MEMORANDUM

To: Charlottesville City Council
From: PLACE Design Task Force
RE: Project Case Study Discussion, Installment #1
Date: October 21, 2014

As part of its 2014-2015 agenda, PLACE is undertaking case studies of local public projects for which PLACE provided a review role. The intent of the case study effort is not to evaluate the designs resulting from the project work, but rather to evaluate the effectiveness of Charlottesville’s public project management process. The evaluation will document the successes and challenges encountered during local public project activities, and will also draw from PLACE’s and staff’s professional expertise and understanding of best management practices. The desired outcome of the case study is a set of recommendations for new policies and/or guidelines that improve the city’s standard processes for managing public projects.

PLACE believes an effective process will ensure that public projects address the appropriate set of design challenges and that project-related information is provided at the right time and in the right place so that citizens and decision-makers in the city are empowered to make good design choices.

PLACE’s steering committee involvement on the SIA and Belmont Bridge Replacement projects—and their shared location—make these projects an appropriate beginning for the case study. Although the SIA redevelopment and Belmont Bridge Replacement projects are on-going, hindsight into their earlier design phases provides PLACE with a useful perspective on the projects’ respective challenges and lessons. The initial discussion about these projects began during the October 2014 monthly PLACE meeting and focused on the topics of Community Engagement and Project Preparation. Preliminary case study action items are included at the end of this memorandum.

Community Engagement

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<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Lesson</th>
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<td>Project areas included very distinct neighborhoods with complex constituencies</td>
<td>Identify the right range of stakeholders and invite them to meet together in neutral places at convenient times</td>
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<td>Stakeholders had different levels of understanding about the design and planning issues embedded in the projects</td>
<td>Provide educational opportunities for stakeholders so that everyone has a shared baseline of information and understanding</td>
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<td>Stakeholders did not know what outcome to expect from the project</td>
<td>Communicate a clear set of expectations and an outline of project principles and deliverables</td>
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<td>Outside consultants may not understand Charlottesville or have a community engagement strategy that works here</td>
<td>Consider using a local public participation facilitator for all projects</td>
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<td>Community stakeholders are in a reactive role during project engagement</td>
<td>Build on the new NEA grant/Bridge PAI project findings for community engagement</td>
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<td>It is difficult to engage the community in defining the urban design problems within their neighborhoods before a project starts</td>
<td>Work proactively to create a “look book” of community images with neighbor participation in order to help people visualize design problems to be solved</td>
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Lesson: Work proactively to engage neighborhoods to record what they like and what they don’t like in their neighborhoods
Lesson: Create a 3-D model of the city or other visualization tools

Challenge: Community fatigue with public participation / people don’t see results
Lesson: Ensure projects are scoped to result in an action, such as construction or a zoning update
Lesson: Create opportunities for immediate positive feedback during steering committee meetings and project-specific public meetings—deliver meeting minutes directly after meetings, provide a clear set of questions and expectations for meetings (and share these expectations in meeting announcements), encourage creative feedback from neighbors, recap questions and answers at the start of the next project meeting to “close the loop” on project issues
Lesson: Publicize project successes and give a copy of project documents to participants

Project Preparation
Challenge: Consultants have a steep learning curve for understanding the city’s history and environment
Lesson: Engage UVA to undertake background research in advance of project initiation / share research findings with new consultants
Lesson: Provide opportunities for neighbors to give project site tours to consultants
Challenge: City RFPs are not consistently well-focused with good problem-definition or appropriate goals
Lesson: Engage neighbors via a steering committee in the RFP writing process
Lesson: Use PLACE for RFP writing support and peer review for design and public infrastructure projects

Challenge: Steering committees for complex community projects are not always identified early in the project planning process
Lesson: Consider developing steering committees that represent a broad and diverse spectrum of constituents to include:
- Residents in affected neighborhoods
- Member of the affected neighborhoods’ business community
- Member of the affected neighborhoods’ long-term institutions, such as churches
- Member of project-related governmental agencies
- Members from city advisory bodies such as Bike/Ped, Tree Commission, PLACE
- A “pass-through” user, such as a county resident

Preliminary Recommendations/Action Items for Council and Staff Consideration
- Establish an on-call city contract for local community engagement to support the facilitation of public projects
- Create a policy for the formation of steering committees to support public projects; establish thresholds for steering committee involvement based on project size or complexity.
- Create guidelines for the timing of steering committee involvement in public projects (pre-RFP, pre-design, etc.).
- Identify opportunities to use community knowledge and UVA research capabilities during pre-project planning
- Consider investing in a neutral, accessible public space for project-related meetings.
- Develop educational toolkits for citizens involved in public design projects

PLACE welcomes any questions about this case study process and the associated recommendations. Pending direction from council, PLACE—in coordination with city staff as necessary—will undertake additional research and guidance for any of the action items.

Further installments of the case study will follow during the year.

END