

Why Don't Communities Pursue Smart Growth?

A Case Study of Public Deliberation over Planning Decisions in Malta, New York

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	2
1.1 The Need for Effective Public Participation, Deliberation and Representation	
1.2 Malta, New York	
2. Methods.....	6
3. Public Participation and Deliberation.....	8
3.1 Literature Review	
3.2 Results	
3.2.1 Public Participation in Malta	
3.2.2 Public Deliberation in Malta	
3.3 Discussion	
4. Political Representation.....	15
4.1 Literature Review	
4.2 Results & Discussion	
5. Visualizing Growth.....	20
5.1 Visual Assessment Studies	
5.2 Methods	
5.3 Results	
5.4 Analysis	
6. Conclusion.....	29
Acknowledgements.....	31
Bibliography.....	32
Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions.....	36
Appendix B: Visual Assessment Discussion Group Questions.....	36
Appendix C: Images from Visual Assessment Discussions.....	37

Abstract

We know sprawl is unsustainable, so why do we still do it? We examined a high-profile debate over sprawl and smart growth in Malta, NY – a community expecting tremendous growth. We found low quality participation and deliberation and developed a promising way for discussing growth and improving deliberation.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Need for Effective Public Participation, Deliberation and Representation

Environmental, social and economic problems related to climate change and peak oil that require important governmental decisions create an urgent need for citizen participation in government. Public involvement, however, has only declined in recent decades, making these problems more ominous (Lowndes et al. 2006). Voter turnout has declined in the past four decades and civic engagement in public meetings has dropped by more than a third (U.S. Census Bureau 1991; Putnam 1995). Increasing participation and engagement is required to contend with these large-scale issues facing society today. Engaging the public in these global problems is important at even the smallest, local level.

At the heart of local decision-making is the conversation surrounding planning and development (Talen & Knaap 2011). ‘Sprawl’ development, the current status quo for most communities in the U.S., is centered around segregated land-uses that are low in density; this single-use arrangement spread over long distances relies on the conversion of open space to

urban use, using land inefficiently. As a result it creates a strong dependence on cars for transportation, increasing travel times and distances (Gordon et al. 1989; Muñiz & Galindo 2005; Frank et al. 2010); significantly increasing greenhouse gas emissions contributing to climate change; increasing rates of obesity and overweight as people spend proportionally more time in cars (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2001; Frank et al. 2010; Wen et al. 2006); and increased economic costs to individuals and the larger community as a result of high infrastructure costs (Downing & Gustely 1977; Ewing 1994; Center for Urban Policy Research 1992; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). Many have also found that sprawl development patterns are associated with declining socialization and social capital and a weakened sense of community (Putnam 1995; Edward et al 2002; Glaeser & Sacerdote 2000). Sprawl can be the product of either an expressed preference of the public in the community or an implicit assumption of public preferences and priorities. All in all, sprawl development is unsustainable in environmental, economic and social terms.

There are, however, alternatives to sprawl. Smart growth, sustainable development, and New Urbanism are all principles that focus on compact, mixed use development that incorporates alternative transportation options – in this paper we will use smart growth to refer to these alternatives to sprawl. These principles have been shown to reduce driving dependency (Cervero & Kockelman 1997) and, as a result, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve public health (Frank et al 2009; Lee et al 2009; Wen et al 2006). Many planners consider smart growth and related principles simply to be signs of good planning (Talen & Knaap 2011). However, despite the abundance of literature on the benefits of smart growth, there are few communities actually pursuing it (Downs 2005).

Those who have investigated this have found that a poor planning process or one intended to streamline sprawl – not smart growth – is the cause (Ewing 1994). Downs (2005) found full smart growth implementation would require a redistribution of power from the local to regional level as well as a shift in the general public’s assumption about the status quo. This status quo is strongly rooted in values commonly held by many Americans, particularly home ownership and privacy (Cervero & Bosselman 1998). Informed by these values, most Americans prefer low density communities, however, researchers have found that individuals will tradeoff high density communities for parks and other amenities when presented with the option (Bookout & Wentling 1988). From this we ask: How can we frame the debate to help internalize these tradeoffs? And, more importantly: how can local governments begin to improve the planning process to create more sustainable communities?

1.2 Malta, New York

In order to answer this question, we investigated three areas of the planning process that may be of issue: obstacles to public participation, a lack of effective representation by political leaders and a technical approach to planning that does not capture the public’s preferences. To conclude the study we investigate a method of deliberation that has the potential to solve many of these problems. We examined these principles of local planning in Malta, New York, a town of about 14,000 residents on the cusp of considerable development (US Census 2010). Not only is it located in one of the fastest growing counties in New York, but it is currently the site of the largest construction project in North America, a \$4.6 billion computer chip factory expected to create 1,400 direct jobs, and over 5,000 auxiliary support jobs (U.S. Census; Times Union; Success Magazine). Caleb Stratton, a town planner in Malta, estimates that the town will grow between 170% and 340% over the next 18 years to a population of 25,000 - 45,000, based on

growth in 7 other communities where similar plants have come in (28 Feb 2011). Malta is currently considered by most to be a “bedroom community”, exhibiting classic elements of sprawl, but a high-profile discussion in the town about increasing density may change that.

During the course of this study, the town was invested in discussions of their recently created Downtown Plan. The plan was developed by the ‘Downtown Planning Team’, nine residents selected by the town board to spearhead the plan. They held sixteen meetings from Jan 2010 to Jan 2011. These meetings focused on the discussion between team members, not between the public and team members, as the only time allotted for input by the public was at the end of the meeting. The main goal of the plan was to implement smart growth principles of increasing density in an area designated as the ‘Downtown Corridor’ with taller buildings and smaller lot sizes.

The debate in the town centered on this increasing density and size of the downtown and we heard several sides of the debate in our interviews and in attending town meetings. Those in favor of a denser and more urban downtown contend that growth is imminent and, for this reason, a denser downtown is needed to preserve space in the outlying neighborhoods. They also argue that denser development will create a stronger sense of place and community. Most of the town board represented this view or a similar one; several cited speaking with planning consultants or attending planning conferences as a reason for their position (Klotz 18 Feb 2011; Ruisi 19 Mar 2011).

Those that oppose an urban downtown represent primarily two viewpoints. Some contend that the town is anticipating too much growth and that large, urban development projects will remain vacant and unfilled; others want to resist growth in the downtown, claiming it will change the ‘rural, family town’ character of Malta, people representing this view often cite traffic in the

downtown corridor as a primary concern. Even these views are at odds: the former disagrees with the amount of growth that is expected while the latter simply wants to avoid growth, particularly in the downtown area. Many in opposition also value private property and driving too much to favor a dense, walkable downtown. The primary voice for positions that oppose a dense, urban downtown is Town Supervisor Paul Sausville; in an interview Sausville assumed both oppositional viewpoints at times, despite their conflicting assumptions on the amount of growth (8 Apr 2011). Sausville has also cited the financial implications of making the downtown walkable along with the need the downtown will create for a paid fire department and more police (Sausville 2011); it is unclear, however, whether less dense growth would actually mitigate costs or increase them.

Because of these clear divisions in viewpoints in Malta it is an ideal location to examine the planning process. In this study, we analyze several overlapping realms that are potentially at the bottom of resistance to smart growth in Malta and suggest a new method for community discussions on planning.

2. Methods

We examined both the current and previous downtown plans and accompanying presentations to get a concrete understanding of what specific elements and governing zoning laws the town planners are and were using to push the town to develop in a particular fashion. We reviewed the stakeholder interviews conducted by the downtown planning committee. We used this comprehensive, albeit non-exhaustive, amount of historical context and knowledge to

create a timeline to allow us as researchers to visualize the events and their implications on a temporal scale.

During the course of the study we attended three town board meetings and one town workshop in order to gain an idea of the discussions in the town. We paid close attention to the people attending and their participation in the discussion. In order to get more in depth into town discussions and to understand more of the background, we reviewed relevant town materials like the 2011 Malta Downtown Plan and the 2005 Comprehensive Plan as well as local news and op-ed articles.

We also interviewed members of the local government including: four of the five members of the Malta Town Board: Peter Klotz, Maggi Ruisi, Tara Thomas, John Hartzell and Town Supervisor Paul Sausville); department employees including Audrey Ball (Parks and Rec. Dept. Head), Anthony Tozzi (Bldg & Planning Coordinator), Caleb Stratton and Sophia Marruso (Planners), and Paul Perrault (Town Historian). We recorded all interviews with an audio recorder. Specific attention was paid to our status as outsiders, our potential to be impartial and our respondents' potential for judgement (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions). We asked interviewees to discuss the scale and nature of development plans and perceptions of participation (Raco 2000, McCann and Eugene 2002, Lowndes et al. 2001). We aimed to gain an understanding of perceptions of urban sprawl from these community leaders as well as their connectedness with and understandings of community sentiments related to growth (see Appendix A for interview questions). These interviews served both as a discourse on the history of Malta politics and planning, an indicator of the current perceived state of local community involvement, and a method for measuring opinions held by elites.

3. Public Participation and Deliberation

3.1 Literature Review

Public involvement is vital to a legitimate and effective local planning process. Active public participation in policy and planning is necessary because: it ensures that the public's basic right to expressing personal values and preferences is fulfilled (Rydin & Pennington 2000). Arnstein (1969) argues that participation guarantees inclusion for have-nots currently excluded from political and economic processes; thus, citizen participation legitimizes political processes as democratic.

Participation also improves the final outcome of policies. Rydin & Pennington (2000) assert that citizen participation in planning further improves the effectiveness of the final policy because the "public hold key resources of knowledge that policy actors need." The National Research Council (1996) echoes this sentiment and further contends that synthesizing public concerns and knowledge with policy goals ensures that those most affected by policy changes are given the opportunity to inform and discuss such changes. In local democratic governments, active public participation is required and necessary.

Research within the past five decades provides important insight into factors that influence participation, barriers to civil engagement and ways to improve public involvement. There are a variety of forms of participation ranging from traditional (the public meeting), to those eliciting individual responses (surveys), and to those encouraging group deliberation and consensus (focus groups, consensus conference). Each of these forms provides a different input,

a different amount of power in the decision making process and potentially different outcomes – each form will also attract input from different residents.

Lowndes et al. (2006) identifies three principal factors that influence participation: socio-economic status including education, social capital (social networks and community cohesion) and institutional design (the governing body). They go on to suggest that improved institutional design is the easiest way to increase participation and that an effective institutional framework can even overcome socio-economic, educational and social capital barriers. Many others emphasize the important role of the governing body in encouraging residents to participate (Arnstein 1969; Verba et al. 1995; Foley & Edward 1996; Lowndes et al. 2006). In case studies of different political processes in action, Beirerle & Konisky (2000) identified three important characteristics of successful participation: “1) Good deliberative processes with an emphasis on consensus; 2) good two-way communication between participants and government agencies; and 3) obvious government commitment to the process;” more importantly, they go on to conclude that all of these characteristics were “highly influenced by lead agencies” (599). The role of the governing body in reinforcing a message inviting active involvement is clear and necessary. In this study, we explored modifications to institutional design that can increase participation and deliberation in planning decisions.

While participation refers to the inclusion of individuals in government, deliberation is what occurs when individuals come to participate. High quality deliberation has been identified as a ‘talk-centric’ discourse focused on argumentation and persuasion (Steenbergen et al. 2003). Ackerman & Fishkin (2002) stress that good deliberation at town meetings should be between small groups of residents with a focus on drawing consensus. Steenbergen et al. (2003) emphasize the importance for the justification of particular stances in order to establish validity

and logical reasoning. This type of deliberation, Fishkin (2003) elaborates, is necessary to clarify the issues and their possible solutions and to help residents discuss the differing viewpoints; for these reasons, this process often features mediators. Good deliberation leads to more informed citizens, and, as often is the case with information gain, citizens' opinions change. It also results in a higher degree of preference 'structuration', meaning that those involved better understand their positions and how they differ from others (Fishkin 2003; Steenbergen et al. 2003).

Could poor participation and deliberation be at the core of a rejection of smart growth principles by local governments? This view would suggest that giving the public a greater chance to offer input into local planning decisions would create more sustainable communities. More importantly, it suggests that better quality deliberation would more effectively inform and educate residents on the various benefits and drawbacks of specific development patterns – creating a space to make an informed case for smart growth principles.

3.2 Results

3.2.1 Public Participation in Malta

In attending town board meetings we found that turnout remained generally low (12-16 residents) and the residents largely seemed uninterested and inattentive. Some residents used these meetings for social interaction (socializing during breaks and often during the meetings themselves) while others during meetings appeared inattentive – occasionally 1 or 2 residents were seen knitting or looking at magazines.

From our discussions most individuals involved in the town admitted that public participation was relatively low. Perrault rated active public participation as low and largely as a result of the dominance of the Republican party in the town (1 Mar 2011). Caleb Stratton, a town

planner, explained that he believed that less than 5% of the population is active and that the only opinions that are vocal are from the extreme views (28 Feb 2011). Paul Sausville, the town supervisor, spoke of a “silent majority” of residents that oppose smart growth principles. He also mentioned that getting people involved was becoming more of a challenge (8 Apr 2011); Peter Klotz, another town board member, labelled this same group as a “vocal minority” (18 Feb 2011). These two opposite terms for the same viewpoint suggests a disconnect between political leadership and residents probably as a result of such low participation.

Despite the differing viewpoints on public opinion, the majority of town officials were confident about their understandings of public sentiments. They named methods sponsored by the town including planning meetings, a downtown planning committee of citizens, stakeholder interviews, and workshops along with informal discussions with residents in the town as being effective ways to gauge public preferences. When town officials on both sides of the sprawl/smart growth debate were asked about the opposing officials’ understanding of public opinion, however, they claimed that the opposition was out of touch with the public.

3.2.2 Public Deliberation in Malta

If residents did choose to attend meetings and participate in the local government, there was little opportunity for informed discussion. During the course of these meetings, presenters would stand at the podium but face and address the town board, often turning any presentation materials towards the board and away from the audience. Questions would be encouraged from the board, but not the general public. When giving updates department heads did not stand at the podium with a microphone (often making them hard to hear) and rarely stood at all; department heads also only addressed the town board and largely ignored the residents in the audience. Because of their unplanned seating arrangement and choice not to address the audience, it was

hard to know the face of the department heads, let alone feel included. A resident commented: “We don’t know who you are. You got a bunch of town officials in the corner sitting over there playing with their computer. And they don’t even stand up when they’re addressed. You got a desk and chairs right there at the front [of the room], you should all be sitting there. Sit there and let people see who you are not sitting back in the corner with a cigar and beer.” In general, attending a town meeting appeared to be more of a chance to *witness* the political decision-making process rather than to directly *participate* in it. This was probably a reason for the low turnout and disengaged audience.

When the Downtown Plan came to discussion in town board meetings there was a significant amount of disagreement on the board. Supervisor Sausville was the most outspoken board member in these discussions, often speaking for several minutes explaining his disapproval of the plan. Neither side of the debate would address specific points made by the opposition, instead opting to expound their own positions. Audrey Ball commented on this and its effect on the community: “as opposed to standing up as a unified group now – the politicians are split. That type of splintering also splinters the community” (19 Mar 2011).

The town board did accept comments from the public prior to voting on the Downtown Plan, but their decision to vote on the plan during the same meeting suggests that the plan was rigid beyond public input. We found most of the speakers either simply declared that they liked the plan or went into specific detail about the technical aspects of the plan like building heights and setbacks – some argued for seemingly arbitrary changes in the number of building stories or setbacks. It appeared to us that these speakers were missing the big picture and getting caught in specifics. One speaker debated with himself over the right size for setbacks and building stories before expressing specific frustration with the political structure: “What are you voting on? I’ve

seen 8 people talk or 7 now, and no specifics. So what are we asking you to vote on and what are you asking us to expect?” The town supervisor responded and informed the citizen that this meeting “isn’t really a Q and A session” and that the plan was available online and at the public library. The citizen responded with “a lot of us don’t go to the library, and a lot of us don’t have computers”; apparently disappointed with the efforts made by the town to familiarize citizens with the plan. Although we did not attend any planning meetings where the town would have informed citizens of details of the plan and allowed for input, one town official told us that the planning consultant company “basically led the meeting”, there were never any breakout groups and, like all other workshops and town meetings, public comments were saved to the end. Ball explained: “I heard from a lot of people that they would go to the meetings but weren’t a part of the meetings. May have been given a chance at the end to speak but not given an opportunity to be a part of the dialogue – not a part of the process” (19 Mar 2011).

Several town officials indicated that the town has changed how it holds planning meetings. They explained that during the development of the 2005 Comprehensive Town Plan the town focused on interactive community planning with maps, pictures and town walkabouts to discuss the desires of residents. One official mentioned that many participants she had never seen before would often show up to these meetings, suggesting it was more inclusive. These officials expressed their belief that this was a more effective method of involving the public, weighing planning decisions and gauging public opinion.

3.3 Discussion

Our observations of town meetings did not fit our criteria for adequate public participation or deliberation. Participation was low at these meetings and, although it is hard to say why, the lack of engagement between the political leadership and the residents in attendance

is a possible cause. It may not seem worth it to the average resident to attend these meetings because they are not a space for dialogue. The audience was rarely addressed in these meetings and, instead, the conversation remained primarily among the town board. This did not fit our criteria for discussions that include residents, if not solely featuring residents. This exclusion from the conversation may be a reason for why some residents of Malta have been reluctant in accepting some aspects of the Downtown Plan since, as Ball suggested, they cannot accept an outcome whose development process they were not included in. Residents in attendance were also rarely given the opportunity to make comments and when they were given time to make comments they were not approached in a conversational way. Comments were taken and that was that.

When planning related discussion did occur, mainly among the town board, the discussion rarely developed beyond town board members simply listing their reasons for approval or rejection. Back and forth discussion where town board members addressed specific points made by the opposition was sparse. This kept the quality of the discussion low as it never developed into in-depth dialogue and analysis of arguments and, as a result, never built consensus among the group - a key component of high quality deliberation. The lack of analysis also removed the possibility of determining the exact reasoning for any particular belief which, in turn, does not allow for misconceptions to be corrected. For example, Sausville often cited the financial implications of a dense downtown as a reason to reject it, including a paid fire department and more police patrol cars. It was never brought to his attention by other board members, however, that denser development reduces these costs by limiting the coverage area for such services – precisely one of the tenets of smart growth development. It was as if the town board was satisfied with continual disagreement.

Many researchers agree that it is up to the governing body to take the extra step to fully engage citizens and encourage their participation (Arnstein 1969; Verba et al. 1995; Foley & Edward 1996; Lowndes et al. 2006), but the structure for town board and planning meetings as well as feedback from, albeit few, residents does not meet this criteria and suggests a lack of effort on the side of the local government to truly engage residents. Ball's indication that meetings had been conducted differently in recent years by focusing on addressing the public through community planning also suggests that the town is capable of doing more. The lack of a framework for citizens to effectively express preferences, whether policy or outcome, inhibits the political process.

Along with failing to encourage participation, the structure of these meetings does not encourage a process of deliberation among residents and political leaders as laid out by Fishkin (1995). The majority of planning meetings focused on discussion among Downtown Planning Team members and did not include any discussion with residents, instead opting for a section of public comments at the end. The failure to have an in-depth dialogue on planning with justification of stances and beliefs, as identified by Steenbergen et al. (2003) and Ackerman & Fishkin (2003), is a failure to have adequate deliberation over planning topics. This has prevented real conversation on the reasons for and benefits of smart growth and the drawbacks of sprawl development. We believe it is at the core of the rejection of smart growth principles and, specifically, the Malta Downtown Plan by some residents and leaders in Malta.

4. Political Representation

4.1 Literature Review

Representation is the process in which constituents elect officials to endorse both their policy and outcome preferences. The classic understanding of how representation works under the assumption that politicians have a strong interest in being reelected. Politicians are held accountable for representing their constituents views and when they fail to do so “citizens [will] replace them with those who promise to be better delegates” (Arnold 1993, 403). This generally accepted principle is called electoral accountability (Prewitt 1970). However, studies have called into question the principle of electoral accountability by showing that individual voters are generally ignorant about officials’ policy actions (Miller & Stokes 1962). This model of representation only works when citizens evaluate their representatives based on their positions and actions and vote based on that evaluation.

Citizens affect outcomes through the electoral process. Miller & Stokes (1964) found that constituents influence legislation either by electing officials whose opinions are aligned with themselves or by electing an official whose perceptions of her constituents’ opinions allow her to satisfy their interests, regardless of her own. Thomassen (1994) frames this similarly by asking “should deputies act according to the will of their constituencies or according to their own mature judgement?” (238). We refer to these two pathways as the trustee and delegate models, respectively. Miller & Stokes (1964) note a shortcoming of this latter pathway in that the elected tend to have “very imperfect information about the issue preferences of his constituency, and the constituency’s policy stands of the representative is ordinarily very slight“ (56). Miller and Stokes would argue that a representative who votes on her own opinions that differ from the public would be dysfunctional democracy.

In contrast, many researchers argue that, because of imperfect information held by constituents, representatives should act on their own judgement to carry out the will of the public (Eulau 1967; Arnold 1993). Arnold (1993) contends that the trustee model fails because it assumes that citizens have outcome preferences for what they want *and* policy preferences for how to get there – he asserts that most citizens lack these policy preferences. Eulau et al (1959) suggest that representation merely refers to the method with which deputies were chosen and adds legitimacy to the process – in this sense, representation refers to how officials are chosen, not how they make their decisions.

Are these divergent models of representation barriers to smart growth? As Arnold (1993) points out, the trustee model relies on residents educated on policy alternatives in order to be effective. Citizen rejection of smart growth principles may be a result of citizens *without* technical planning knowledge dictating to ‘trustee’ representatives strongly adhering to their constituents. In a delegate model, smart growth principles may have an advantage because representatives would likely choose to adhere to the planning experts and their own mature judgment in favor of those principles. However, the delegate model may fail since electoral accountability suggests that if representatives fail to effectively inform the public of the tradeoffs and benefits of smart growth, the public may continue to disapprove of the representatives’ policy choice and elect a replacement. The underlying principle in the effective implementation of either model is that the public must be informed in some way of the tradeoffs of smart growth. Downs (2005) stresses this as the principal challenge for smart growth proponents. Proper knowledge allows the public to effectively prescribe smart growth principles for representatives to implement in the trustee model and knowledge allows the public to accept policies that representatives create to initiate smart growth in the delegate model.

4.2 Results & Discussion

In Malta, town board elections are limited in their ability to translate the public's views into policy because it is difficult to gauge public opinion, citizens may have conflicting policy and outcome preferences, there is limited opportunity for voters to replace officials they do not approve of, and elected officials are representing the same constituents but interpreting different conclusions.

The five most recent elections (2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009) in Malta saw a range of voters from as low as 1,674 in 2003 to as high as 5,672 in 2006 with an average of around 3,200 (Saratoga County Government). Malta had a population of 13,005 in 2000 with 9,517 that are 18 years of age or older so we can deduct that at any given local election in Malta, about 34% of the constituency can be expected to vote. It is difficult to gauge public opinion in Malta through voting because of the limited portion of the population actually voting. We hypothesize that another reason it is hard to gauge public opinion is because of the lack of media attention and salience of local decisions in the constituency perception.

One reason that representation fails in Malta is the lack of alternative, opposing candidates. In the 2003 and 2005, there were only two individuals running for the two town councilman positions, both of the Republican Party. In 2007 and 2009, there were three individuals running for two councilman positions. In 2007, there was only one individual in the running for town supervisor. We can see from these elections that even if the constituents were dissatisfied with the policy performance of elected officials in many cases they do not have the opportunity to replace the official with someone more closely aligned to their preferences. This suggests that town board members have the opportunity to make decisions without fear of electoral accountability.

For the second part of our representation analysis we asked the two-part question: what model of representation are officials following in Malta and what affect does that have on outcomes related to smart growth? Although public officials exhibited qualities of both the trustee and delegate models of representation, in interviews they tended to lean toward one model. Paul Sausville has adamantly stood by his view of public opinion, consistently opposing the downtown plan on the basis of his understanding of the ‘silent majority’ that would prefer rural/suburban development and citing his self-conducted survey as evidence. When asked about how to compromise his opinion with the public’s view his response indicated that ideally his decisions would reflect the will of his constituents (8 Apr 2011).

Most other town officials expressed that, although incorporating the residents’ views was important, their own education on the issues and the opinions of consultants were just as important if not more so. Klotz indicated that “there’s a measure of taking the pulse of the community but there’s also a measure of listening to the consultants and the people who talk about why this makes sense in the long run” (18 Feb 2011). He continued to discuss that it is necessary for leaders to have their own vision and for them to educate the public on this vision. Maggi Ruisi, another town board member, described her own transition from previously opposing a dense downtown plan to supporting the current plan for denser development after learning specifically more about planning. She noted that “the public doesn’t have the ability to attend planning seminars and learn all the things that I’ve had the opportunity to learn” and when asked if it is then her job as a town board member to use that knowledge that is unavailable to the general public to make decisions she responded: “Absolutely.” (19 Mar 2011).

This dichotomy between listening to specific policy interests of the public and using expert knowledge to make decisions represents the opposition between the trustee and delegate

models of representation as posed by Thomassen (2005). Sausville's adherence to the policy preferences of who he sees as the majority represents Arnold's (1993) primary criticism of the trustee view of representation – that residents often hold imperfect information about policy preferences. Residents pushing for specific policy changes like 1-2 story buildings without knowing the tradeoffs associated with that opinion has led to some strong resistance to smart growth by Sausville.

Interestingly, approaching development from the view of the delegate model may have drawbacks when proper public deliberation and education has not taken place. A lack of this deliberation and public involvement could be the reason for why many vocal residents still do not support of the Downtown Plan and resistant to the efforts of some town board members to implement smart growth principles.

5. Visualizing Growth

5.1 Visual Assessment Studies

In the second part of this project, we explored a promising way of conducting planning discussions that addresses the need for more effective participation, deliberation and representation. Many planning and transportation researchers have begun adopting the use of images in order to help residents better conceptualize development options for their communities. They have been show to better engage the public in planning discussions, help inform the public on tradeoffs of development patterns, and gain a better understanding of the public's preferences. Many argue that visualizations are vital to increasing public engagement

because they transcend barriers posed by language, race and socio-economics, and also do not require technical knowledge by the residents – a challenge often faced by planners (King et al. 1989; Al-Kodmany 2002). Bailey & Grossardt (2004) assert that visualizations are more informative and accessible than written planning descriptions or specifications and lead to more comprehension by citizens.

Visual assessment surveys are the most well established and common method for visualizing planning. These surveys have successfully been employed to help design urban and transportation infrastructure (Nelessen 1994; Ewing 2001; Ewing et al. 2005). This process usually involves showing images of existing infrastructure in other places with both dramatic and slight differences followed by a period where participants rate or discuss the locations (Ewing et al. 2005). Researchers can then use either the ratings or discussions to gauge the preferences of the participants. Researchers then correlate evaluations of the scene with particular characteristics exhibited by each scene in order to determine the particular preferences of the participants (Nelessen 1994; Ewing et al. 2005). Many surveys been conducted to look at specific development characteristics for design but few have used them to look at development densities; Constantine (1992) did find, however, that when presented with a visual preference survey residents gave highly positive reactions to dense, urban townhouses over other options. In general, visual assessment studies have been a popular and useful tool in the urban planning world and have been shown to improve both public participation and outcomes (Al-Kodmany 1999, Tress and Tress 2002, Soliva and Hunziker 2008).

5.2 Methods

In our discussion groups we used photographs and diagrams to start a group discussion about the content of the photographs. We carefully selected a variety of images and image pairs

to create a fourteen page document. We compiled images which represented a range of different scales of development (from rural to suburban to urban) and also represented the different attributes addressed in zoning; especially building heights, setbacks, and usage. We reviewed professional and scholarly presentations on smart growth, walkability, New Urbanism and other related topics and pulled the most compelling and representative images. Additionally, we used the street view feature in Google Earth Pro to capture images in cities identified by the EPA to exemplify smart growth. Finally, we decided to show some images adjacent to the aerial view of the same area to provide additional context as to what the larger area looks like. We hoped these paired images would encourage participants to talk about development in a broader sense and recognize tradeoffs between different patterns of development.

To select our participants we gathered contact information from sign-in sheets from previous town hall and planning meetings. We asked town board members and planning board members for contact information of people that they knew who might be interested; including a list of stakeholders previously identified and interviewed by the planning board. We posted a notice of the times and locations of the discussion on a housing development message board. An interested individual reiterated our notice in another popular blog; the Malta Times Union blog. Finally, we used snowball sampling in an effort to increase our sample size; we asked our participants to identify other potential participants for our focus groups.

Despite our many sources for participants, few returned our requests and the majority that did respond either refused or confirmed their attendance but eventually did not come. We held two discussions with three different citizens at the centrally-located local community center. We first asked the participants to take about 30 seconds viewing each photograph or set of photographs. We then asked participants to imagine they were living or considering living in this

community and then asked them to share their general evaluation of the image with the group - this offered an initial point of discussion for the images. We then asked 1-3 questions for each pair of photographs as the conversation needed in order to evoke thoughtful analysis of the walkability, aesthetics, and sense of community they would expect (see Appendix B for focus group questions).

The visual component of our discussion groups also had the intention of allowing participants to talk about the sort of things that they would and would not like to see in their town without interference of technical jargon about setbacks, building heights and other specifics (King et al 1989, Al-Kodmany 2002, Bailey & Grossardt 2004). Additionally, the small group setting was expected to give participants the opportunity to speak about their preferences and respond to the thoughts of others.

Since many of our participants also participated in Malta Downtown Planning workshops we asked them to compare the quality and depth of focus group discussions sparked by images with the methods used by the town to run these workshops. The goal of these focus groups had three parts: to determine residents' opinions on growth and sprawl, to determine if images can spark in-depth group discussion, and lastly to discover if this method can reduce resistance to smart growth principles by helping participants internalize its benefits.

5.3 Results

Although turnout for our focus groups was low, the results were promising. Those that participated became aware of the tradeoffs inherent in different patterns of development as a result of the process. As suggested by Fishkin (1995; 2003) the very knowledge that they were participating in this event likely encouraged them to engage those around them and learn more about the topic at hand.

Those involved talked generally talked about a different set of concerns and issues than at the town board meeting. One participant spoke a lot about daily or weekly shopping as a consideration: “See, I think something like this is good because you drive to one place, you can go and pick up your cleaners, you can pick up your Chinese takeout, you can get your haircut, you can bank, you can do all of your stuff right there, but again its not that big scope of your weekly shopping its all of your put-put little errands”. Aesthetics of structures were more frequently discussed.

While discussing page 5 of the visual assessment packet (Appendix C) two of the participants realized that they had conflicting opinions when it came to the future of Malta in terms of walkability:

Participant 1: “What I think we’re getting into is more drive-ability, pull in, pull out.... and that’s what I see Malta is going to become.”

Participant 2: “In my mind I actually see things a little differently. I see there being a real walkable downtown”

Participant 1: “you think...?”

Participant 2: “I do, because I don’t see businesses spread out as much as they are today. I see more buildings like Ellsworth where its mixed-use...”

It’s clear that the interaction between the two participants was more engaging. The focus group setting allowed them to play off of each others ideas and build arguments in a cohesive, respectful and productive way. After this dialogue Participant 1 accepted the opposing ideas verbally and gestures of agreement. Participant 1 went on to state that he would personally rather live a little bit further out and have a little bigger house, but showed new-found comprehension of the principles of smart growth.

A similar disagreement manifested over the discussion of page10 in the visual assessment packet. This particular image depicts two different configuration schemes for the same number of housing units; one has a dense center surrounded by open land representing smart growth, and the other has a relatively equal distribution of land between the housing units representing suburban sprawl. In this particular image, Participant 1 initially described the sprawl image favorably, concern about property values led to his opinion:

Participant 1: “This would be worth more to me: to pay to do this (sprawl) then to do this (smart growth). Well the lots are bigger and if I compared the two and the accessibility here, this just doesn’t make any sense.

Participant 2: “I have a different view. (laughter) I think this is the American model and this is the European model. The European model from, really, a long time ago and still today, is a high density community... You still have park space, agricultural space, open space that you can do more with.”

Participant 1: “Based on private ownership this would be better because you have more land, you have more space to use.”

Participant 2: “Well yeah... (but) if i can put in the same number of housing units... it makes a walkable community and then we think about what are the kind of things that we do on the outskirts.”

After Participant 2 elaborated on his preference for the smart growth diagram, Participant 1 showed signs of understanding the reasoning for it and openness to supporting it. Again, here we see a quality interaction between the two participants in which they expressly detail the tradeoffs involved in different development patterns, particularly smart growth. By the end of their deliberation both participants clearly see the logic in the others view. Participant 1 begun

expressing understanding and even agreement with smart growth principles (even though they conflicted with some of his personal property values). The two participants then connected the images with Malta; referring to the smart growth diagram: “There’s little elements in Malta with all of that too”.

5.4 Analysis

From the interactions and discussions of the images in the visual assessment discussion groups we found three important trends: participants developed new understanding of the different patterns of development and consequences at stake, participants were frustrated with the current political system, and the deliberation we witnessed in our visual assessment discussion groups fits the established criteria for good deliberation,.

The first trend we observed was that participants were able to interact with each other and the images to find new understandings and interpretations of different patterns of development. One participant appeared to have formed a completely new understanding and appreciation of the rationale behind smart growth principles. The discussions were respectful and productive and even enjoyable; participants laughed and seemed to enjoy being there.

The second trend was that participants expressed serious frustration with the current political system and forum for discussion while at the same time commending the visual assessment discussion group as an enjoyable, worthwhile and productive activity. Participant 3 said of the method, “I kind of do [think this is an effective way to discuss planning], because I think it makes more sense for people to get a visual”. Participant 2 said “I think it is a good exercise. I think it’s a good exercise to really kind of draw out how different people react to different things. And it does certainly provide a time for contemplation”.

The final and most significant trend we observed was that visual assessment discussion groups significantly improve the quality of deliberation as compared to the town board meetings. The discussion groups were talk-centric—the participants were actively engaged in the activity by speaking and responding to each other. This is an improvement over the static nature of town board meetings where residents speak at the town board members or don't speak at all. Participants discussed values and preferences in terms of real life examples in the form of images. Since these images were right in front of the participants, the discussion was mostly realistic and fact-based and no prior knowledge was necessary or assumed, which further distinguishes this method from the traditional town meeting. Recall the previously mentioned comment and response at the downtown plan meeting where the town supervisor was unable to respond to the concerns and questions on the specifics of the downtown plan:

Citizen: “So what are we asking you to vote on and what are you asking us to expect? And what are you asking of us as residents of the town?”

Town Supervisor: “OK, this isn't really a Q and A session, but I will point out that the plan is on the website, available in our library and available in the town hall.”

In addition to the flexibility that allowed participants to ask questions, an additional benefit of our method was that there was less debate on indefinite issues (such as how traffic will change, and what vacancy rates will be) and more of a focus on the overarching issue of what places the participants would and would not like to live in as well as why they feel the way they do. In stark contrast to the comments during the downtown plan meeting, technical language was avoided for the most part; there was little mention of setbacks, density, build-out capacities and

other abstracted terms. We found that these terms were not need for an effective discussion as pointed out by King et al. (1989).

We also found that our participants appeared to approach agreement in opinions and preferences, which suggests our method may encourage consensus. At town board meetings the onus of consensus is placed upon the town board members themselves, which rarely happens, and citizens are not challenged to understand the opposing views. In the discussion of Image 6, we saw that one participant initially approved of the environment but had a change of opinion after he was challenged by the other participant:

Participant 1: “This could probably be really good if you’re think about the 4 lanes out there out on Route 9... you could pull off and then park and then pull back onto the main drag. “

Participant 2: “I’m not so crazy about it... The stop in place on the way – that’s what I see... we have an opportunity to build what we want here and I wouldn’t wanna build that. This reminds me more of a Clifton park versus a Saratoga Springs downtown”

Participant 1: “Clifton park – really? I would consider this Central Ave – Market Street up to Allen Street.”

Participant 2: “Yeah and that’s a pretty dead area.”

Participant 1: “Yeah it is a pretty dead area.”

Participant 1: “I think it’s a dead area because there’s been effort put into building the kinda things elsewhere that people go to.”

Participant 1 “Yeah I don’t think it’s planned. Yeah. I don’t like that. Its just unsettling. Doesn’t work for me.... I don’t like that. It’s crap.”

We can see here that once the first participant took some time to think about the image and what it would be like to interact in that place he changed his opinion from initial approval to complete disgust in concordance with the other participant.

It should be noted that while this method has established benefits, it is a significant departure from the accepted institutional, political and legal norms in local government procedure. Visual assessment discussion groups have no legal standing in local government and therefore cannot serve as a replacement for the current standard town board meetings. And finally, resident discussions based in visual images are neither practical nor necessary for most political issues; local government deals with a host of minor decisions on a weekly basis. Our method is appropriate for town planning decisions because of the scale and significance of the potential consequences at stake, the public interest, and the perceived shortcomings of public knowledge of the consequences.

6. Conclusion

We found participation in Malta to be relatively low and found the structure for inclusion in the planning process to be of low quality. We also found education related to the specific principles of smart growth was missing – which seemed to explain much of the resistance to those attempting to implement smart growth. We hypothesized that a more inclusive, interactive and informative method of deliberation was needed not only to increase public participation but to improve the quality of debate and, most importantly, help residents understand the reasons for smart growth. We believed that this, in turn, would generate more support for it and legitimize the political process.

Visual assessment discussion groups are a promising method for exploring planning options in local government and solving problems associated with public participation and deliberation. It has the potential to provide an accessible method for participation, particularly for residents without technical planning knowledge, and to be a deliberative process that imparts information to residents on reasons for smart growth – a process which could help residents internalize the tradeoffs of smart growth and, as a result, support it.

While the results from our visual assessment discussion group were promising, our sample size severely limits our ability to draw conclusions. We suggest that future studies spend more resources on the visual assessment discussion group. In order to improve attendance these meetings should be publicized well in advance. Additionally researchers could investigate the use of a small monetary incentive or lottery to encourage a different set of potential participants. In addition to the sampling methods utilized in this paper we suggest paper fliers as a way of reaching an additional demographic of people who may not be involved in local politics or in the online community.

While we think this method may reduce resistance to smart growth, we understand that it is a possibility that even with high levels of participation and quality deliberation the public may still select a less sustainable pattern of development. In our interview with Tony Tozzi he told us a fitting anecdote:

“One of our planners actually said, ‘we don’t think this is going to work and here’s why’...and [the downtown planning team] said ‘we understand what you’re saying and we understand where we’re going, don’t take this the wrong way, but we wanna go in the direction we’re going’...and I said ‘guys, this is the way the process works this is not your plan it’s the community’s plan’”.

In other words if it is established and demonstrated to the public that there is a more sustainable and better way to accommodate growth and the public still chooses a opposing pattern of development than the officials should enforce the will of their constituency. We are confident, however, that creating a more effective method of deliberating that helps citizens internalize the reasons for ‘smarter’ growth would be convincing enough. Improving the local decision making by helping both political leaders and residents understand the implications of varying types of development is crucial to stopping the sprawl in its tracks. If we can do this, then we can finally begin to build more sustainable communities.

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Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions

What is growth and is it the ultimate goal?

What are the consequences when you do not manage growth?

How much are lifestyles going to change in Malta?

Do you think the average citizen understands the weight and scale of these changes facing Malta?

Do you think the average is well informed on the different sides debate on planning in Malta?

What are the different sides of the debate on planning in Malta?

Do you think the debate in Malta is a healthy one?

Where do you stand?

What are the main factors that influence your position?

How active is the average citizen in local government?

How do you gauge public opinion?

What is your perception of the public's stance on growth and planning?

How do you come to this understanding?

Do you think the local government is effective in engaging citizens?

Has there ever been a situation where your opinion has differed from the majority of the public?

If the views of a consultant vary from the views of the public, how do you reconcile the two?

Appendix B: Visual Assessment Discussion Group Questions

1. Image Discussion

What do you think of this image?

What do you think the community would be like in a place like this?

Would you want to live in or near a place like this?

How would you get around in a place like this?

What do you make of the relationship between these two images (the aerial view and the street view)?

What do you think of this place aesthetically?

2. Participation

What do you think of the town board meetings?

What do you think of the political process in Malta?

Can you tell us what the town workshops were like?

3. Method Review

We'd like to hear your thoughts about this exercise.

What is it like to look at these pictures and talk about them as places to live?

Notes:

We sometimes asked participants to define the terms that they used (this looks too dense, this looks like sprawl, this looks like crap)

Once we were underway on the discussion, the participants would sometimes discuss the images without any prompt.

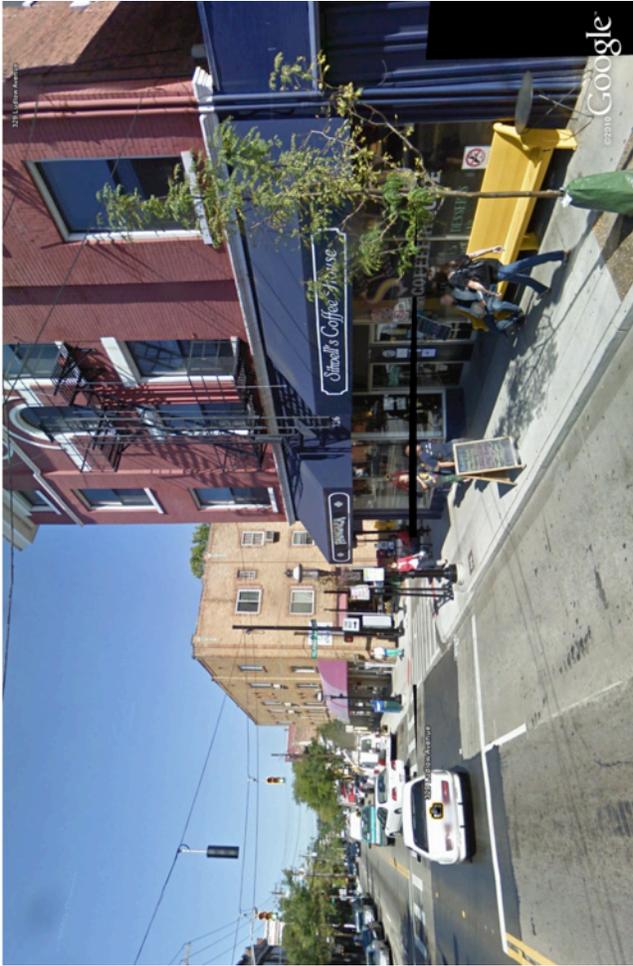
Appendix C: Images from Visual Assessment Discussions

Appendix C: Visual Assessment Packet

1





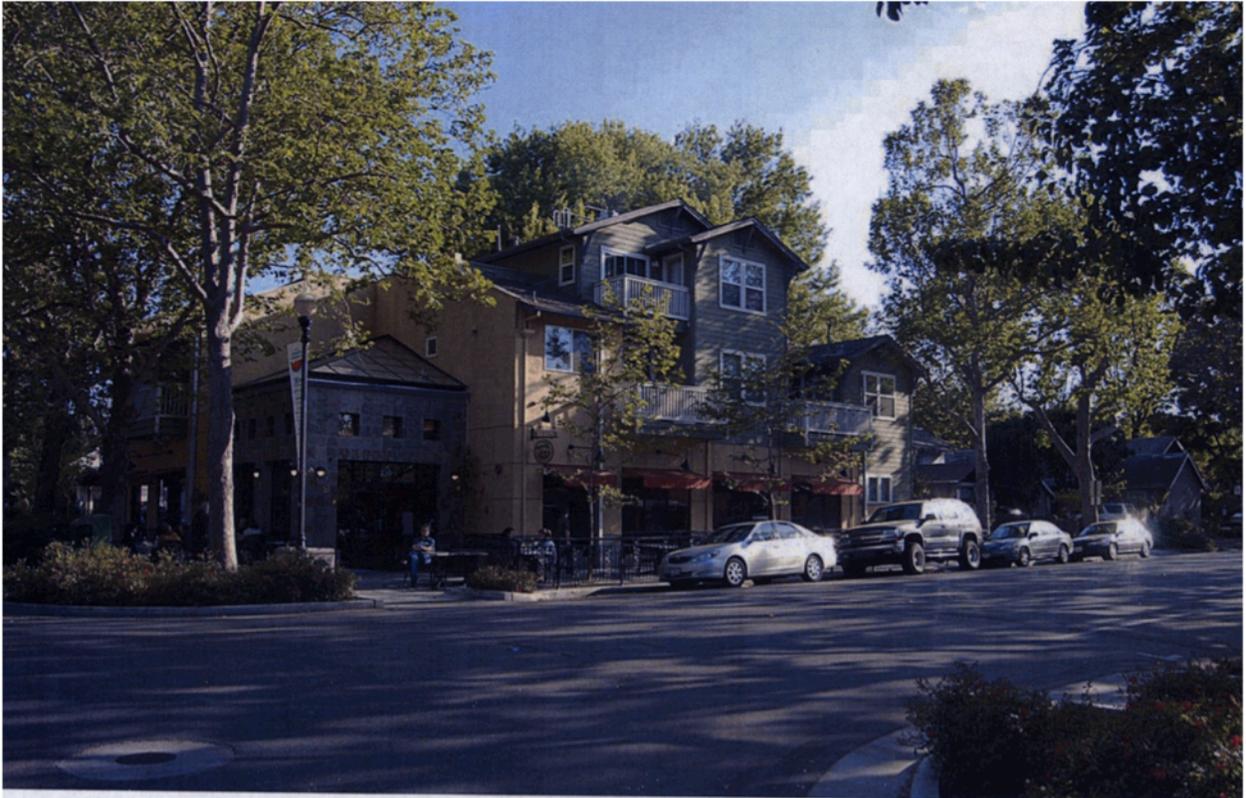


Note: the red dot represents where the opposite photo was taken from













Note: these images are meant to represent the same total number of housing units, just in different configurations the left image represents sprawl, and the right image represents smart growth



Note: following image is taken from the downtown area of this aerial

