

The Buzz about Charrettes and Harbor Springs Insights

Harbor Springs,
pop. 1,194



This July, the city of Harbor Springs, working with a team coordinated by Wade Trim—allowed me to observe their downtown enhancement charrettes. To paraphrase Wikipedia, charrette is a collaborative session in which a group of designers draft a solution to a design problem. Charrettes often take place in multiple sessions of stakeholder groups. Each group's work is then presented to the full group as material for future dialogue. Charrettes serve to quickly generate design solutions while integrating the perspectives and interests of a diverse group of people. As communities learn the value of civic engagement, charrettes have gained in popularity.

I learned several valuable things I'd like to share with communities that have not yet participated in such a process. But let me back up for a moment and take note: Harbor Springs has been on a roll. Eight community leaders attended a Placemaking Summit hosted by the Northwest Council of Governments in March 2011—the catalyst for the city's current Downtown Vision Plan. (See *the Review*, May/June 2012, p.12.)

Charrettes in Action

The Harbor Springs Downtown Vision Plan calendar certainly contained preliminary work and far more follow-up than I could observe, but over the course of the day-and-a-half that I was there, Wade Trim held numerous stakeholder focus groups—each 45-60 minutes. Day one focus groups included downtown businesses, waterfront and marina users, owners and neighborhood groups, and year-round residents. Day two focus groups were opened by three topic areas: parks and waterfront; streets; and architecture. These groups run consecutively, so residents may participate in more than one. It's also an intense concentration of effort to provide quick feedback and momentum.

Nearly 30-35 people attended each session—which is high a turnout even in a much larger community. About 10 years ago, Harbor Springs and neighboring communities came together in a collaborative visioning process that resulted in the very successful regional coordination organization, HARBOR Inc. (harborinc.org/). This experience likely spurred the high charrette participation rate Harbor Springs now enjoys.

Wade Trim's Senior Professional Planner Chip Smith, along with Landscape Architect Danna Widmar, facilitated lively and informative conversations. People expressed concerns constructively, offering insight and potential solutions. Conversations were candid and respectful. By the end of each quickly moving session, consensus was emerging about the priority wish list of each group. During the focus groups organized by topic, Jamison Brown and Courtney Piotrowski from Living Labs used their design skills to help lay out potential planning/design elements. Large aerial maps of the downtown were overlaid with a velum-type paper, on which Jamie and Courtney quickly sketched in conceptual changes—such as a bike lane on Bay Street and feasible locations for affordable housing.

Hope Is Not a Strategy


I also attended an evening Visioning Workshop, with a turnout of nearly 100. Wisely, it began with an appreciative inquiry exercise (one of the best tips for handling those concerned about *change* and for keeping the tone positive). People listed their top three favorite places and their top three favorite things to do. Without mentioning the scary “c” word, you’ve learned specifically what people want to retain. We heard many views expressed about the “place” that is Harbor Springs—the unique and special aspects of a community that evoke an emotional response from both residents and visitors. It’s what they love and what ought to be preserved.

Charrette is French for “cart” or “chariot.” Architecture students in 19th century Paris worked in teams; when the deadline hit, a charrette was wheeled out to pick up their work for review. Working furiously to apply the finishing touches, the students were said to be working en charrette, or ‘in the cart.’

Soliciting this input first leaves space on the canvas in which to dream; in which there is room to move from good to great. And that’s exciting. To wish for no change is to hope, and as Chip Smith puts it, “Hope is not a strategy.” Change will occur from outside influences, so it needs to be managed. Already Harbor Springs resort residents and year-round residents have learned the economic downturn and lifestyle changes have had a big impact on this idyllic town, with resort residents reducing their lengths of stay from six months down to one. A plan is needed.



Picture-Perfect Postcard

The second part of the evening’s exercise was “Postcards from Tomorrow.” Small groups composed a postcard message sent to friends from Harbor Springs in 2032. What does Harbor Springs look, feel, sound, and smell like 20 years from now? It is full of outdoor cafes, free Wi-Fi, and live music! Flip to the picture side of the card where all the new activities and changes are drawn. Did I say change? I did. And with that, we have a community vision from which to work. 

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