Rethinking the Urban Conversation in a College Town

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1. Introduction

This presentation will describe a community-based website dedicated to discussing urban planning in a small college town. The website is a specific example of a placeblog, a broad class of blogs dedicated to discussing a discrete geographic neighborhood or community. I will propose these websites can serve both as a community forums and also to reinforce official planning processes.

2. Project Context

College Park, Maryland is a small incorporated city in Prince George’s County, Maryland. The city contains the University of Maryland’s flagship campus, covering over 1,000 acres. Due to the large number of undergraduate and graduate students living in on-campus housing or the surrounding city neighborhoods, 61.8 percent were under 25 years of age in 2000. Located within the Capital Beltway, the city is embedded in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., and is served by a station on that city’s Metro system. Under Maryland law, although College Park is an incorporated city, it has relatively few powers. Many important public services, including schools, libraries, and police protection, are administered by the County. Most importantly, although the City has advisory powers, the County has planning and zoning authority. To add complexity, as a branch of state government the University is not subject to zoning controls and is governed by a separate master plan and internal review process, as well as operating an independent bus system, dormitories, restaurants and stores, and other facilities.

Through the late 1990s and early 2000s, the City of College Park experienced a significant real estate boom, along with the entire Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Many large new apartment buildings were proposed and one was built under a new mixed-use zoning district adopted by the city. In

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1 The website, Rethink College Park, can be accessed online at http://rethinkcollegepark.net/blog
2006, two important events occurred. The election of Baltimore Mayor Martin O’Malley as governor meant the state planning effort for a proposed light rail line planned to bisect the campus and city was accelerated. Second, the University launched the planning process to identify a developer and plan for a 38-acre portion of campus that was to be redeveloped to contain 1,508 housing units, a supermarket, restaurants and shops, and music venue, known as the East Campus Redevelopment Initiative.

2. Project Origins and Purpose, and Structure

In this context, an undergraduate student proposed in the student newspaper the creation of a website in May 2006.\(^3\) I reached out to the student and we contacted university and city officials, who received the idea of a website with official sanction with caution. Relations between the two had historically been tense, and in fact a city-university task force of high-level officials met regularly but in closed meetings. With an agenda to attempt to reach out to diverse people outside the elite community, we decided to launch the project as a community-based website without official sanction or ties with either the city or university. Crossing the boundaries of journalism, new media, and planning, the website was dedicated to discussing issues related to the urban development of the city, as well as loosely related topics of local politics, local businesses, public art, and transportation.

The website has several parts: short articles (handled as blog posts) which can have user-contributed comments, a “library” of short articles describing the basics for large development projects, neighborhoods, and plans, and two “development maps.” One clickable map pulled up posts specific to the city’s various neighborhoods, and another Google Map contained points for each proposed project, linked to all our short articles about it. These projects included transit and road improvements, public parks, a proposed city-owned parking garage, as well as private developments. The website also features a “visual library” of images, including historic images of College Park, scans for drawings from a community charrette, a variety of planning maps, and developer’s renderings.

As a community-based project we actively solicited all types of contributors. We published any submitted op-ed, but regular contributors had to agree to share our general philosophy that new urban development could be a positive asset for the city. We also espoused a “smart growth” point of view that infill redevelopment near transit was preferred over greenfield development, and walking, biking, and transit were important to encourage. We used the “college town” concept to convey the character of community we wanted, deliberately drawing comparisons with Charlottesville, Virginia, Ann Arbor,

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Michigan, and other prototypical college towns. To publicize the website we made presentations to many campus and city groups including the student council, city council, citizens associations, and others.

Over the past three years we had 18 writers, but a majority of the posts were written by a group of four main contributors. Although from these statistics it would appear to be a monologue, the site’s 1,839 comments meant for many posts, the majority of the text on the page would be user-contributed. Grouping the comments by the email address they left – website policy requires visitors leave an email address, and we also request real names. A quick review and my experience with the site meant people left the same email address with very few exceptions. The distribution among authors is similarly on a sharp curve. In fact, the most prolific contributors include site contributors, often responding to comments, students, a local transit activist, and a city council member. However, the “long tail” is striking – 71.7% of commenters left only one comment.

3. Who Participates?

According to a free tracking service, the website received an average of 148 visitors per day since launching in July 2006, or 1,036 visitors per week, for a total of 167,964 unique visitors. College Park had a 2000 population of only 24,657. Over one year after launching the website, we conducted a reader survey in October 2007 to learn more about the readers. Over a week’s time, 65 respondents participated in the survey. The survey suggested some respondents were made more active in local affairs: 43% had attended some public meeting after “directly learning about it through Rethink College Park,” and 22 percent wrote or contacted an elected or university directly to express their views after reading something on the website. The survey found a diverse group of readers, including 17 percent university students, 17 percent faculty and staff, 20 percent local residents, 25 percent university alumni, 4 percent development professions, and 15 percent other visitors. A majority—59 percent—lived in College Park or an immediately adjacent community.

Although the survey reflected only the most dedicated readers and may not be representative of the entire group of readers or many casual visitors, we found the results encouraging. The group was reaching the communities we had hoped to reach. 72% reported sending a link to someone else – evidence of viral marketing among this group of regular readers. The readership was also very dedicated, 56% reported first visiting before October 2006. (The website launched in July 2006) A majority reported visiting more than once per week.

4 These numbers do not reflect several op-eds written by others published under our names, or posts which simply re-posted a portion of opinions or information originating elsewhere.
4. Discussion

From the case, I draw several emerging hypothesis. First, high quality, easy to understand information about local communities is a key catalyst to attracting and sustaining interest in planning and urban development. The timely and detailed information on the website, often drawn from multiple sources across the Internet and through requests and public meetings, became the mechanism to attract and keep readers on the site. In fact, readers reported a desire to learn about local development projects was a primary reason for visiting.

The second and related lesson is that the Internet can be an important venue for what historian Robert Fishman has characterized as the “Urban Conversation.” Given the decline or closure of many newspapers and the proliferation of blogs, email lists, and other forums on the Internet, the venue for the conversation has changed profoundly. This case study suggests blogs can play a role supporting the conversation on urban policy formation.

Third, the project deliberately challenged a variety of conventional professional roles and boundaries. Our information was often more detailed than journalists’ reports, perspective generally more nuanced and detailed than elected officials’ positions, and communications more clear and accessible than conventional planning documents.

Lastly, at least some citizens not formally involved in the planning process will seek out and participate in an Internet forum. However the extent to which the website was bringing new people into policy discussion is unclear. However, even if the website was simply facilitating communication between interested elites, it was done in such a way that was visible to thousands of Internet visitors, and archived for posterity.

There are many unanswered questions for further inquiry, including what the purpose of the website should be, what its effect was on the community and local politics, the precise way it interacted with the local public sector, as well as how it effected the private sector’s research, design, and decisions. As such, Rethink College Park is considered an ongoing experiment in applying Internet technology to the process of urban planning and development.

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5. Appendix

Rethink College Park
http://www.rethinkcollegepark.net

This paper, along with the accompanying presentation slides are available at:
http://web.mit.edu/rgoodspe/www/