a particular group.

Linked to this is the tendency to have too much talking and not enough drawing. In order to avoid this pitfall skilled and careful facilitation is needed in order to strike the balance between giving everyone an opportunity to express their views and allowing time and energy for constructive design. Designers need time to 'test' ideas by design on paper, before being able to reach appropriate design based decisions.

Lack of the 'right' communication to a community can lead to confusion and frustration. The use of technical jargon, planning 'buzzwords' and the like, are not often readily understood by the lay community. Likewise many people have difficulty understanding complex plans and diagrams. Particular efforts were made at the Tanilba Bay workshop to counter these difficulties by careful verbal explanations of intent and simple colour coding of the plans. The additional employment of a perspective artist who provided 3D perspective drawings in colour to help illustrate the built form of proposed developments.

RESULTS – What did the Workshop Achieve

Pitfalls aside the Tanilba Bay workshop was highly successful and widely acclaimed. The results of the workshop were twofold, firstly a physical, graphic development plan for the site and secondly significant social resolutions for the community.

The concepts derived at the workshop formed the basis for the formal Development Application to be lodged with Port Stephens Council. Two major plans were developed at the workshop. The *'Development Application Plan'* detailed street layout, lots yields, open space and proposed street tree planting. The *'Plan of Project and Environs'* showed landuses, such as home based business precincts, medium density sites and standard residential parcels. This plan also showed what were titled "bolt-ons", these were developments outside the site and therefore out of the control of the developer. Instead these are initiatives that may eventuate as the momentum of the development actually takes shape. "Bolt-ons" included such things as proposed improvements to the Main Street, proposed medium density development on RSL Club land and possible eco-tourism style development potential near the Tilligerry Habitat area.

Environmental resolutions and initiatives such as key strands of significant bushland were kept as a reflection of community values. The plan also proposed the reservation of a buffer zone to the north of the site incorporating all significant Koala feed trees. Economic initiatives were achieved through the development of home based business precincts improving commercial viability of the Peninsular and boosting local employment.

Through the workshop process Landcom acts as a catalyst to develop a quality innovative urban environment within sensitive environmental areas. For example subsequent negotiations with utility provider Energy Australia have resulted in the possibility of removing high voltage power lines that presently run through the Koala habitat area.

In terms of social resolutions the workshop drew its major strength. As in any vibrant and vocal community there are opposing factions and self-interested groups. The cooperative approach demanded by the workshop process drew warring participants together to form a holistic and united community approach. In the Tanilba Bay example, the proposed development will increase the residential capacity of the area by 15% which is a dramatic increase in population, however as the community has been part of the process there was 100% agreement to the proposal at the end of the workshop. The waving of the white flag by self-interested groups allowed a suitable urban outcome for the site to be reached and agreement made at the conclusion of the workshop.

CONCLUSION

After the initial shock of being confronted with the rare opportunity to have up front input into the design, both the community and developer embraced the spirit of the design workshop process with enthusiasm and vigour.

The physical plans resulting from the workshop were of the highest quality, but more importantly were able to communicate the concepts and intent of the development to the community. The hurdle of gaining community support in what could have been a controversial development is a major plus for the securing of the development through the various approval processes.

The process also seeks to educate the community, in as much as come up with an actual development plan. Through its dynamic response to issues, participants can actually start to become equipped to understand design and development issues, and offer reasonable, informed opinions.

The Tanilba Bay example helps to translate the design workshop process into a useable everyday, planning tool for communities and developers alike. To the project a developer brings technical expertise, vision and financial backing. The community brings their own strengths to the process such as local knowledge, insight, community values and civic pride. When combined through the workshop process these strengths promote a healthy collaborative and design orientated approach to a development. While the ultimate results of the Tanilba Bay workshop are yet to be realised, in the end a significant favourable impact on the local community is proposed. The momentum from the workshop has been a major boost in community consultation initiatives as well as getting the project off the ground.

Finally, the question of sustainability which equates to size, design and performance that is presently being used as a measure of an urban model, will be realised in the vibrancy of the project in this small but important area of Port Stephens.