

Film Viewing and Discussion

Brooklyn Matters: Urban Neighborhoods on the Brink of Change—Who Makes the Decisions?

Moderator: Henry Webber

Washington University in St. Louis

The conversation focused on larger themes of the film and the nuances that related to community development at the local level. Essentially, the film is about very large-scale, mixed-use development involving huge issues like eminent domain, environmental quality, social justice and public engagement.

The context for all development projects is the local community, and the community affords all benefits and costs. But when it comes to large-scale development, exactly what defines community and who speaks for the community? When large-scale development is proposed, the answer to these questions may become unclear.

In all communities, there are many stakeholders each with an idea about what is and is not good for the community. The problem is that all seem to have great difficulty in making their case for the type of development they desire or propose. The public engagement process is theoretically intended to help meet this need, but it's outdated or broken.

A possible reason is that it's easier to manipulate the development process to favor one stakeholder over another. Private interests influence state and local officials in the design and establishment of policies to benefit one group over another. More thinking goes into manipulation and circumvention techniques than to improving the process to benefit the entire community.

Sustainability issues are usually not part of the deliberation process. What is sustainability, how does it work and how is it measured for each development project? Professional sports stadiums were cited as one example of mega development where measures of sustainability are usually always absent. Job creation is usually a cited measure, but the type of job is overlooked. Ideally, development with a public interest would likely seek to create permanent, well-paying jobs rather than temporary positions.

On the other hand, it may be that certain development projects that have negative impact in the near-term, could have positive effects on the wider community in the long run. These are tough issues to sort through, but one this is certain to help. A positive public process requires and relies on access to facts. Unfortunately, many development proposals are debated without the benefit of equal levels of access on all sides/aspects of the issue.

A key lesson of the conversation was that many large-scale developments seem to involve false choices. It isn't either/or without the option for alternatives. Development initiatives really aren't two-sided but are multi-faceted. Also, why aren't choices framed to include the new, the novel, fresh voices and innovative ideas?

In the future, there is a need to work toward balance between short-term and longer-term interests and issues. Balance between different size and scales that reflect a conversation about vision and the idea that all members of community have the need for an environment that promotes positive behaviors and a sense of community life. Must different views and interests always be in conflict and competition? Is it possible to create new techniques to improve the balance among financial benefit, social equity, a safe and high quality environment, and a prosperous economy, etc.?

Near-term: Focus efforts on making improvements to the transparency in the local development process and identify policies, regulations or laws that may unintentionally hinder good process. Become more proactive to prevent the circumvention of good public process and decision-making by private interest without a sense of fair play.

The need to improve public process and engagement: How to improve the level of engagement of the public in meaningful ways that add value to the development process. Where is the innovation in the public engagement and leadership field? There is a high level of opportunity for doing things differently. Two examples were suggested: T4 America and Blueprint – a public engagement tool being used in Sacramento, Calif.

Transportation for America

<http://t4america.org/>

Sacramento Regional Blueprint

www.sacregionblueprint.org