



Planning — July 2011

## Getting Ahead of the Opposition

How to control the conversation before the naysayers can.

*By Mary Means and Elaine R. Clisham*

In fall 2009, after a thoughtful two-year planning process involving hundreds of participants, charrettes, and workshops, the commissioners in Carroll County, Maryland, were about to take a vote on Pathways to Carroll's Future Landscape, the county's proposed comprehensive plan. That's when planners learned how much opposition was out there.

The county, though less than an hour's drive from Baltimore and Washington, D.C., remains mostly rural; many residents work elsewhere. A key aspect of the Pathways plan was to enhance the county's jobs situation — and reduce commuting time — by creating a mixed use employment center near I-70. Planning staff felt the proposal had strong support.

Yet at the last minute, a new movement emerged whose purpose was expressed in its website address: [www.no2rezone.com](http://www.no2rezone.com). Its leaders quickly captured the rhetorical playing field. The Pathways plan would have, according to their blog, "the effect of enabling everything the citizens of our county oppose, including high-density commercial and residential development and government-sponsored housing initiatives." The plan would be "a grand slam for over-reaching bureaucrats and an egregious slap in the face to our citizens."



Suddenly planning commission meetings were packed with people eager to testify, virtually none of whom had attended any previous event. Not only did the Pathways plan go down to defeat, but the controversy propelled a takeover of county government in the 2010 election by deeply conservative candidates.

The defeat of the Pathways plan was just the starting point for this new county commission. Its website, the Campaign for Liberty, the national network of libertarian-leaning state networks, boasts that the newly elected Carroll County commissioners abolished the county's office of sustainability

and "became the first governmental organization to drop out of the UN's International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI)." This turn of events reaches far beyond one rural jurisdiction. As Clay Shirky makes clear in his fascinating book, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, the digital age has made it possible for nearly anyone with a computer to broadcast half-truths and amplify misplaced alarms.

What can planners do about such opposition initiatives? George M. Homewood, AICP, vice president for policy and legislation of APA's Virginia chapter, says that planners must learn better communication skills. In his essay "Dealing with the New Activists — What Planners Should Know," recently sent to chapter members, Homewood notes, "In many ways, we are our own worst enemy. It is hard to find a profession with more jargon and acronyms. Language is very important and planners need to clearly enunciate goals without reverting to planning jargon like 'sustainability,' 'livability,' 'walkability,' 'smart growth' and similar terms that are either code for things people think they don't want or are simply things that they do not care about today."

While professional planners view their work as above politics, it is naive to think that a planning process will be driven solely by issues. Policy considerations are but one — and not necessarily the chief — factor in the political calculations that determine the outcome. Annapolis political consultant William Schmickle notes that "politicians are happy to use planning issues as cover for unrelated political reasons such as ideology, party discipline, and political ambition."



A session on getting ahead of opposition initiatives attracted a standing-room crowd at APA's National Planning Conference in Boston in April. There, Steve Horn, the former planning director in Carroll County, was joined by Vera Bothner, a communications consultant involved with the newly adopted downtown plan in Wichita, Kansas, and Elaine Clisham, a planner with a strong background in the changing media industry. Lively discussion revealed several useful lessons:

**Doing things by the accepted playbook will no longer work.** Carroll County learned this lesson the hard way, Horn said. Planners need to fill in the gaps in their knowledge of the "attitudinal topography" of their jurisdiction. That means more than choosing the right non-jargon words. For most people, their home is their largest asset and anything that threatens to change their property values or way of life produces a knee-jerk negative response. Political activists use this situation to their advantage. In English: Get help figuring out what's on people's minds and craft your messages to address those issues.

**Begin with the end in mind.** This is especially true with communication strategies and tactics. Underinvesting in communications can be costly in the long run. Because there will always be some opposition to a plan, it is important to do an early analysis of what people really care about and to frame messages around those concerns.

In Wichita, early interviews revealed that a key concern among business and civic leaders was that young people were leaving the city and the region. As a result, messages about the downtown plan made use of research showing that young people want to live in compact, walkable urban areas — and Wichita's downtown wasn't one. This made an economic case for the plan: Downtown is where growth should occur. The message wasn't about the development tools, but about what the tools can

bring: How will the plan help us be competitive, to grow, to have more time for our families, and to create a better quality of life?

**Really understand and list the objections, then enumerate all the benefits and responses.** It's sometimes hard for a planner to imagine how anyone could object to good planning. Yet, before undertaking its plan, Wichita worked with politically savvy civic leaders to identify all the political reasons why a downtown master plan might not be feasible at that time. Then the planning team methodically drew up a list of all the valid arguments that could be used to counter each objection, and all the ways they might be able to work around an objection. Scott Knebel, AICP, the city's planner for downtown, confirms, "This took months, but it was time well spent."

**Identify key friends and foes and figure out how to win over the objectors.** It's critical to know all the important players, to understand how they think, whom they listen to, and who will oppose the initiative so you can strategize about how to secure their support. Identify the key audiences and how to reach them.

Those involved in the Wichita downtown plan tried to look at the process not just tactically but holistically. They knew it was important to have a broadly representative steering committee for the plan with thought leaders across the full spectrum of the community.

The steering committee met frequently with the planning team throughout, providing valuable input and learning the reasons behind the planning team's choices — and how those choices formed the basis of the plan's recommendations. They became invested in having the plan adopted and made numerous presentations to citizen groups as advocates. "This was really important," says Knebel. "The media was much more willing to listen to them than to a government official. Public officials are felt to have a vested interest."

**Work proactively with local media.** Don't rely on press releases to announce events. Identify all key local media, including bloggers and e-mail list managers, and meet with their writers to make sure they understand the complexities of the planning effort. Get to know newspaper staff at all levels: publisher, editor, and reporters who will be writing about the plan. Meet with the editorial board early on to explain the importance of the plan and secure the board's support. Meet with other members of the mainstream media as well.

Do everything you can to educate the media and to ensure accuracy (as opposed to agreement). Get your allies to participate in local e-mail lists if that's where the conversation is taking place. Reach out to local bloggers who have a voice; if they're legitimate they'll try to frame the issue fairly. When they don't, be strategic about taking them on. Don't make big issues out of small things, but keep coaching those who are writing about you.

**Choose your words carefully.** "Naysayers often have more resources than we do," noted a planner in the conference session in Boston. "What can local governments do — cost-effectively — to counter the naysayers?" Bothner's response: "Whoever frames the issue first, wins." She advised planners to make an intentional, strategic communications plan and to choose their words and actions very carefully.

**Consistency of message is key.** Take all the information about the plan and distill it down to a small number of easily understood talking points. Write them down. Test them on someone who you think represents "the public" to be sure they work. When you (or one of the plan's advocates) are making presentations to community groups or briefing elected officials or the media, stick to these messages. Use these opportunities to take the microphone from the opponents, too.

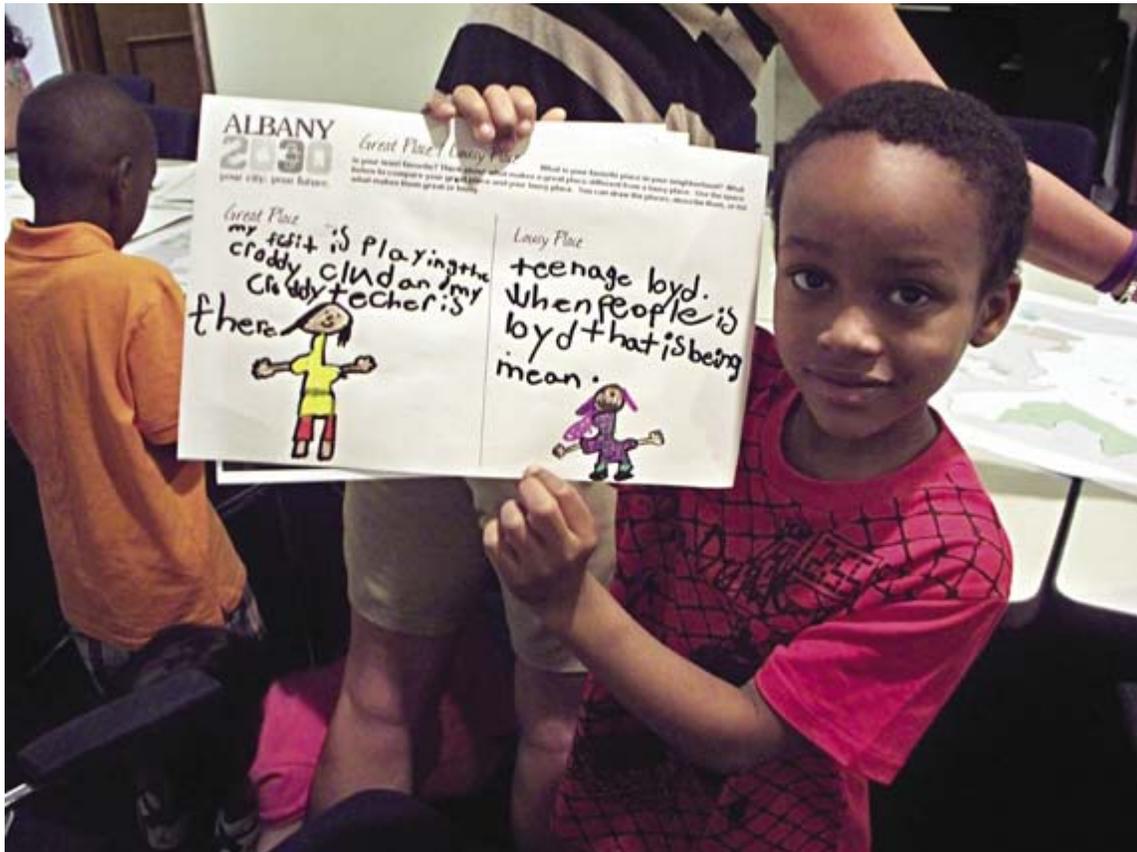
"Opposition to an initiative will always be there," said Bothner, "but the arguments can be blunted by articulating them first and then countering them logically."

**Don't forget elected officials.** Rarely are elected officials truly knowledgeable about planning or zoning, so consider them a key lay audience, not jargon buddies. Meet with them often to keep them updated, so that they have information they need when they talk with constituents. When it's time for key decisions or an election rolls around, all elected officials should be able to repeat the reasons the plan is important, because the message has been crafted and repeated.

**Don't try to do it all yourself.** Use public information resources elsewhere in your government if you can. Properly established, charged, and involved, advisory committee members can fill an essential role in fostering community understanding and support for sound plans. In Shreveport, Louisiana, steady advocacy by motivated members of the advisory committee played a big role in the recent unanimous adoption of the comprehensive plan, despite opponents.

Your narrative must be the one that gets out there most often. Try to have as many of your partners as possible voicing support for the plan. They can stand with you when the opposition comes. There is always opposition, but a proactive communications strategy can lead to endorsement by a wide range of stakeholders, which can become a voice strong enough to carry the plan forward.

**Communications and public relations professionals should be part of all major public planning initiatives.** Focusing on the technical content of the plan while failing to develop and execute a thoughtful communications strategy can lead to well-made plans going south. Opposition initiatives are likely to be with us for a long time, as are government-bashing political activists. Add to that the ease of reaching an angry public via the Internet and targeted lists, and it is clear that to be effective, planners must adapt quickly, retool, and learn new skills. Or learn to make the case for professional help when the stakes are truly high.



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### Fishing for Participation

*By Sarah Reginelli*

On a recent family vacation, I was struck by my dad's well-organized and well-stocked tackle box. When I asked him if having 50 different types of lures was really necessary, he replied, "If you only use one type of lure, you only catch one type of fish." That one sentence sums up the way planners should be thinking about community engagement. If the goal is to attract as many different members of the public as possible, then a tackle box is a more appropriate metaphor than a toolkit. We should be using diverse methods to attract diverse populations.

That is the strategy being used in Albany, New York, which is about to complete Albany 2030, the city's first comprehensive plan. The two-year planning process kicked-off in fall 2009, when Wallace, Roberts & Todd was hired as the lead consultant.

Albany (pop. 98,000), the state capital, is 57 percent white and 37 percent black, and has a median annual household income of \$30,041. One goal in the Albany 2030 process is to embrace the city's diverse interests while promoting transparency and building trust. The first goal was to match the messages and media to the various audiences and to make the planning process fun. Eye-catching posters in bars and other unexpected spots were aimed at residents who rarely show up at public meetings. Bus shelters were equipped with messages asking how Albany ought to change. Parents at PTA meetings were invited to talk about how old their children would be in 2030. Local radio stations — from hip hop to sports talk to country — were approached about running public service announcements.

PlaceMatters, Albany 2030's technology consultant, has used technology and social media — from an interactive website to keypad polling — throughout the planning process. Some 2,000 participants have signed up for the Albany 2030 e-mail list, and there are 472 "likes" on Facebook and 262 Twitter followers. Technology will play an expanded role this summer, through YouTube and Flickr-linked Walk-shops, Twitter questions of the week, and online surveys, as the city wraps up the process and asks the community to review the draft plan.

However, some of Albany 2030's most effective participation methods have been low-tech ones used to attract groups that are underrepresented at public forums.

Microm meetings are scalable versions of public forums, used with groups as small as five and as large as 50, and with people aged six years to 90. Materials are tailored for each group. The results: Through drawing exercises, children in a first grade class expressed excitement about Albany's waterfront, but also showed fear of abandoned buildings and a desire for safe places to play after school. A group of more than 30 homeless men at the Capital City Rescue Mission said they appreciated the city's existing services but stressed the importance of more job opportunities and affordable housing.

Speed planning condenses the traditional workshop into a fast mixer. During a one-hour event, participants are assigned to a series of five topic tables where they can weigh in on a specific issue for 10 minutes, and then switch tables — and tablemates — at the sound of a bell. The final 10 minutes can be spent networking.

Stoop surveys have been the most successful new lure. Planners send two-person teams into a target neighborhood, where they approach residents sitting on stoops or front porches. The team talks about Albany 2030 and walks residents through an informal five-minute survey. This method has been used to reach students living off-campus, and to survey people in denser downtown neighborhoods and in the African American community. A group of 10 volunteer facilitators has completed as many as 90 surveys in one hour. In each instance participants have been eager to take part.

Albany has replaced its tool kit with a well-stocked tackle box. You can do it, too.

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### Resources

**Images:** Top — In Shreveport, Louisiana, a community advisory group boosted support for the Shreveport-Caddo Master Plan, which was adopted unanimously. Photo Goody Clancy. Middle — Planners in Carroll County, Maryland — which has a budding vineyard scene — were stunned when vocal opponents squashed a promising comprehensive plan that had been two years in the making. Photo Phil Grout. Bottom — In his own word, a first-grader points out what makes a great place and a lousy place in his hometown of Albany, New York. Photo courtesy Sarah Reginelli.