

Development Collaboration by Robert J. Cantwell, RLA

Over the past several months, I have had the opportunity to represent the Rochester Home Builders Association (RHBA) Government Relations Committee in outreach discussions with many local communities. Along with RHBA staff and builders from these communities, we have had very productive dialogue with town leaders and key staff personnel to identify key growth issues, as well as to convey a spirit of collaboration from the residential building industry. Not only is this cooperative spirit critical to the greater Rochester economic development future, it is also critical at the local level as it relates to the design and approval process for specific development proposals. We can all recall instances where the success (or failure) of a development application is the result of an applicant's willingness to work with (or not with) the community. And when a 'spirit of contention' (vs. cooperation) exists during the public review process for a project, it probably means that not enough communication, 'homework', sensitivity and/or understanding of the issues has occurred.

Collaboration must start with a basic understanding that working together is a two-way street between developer and community, and that a win-win results only when each side is willing to give and take. It also requires both to be open minded enough to understand and appreciate the others' perspective. Builders, developers, and their team of design professionals need to be sensitive to the concerns of community boards, special interest groups and neighbors. They need to be able to effectively communicate and need to be willing to work closely, early, and perhaps often in the planning process. Likewise, the community (boards, committees, special interest groups, neighbors, etc.) needs to recognize an owners' property rights, appreciate the development risk factor, come to expect quality, and yes, appreciate the developer's objective and right to make profit.

An excellent example of recent collaborative success between a developer and community is the Lakewood Meadows project in the Town of Canandaigua, which is being developed by Morrell Builders of Fairport, NY. Scott and Jeff Morrell worked with the Town during its' recent update of zoning and land development standards to communicate the realities of the residential market from a home builder's perspective in terms of future demand projections. They also took the lead in assembling a very effective roundtable discussion of community and business leaders focusing on housing and its' positive effect on job attraction and economic development in the Canandaigua area. They also worked with the Town to develop their community master plan in consideration of the Town's newly developed standards for land development, environmental protection, and open space preservation.

The Morrells exhibited a collaborative spirit by voluntarily meeting with neighborhood groups, boards, and committees, independent of and prior to the formal public hearing process. This approach was strongly encouraged by many of the towns we met with to improve the project acceptance and approval process. This approach also results in a greater understanding and awareness of a projects' features by all, and if done early enough in the process, can avoid expensive design modifications later on. However, the development approval process is not necessarily a 'we like it' or 'we don't like it' scenario. It is important that community feedback be constructive; and in the context of public health, safety and welfare, and respect to the developers and owners rights, as previously mentioned.

The RHBA's outreach effort also includes partnering with local communities and regional associations to communicate the need to grow and change to meet the realities of the market. For example, the RHBA conducted a study to assess reasons for the continued strength in the new residential construction market in the Rochester region and found that, despite the local population being stable, household formation continues to expand and is one of significant reasons for the residential construction activity being strong.

Finally, a cooperative relationship can be strengthened when development interests and community leaders are both involved in the update of community plans and in the search for innovative ways to achieve win-win. For example, creative approaches to open space preservation and acquisition can be realized through the use of tools which are currently available, but often not utilized, by communities. Involvement and sharing of success stories can raise the awareness to the benefit of all.

In conclusion, collaboration can result in a more efficient review process, avoid delays and litigation, can often result in greater support for the project, and can lower overall development costs.