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Subject: Comments to Steering Committee (9-24-13) by Alan Tom
Sent: Thu 9/26/2013 7:10 AM

Megan,

Please post this email on the Community Input page and send a copy to the Steering Committee; I am sending it to the Central West Neighbors listserve.

Attached (and also copied below) is the statement that I read Tuesday afternoon to the Central West Steering Committee. As preface to these comments, I have added further reflections on the issue of obtaining consensus.

Alan

After I read my statement to the Steering Committee on Tuesday, several SC members discussed the meaning of consensus, with one definition being something like "preponderant opinion" as opposed to my idea of "conversation until group agreement results." For one reason or another "preponderant opinion" is the dominant view within the Steering Committee, as evidenced by the numerous votes that were taken at Tuesday's meeting. Under a preponderant opinion view of consensus there is no real need to achieve group agreement; rather people express their individual preferences and the majority will prevail. Those who hold minority positions can easily be left out when preponderant opinion is being used to achieve consensus.

Later in the meeting David Tuttle initiated a revealing discussion on the question of whether a SC member is there to represent her/his constituency or whether such a member has some other basis for making decisions. David argued that he was expressing the views of residents -- not necessarily his own views -- and I remember Anthony Carey similarly stating that he saw his role as representing the interests of Town businesses. Certainly the land owners are representing their own personal interests, and have so stated openly more than once. On the other hand, some Steering Committee members seem to be using bases other than personal or group interests for their decisions on development. For example, several appeal to what is commonly called the "new urbanism" to ground their decisions, and yet others talk about the interests of the Town, for example, when increased density in

Central West is defended on the basis that Central West must do its share to provide new housing for the growing population of Chapel Hill. When one appeals to relatively abstract bases -- such as "Central West doing its share" or "new urbanism" -- for making development decisions, it seems to be harder to compromise these views than if one is representing personal or group interests which can more easily be negotiated away to achieve consensus.

Moreover, using differing bases for making decisions leads Steering Committee members to talk past one another, almost as if they are not even in the same room. So in my following statement I may have underestimated the difficulties of reaching consensus when I attributed that problem to lack of skilled facilitation and a shifting charge for the committee. Real give-and-take discussion among SC members may have been almost impossible, from the very beginning, due to the widely varying perspectives which individual SC members brought to the task of creating a small area plan.

If I'm right why consensus through conversation has been literally impossible to obtain, then there are major implications for how to set up future steering committees -- too complicated to go into here.

Now to the statement that I read on Tuesday afternoon:

Comments to the Steering Committee

Alan Tom September 24, 2013

Just last week, the Steering Committee (Action Minutes for September 19) voted to use the map recently developed through individual conversations with Steering Committee members "as a first draft and starting point for the Committee's discussions."

Tonight that same map appears on your agenda for final action because, as noted in the agenda directions, "the Committee needs to send a plan to the Planning Board for their review on October 1st" Even by the twists and turns that have become a defining characteristic of the Central West Steering Committee, the abrupt switch in one week from a map being "a first draft and starting point for ... discussions" to being an action item is a astounding change in direction.

The reality is that the Steering Committee is not near being ready to offer a final report that could be meaningfully reviewed by the Planning Board next

week. Let me capture major unresolved problems that are embedded in the map under consideration this afternoon (for reference, here is the map: <http://www.townofchapelhill.org/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=20575>)

1) A key problem with the plan on the table is the failure of this plan to have a set of defensible performance standards for traffic and flooding, presuming that performance outcomes are to be part of the assessment for potential developments.

2) The plan does not identify square foot maximums for each developer (you can't have both flexibility of building placement and no sense of maximum square footage and still have meaningful protection for surrounding neighborhoods).

3) The whole issue of Estes Drive is unaddressed in the plan under consideration, leaving it unclear, for example, the maximum number of lanes that might be added as part of traffic mitigation procedures or precisely what features will promote the safety of school-age children and other pedestrians (part of this latter issue may be addressed this evening).

4) Yet to be discussed and resolved is whether senior housing can be appropriately placed on a ridge with nearby steep ravines in one of Chapel Hill's last remaining near old-growth forests.

5) The southward extension of Somerset would entail it crossing a drainage area, both an expensive road to build and an environmentally questionable proposal.

6) While the map states that intensity decreases as one moves eastward on Estes, it is hard to see on that map how that claim is true.

7) Even though we now know that Carolina North is going to be phased in slower than originally expected, no provisions are apparent on the map for accommodating Central West development to the phase-in of Carolina North.

These 7 unresolved areas -- other people no doubt can add to this list -- are significant, and it is not surprising that these areas are unresolved. After all discussion of this new map has just begun, and the Steering Committee has only recently started to talk to one another in a serious way. In the absence of a skilled facilitator and with a committee charge that has morphed periodically, the Steering Committee has seemed to spin in circles for much of the past 6 months.

When the Town Council established the Steering Committee membership last October, the Council made the committee membership broadly representative of the interests of the community, ranging from landowners to institutional representatives to residents of Central West. This was a design to promote, if not compel, consensus, and the Steering Committee early on adopted consensus as a goal.

Now is not the time to shortcircuit that goal. I urge you to persist and to work for consensus so that the interests of everyone around the table are preserved and the final small area plan has the support of all of you.