



ACME TOWNSHIP
NEW URBANISM CITIZENS ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Monday January 30, 2006, 1:00 p.m.
Acme Township Hall
6042 Acme Road, Williamsburg MI 49690

Meeting called to Order at 1:10 p.m.

Members present: M. Krakow & L. Craig (Co-Chairs), D. Krause, D. Rohn, N. Veliquette

Ex-Officio Members Present: A. Andres, Jr, L. Grant

Staff present: S. Corpe, Township Manager/Recording Secretary

The purpose of the meeting was to interview Mr. Senen Antonio from Duany Plater-Zyberk (DPZ) relative to the proposed New Urbanist Town Center design project. Mr. Antonio provided a PowerPoint presentation and mentioned that while he works from Florida he has family in Lansing.

Mr. Antonio stated that DPZ is a firm with over 25 years' experience and over 700 projects under their belt. Their hallmark project is Seaside, FL, the first Traditional Neighborhood Development constructed in the past 50 years. New Urbanism is not necessarily about creating a city, but is about the whole range of land uses from rural to urban. Firm founders Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk founded the Congress for New Urbanism (CNU).

Their project they feel is most like Acme's situation is Legacy Town Center in Plano, TX. They worked on this project with RTKL; it was done largely for Ross Perot to create a focus for the community. The site is 180-acres with a 400-room convention hotel, retail and entertainment outlets, 2,400 multi-family housing units and civic buildings and spaces. There are surface parking lots and parking structures, the latter being concealed by a facing of residential and/or commercial uses (a concept called the "Texas Doughnut."

New Town St. Charles, MO is a greenfield development of 720 acres outside of St. Louis. It is composed of six walkable mixed-use neighborhoods organized around a system of lakes and canals. The land used to be flat, relatively featureless farmland. There is a mix of housing uses from apartments through cottages, townhouses and single-family detached homes. This project demonstrates the ability to work with a "blank canvas," but Mr. Antonio perceives that Acme already has much to work with. He was impressed by the natural landscape and the bay, feeling that a place this pretty in winter must be spectacular in the summer. He recognized that Acme is adjacent to greater Traverse City, which can provide a foundation for unique development within the township.

Kentlands, MD is another representative project, being their first full "authentic" community (recognizing that Seaside is largely a resort community.) Built on 350 acres, there is a town center along a major thoroughfare. There was already some big-box development on site, which provided the opportunity to figure out how to integrate these uses into the new development. Liner buildings facing the big-boxes were employed. As the big-box stores reached the end of their natural lifetimes seven years later, they were able to come back and infill with new uses that fit the development pattern. Several distinct neighborhoods were created.

Other projects Mr. Antonio cited as relevant were Mashpee Commons, MD, DownCity Providence, RI (urban infill). He discussed the concept that a mixed use development can be designed to be very adaptable to changes in market cycles as commercial and residential components face respective upswings and downswings. Places designed to accommodate only one use become derelict and lead to blight; he stated there are studies that indicate that the average mall has a 15-year lifespan. He compared the concept to an ecosystem, where if the environment is composed of mostly or entirely one element, a disease wipes out all the elements. When there is diversity of form and function, some components are always thriving.

Mr. Antonio expressed a vision of Acme Township as a “lively, liveable community.” They understand the question to be one of creating a community focal point; the place where you would want to hold the art fair or to which you would direct a tourist to take a picture to send home. Civic and community facilities are present to complement private investment. People can live, work, shop, eat and experience cultural enrichment. He said that the opportunity to plan for nearly 500 contiguous acres accessible from two major thoroughfares is extremely rare and desirable. Local market opportunities must be understood through a local and/or regional market study, with uses reviewed within the context of prevailing market conditions. They understand that some market studies have been done relative to individual parcels but feel that a more comprehensive study looking at all parcels together within the marketplace would be important. DPZ works with Bob Gibbs, the pre-eminent retail advisor in the nation, who summers nearby and is familiar with the area. DPZ would commit to creating safe, memorable, functional public spaces of varying types. Natural features such as wetlands would be planned into the project as promoted features rather than as constraints. Pedestrian accessibility, public transportation opportunities and good parking are also key; a lack of sufficient and appropriate parking can kill a project. Some on-street parking would be combined with parking courts and parking structures concealed behind street front spaces usable commercially or residentially. Green development/ LEED (government accreditation for green building and design) standards would be employed, as would natural area conservation and enhancement through sustainable landscaping. Working with the natural character of the land is the underlying principal. This includes the careful use of architecture, particularly in a four-season environment where energy conservation and stormwater management are important in varying seasons.

Mr. Antonio mentioned that soon there will be new LEED standards, “LEED ND” for neighborhood developments. DPZ is helping to develop the standards, and could help Acme Township achieve the new certification level. He mentioned that plans would be tailored to the local architectural tradition; this slide portrayed pictures of the Grand Traverse Resort as well as streetscapes from Traverse City, Cadillac and Fife Lake and a wooded scene from Williamsburg. Plans are written to be easily understood by landowners, developers and community officials and to be implementable. They seek to provide options rather than constraints to site development.

Mr. Antonio provided a slide demonstrating the “Transect” system of planning developed by DPZ which has caught on throughout the planning community. The transect is a continuum of development patterns from natural through rural, suburban, general urban, urban center, urban core and special district. Each transect has its own codes and guidelines to reinforce the character of that area. For instance, streets in an urban core will be straighter and narrower with more street trees more evenly spaced and taller buildings made of stone, steel, glass and brick. In the suburban zone streets would meander more, buildings would be set back further with parking in front, building materials would include more wood and there would be more use of pitched roofs. The zoning is not based on grouping uses but is based on describing form. A variety of uses can occur in each transect rather than being isolated from one another. The guidelines are what allow the different uses to co-exist happily.

Mr. Antonio stated that DPZ's design philosophy in terms of process is based on the charrette (design workshop) where most of the work occurs. Many planners employ the charrette process, but they hold a meeting and then retreat to their offices for a few weeks to do some design work before holding another meeting. In his experience, this can create frustration because much of the planning work is performed in a public-less vacuum. The work brought back to the community can contain faults that dishearten the community and send the planner back to the drawing board in a potentially endless cycle. DPZ prefers to hold a marathon charrette session of up to 10 days facilitated by 10-12 consultants from their firm and allied service providers. The meetings are held in a large open space, where public input is occurring in one part of the space and the team is working in another part of the space in real time to translate the discussion into the plan as the discussion is occurring. An idea is mentioned, someone draws it up right away, it's posted and there's immediate discussion. All ideas are discussed, and over time the "bad" ideas are weeded out and the good ideas persist to inclusion in the final plan. It may seem like a long process, but overall the process is more efficient and results in an immediate resolution at the end. The more public the process, the better. Property owners, municipal officials, police and fire departments, planning officials, environmental agencies, trade groups and school systems are examples of stakeholders to involve. It can be beneficial to include representatives from some of the retail outlets that might locate in the site to allow for a freeflow of discussion from them about their needs and about how they might be met in new and creative ways in a more urban setting.

Mr. Antonio displayed the book produced at the charrette for Mashpee Commons. It includes maps and discussion of regional conditions/context, existing site conditions and elements, any previous master plans that form a starting point and expansions of that basis in the form of potential satellite neighborhoods (Mr. Antonio stated that a full mix of uses must be represented, and that the development is only as successful as its residential [and captive market] component.). The development area is then overlaid with circles representing ¼ mile, 5-minute walking areas shown to create a successful neighborhood area. This is the maximum distance most people are incline to walk under general conditions before they decide to get in their cars instead. They would seek to make each neighborhood circle complete with a mix of residential, commercial, civic and greenspace uses. Mashpee Commons uncharacteristically contains a proposed 10-minute walk bubble. This can be acceptable in a town center setting – if done well people will be willing to walk up to half a mile along the length of a main street. This length could be extended with the incorporation of public transportation.

The project book can include a strategic phasing plan. In our situation, it would be possible to create areas that respect existing property lines so that different landowners can meet individual timeline needs or in case there are properties that ultimately do not participate to conclusion in the project. The book also contained "political" maps useful to planning departments depicting and quantifying privately-owned developable spaces, publicly-owned spaces, road networks (including alleys and parking), civic buildings and spaces, and public trailway systems.

The book then moves into a depiction of the transect and a map showing the transect layout within the project area. There is a street network hierarchy and the schematic architectural design alternatives for each type of development/land use provided for in the plan.

Mr. Antonio provided copies of DPZ's Smartcode, which is made available as shareware for customization by individual communities. He mentioned that DPZ is doing the master plans for post-hurricane reconstruction in Louisiana. There may be subsequent charrettes for architectural design. DPZ involves many different architects in the process so that the resulting product has variety.

Mr. Antonio closed by expressing excitement on behalf of DPZ in the possibility of working with Acme Township on an exciting design project. He stressed that they have a very hands-on approach

and work from the grassroots up with all sectors of the community to encourage and evaluate input from all segments of the community.

Krakov asked if Mr. Duany would be personally involved with the process from beginning to end. Mr. Antonio responded that Mr. Duany likes to come to a process with a clean slate. There are a lot of initial logistics to be covered, including identifying and booking a large open venue for 10 days, bringing in needed office equipment, conducting initial research and collating data and identifying and scheduling the attendance of participants. This phase takes approximately 4-6 weeks and is handled by a project coordinator. Mr. Duany comes in only at the charrette once the groundwork is laid. He does not want to arrive with preconceived notions about what the project should or could be, or the emotions of any parties. Once he arrives to begin the charrette he is completely immersed in and dedicated to it, leading all of the meetings and sessions. During the first half they spend most of their time listening and absorbing, processing and synthesizing seemingly disjointed pieces of data into the cohesive plan, and weeding out the extraneous ideas to distill the important ones.

LouAnn Brohl asked if any of the communities DPZ has worked with have included big-box retailers on the main floor only of a building designed like other buildings in a block or development with residential/office space on an upper level. Mr. Antonio has not personally experienced this, but in an area where two-story buildings are required he believes this could be a viable concept. He is familiar with a grocery store that has its parking on its second story.

Paul Brink referred to Kentlands, MD and discussion of how a Wal-Mart was integrated into a town center design, asking for more detail. Mr. Antonio stated that there was an existing set of retail pads at the intersection of a major highway. DPZ extended a gridwork street system and lined the existing big-boxes with street-style development including small shops, offices and residences. As the big boxes moved away, the establishment of the grid and associated parking left behind block grids that were sized properly to accommodate new types of uses.

Mr. Brink stated that a local issue is how to design a development that is publicly palatable and also creates an acceptable level of economic return for the landowner/developer. Mr. Antonio stated that this question is addressed through a market study to be performed prior to the charrette process. While the independent parcels have had individual market studies performed, they have likely essentially “dipped into the same pool” of regional marketplace and may create a false picture of what is appropriate and sustainable. A joint market study is therefore needed. Mr. Brink asked if DPZ would be looking for the community to tell it in advance what an acceptable use mix would be, or if they prefer to help the community to figure it out. Mr. Antonio responded that they tend towards a realistic and successful model of determining how much can be successfully created, whether they are told up front or whether the studies are done preparatory to the charrettes. There have been occasions when they have been told to simply maximize the space on the site.

Grant asked if services from Bob Gibbs in terms of market analysis were included in the proposed fee structure; they were because Mr. Gibbs is essentially on-staff. Grant also asked if a resume for the proposed project manager is available and was told it could be provided. Grant also noted that the proposal indicated the charrette could not be scheduled until the third quarter of 2006; Mr. Antonio stated that charrettes are generally scheduled about 4 months in advance because of how much work must be done to prepare. The timeframe is currently longer because the needs of Louisiana and Mississippi for their rebuilding effort are taking precedence. Typically clients pay a retainer to secure preferred dates. There are some dates around July for which retainers have not been secured, so there is some possibility of an expedited timeline. Key market, traffic and environmental studies still need to be completed before the charrettes commence.

Grant referred to the statement that both good and bad ideas will be generated by the public, noting that these terms are subjective and often opposite for two different perspectives and asking for commentary on how ideas are classified. Mr. Antonio stated that the township would be considered as the main clients and would have the final say as to what is put on paper. All public input into the process is welcomed. At the outset all ideas are valid, but some ideas will naturally make their way through the process generations to the final plan because they complement and promote the master plan and some ideas will fade away because they do not.

Grant asked about the 10-day charrette and asked if any work is done off-shore. Mr. Antonio stated that all work is done at the project site studio, and people are invited to drop by at any time to see what's going on.

Mark Nixon asked about successful projects that might be in similar socio-economic settings and geographical latitude that Acme might consider. Mr. Antonio recommended Kentlands, MD, DPZ's first complete "fully authentic" community. Legacy Town Center, TX provides a good look at how mixed uses work together and how parking can be managed. Mr. Nixon suggested that Acme is unusually far away from a significant urban center as compared to other New Urbanist developments. Mr. Antonio stated that DPZ worked on a project in the Bloomfield Hills area and ultimately fired their client. There were a lot of local upheavals and changes which ended up changing the nature and goals of the process to the extent where DPZ was being asked to redesign the project in a way they could not support. DPZ gave the work to that point to the client, who had it completed by a local architect. The product today still incorporates some of DPZ's original design elements. Mr. Nixon suggested that Middleton Hills near Madison, WI might be comparable, but Mr. Antonio felt that it would not have comparable density and would be more weighted towards the residential than a project here might be.

Veliquette noted that the figures developed from a market study will not remain static over time, and asked how the transect model accommodates market changes over time. Mr. Antonio stated that the transect helps achieve flexibility. He agreed that the market study is a snapshot in time and markets change so the plan needs to be revisited from time to time. A transect-based plan is more flexible than a land-use based plan because the former contains form requirements but does not constrain the type and extent of land uses where as the latter requires amendment to change land use mixes. As long as the form is consistent, the uses contained therein can be anything.

The committee thanked Mr. Antonio for his presentation.

Meeting adjourned at 2:50 p.m.