

NNI Presentation Script **Opening Slide**

Good Afternoon I'm Carol Brown with Canton Road Neighbors.

Before I begin the presentation I want to thank the District Commissioners and the Chairman for taking the time to participate in the stakeholder meetings. I particularly want to thank the chairman for being willing to learn about this initiative and consider it for Cobb County.

I want to thank my Planning Commissioner Christi Trombetti for her participation, and Rob Hosack and Dana Johnson for their time and professionalism. All three are planners and Cobb is lucky to have them.

I want to thank the Administrative assistants, particularly Annette Friant and Millie Rogers who helped to set up the stakeholder meetings and keep the process on track.

I want to thank the civic group leaders who took the time to attend the stakeholder meetings and give their feedback on the proposal and on challenges they face in the community as they engage in planning and zoning issues.

Show Stakeholder slide

It was important that this series of stakeholder meetings be as inclusive as possible, and I invited the leadership of Cobb's most active civic groups, in each commission district. Only two did not attend.

There were 5 stakeholder meetings that took place between September 25, 2012 and June 7th of this year.

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Cobb is the 4th most populous county in Georgia, with over 688,000 residents (Census 2010). However, with the exception of a small number of geographically based civic groups, Cobb has relatively low participation in planning and zoning issues.

The geography of participation is uneven in Cobb. There are areas where boundaries overlap or are covered by two groups that may not agree on an issue. There are areas where there is little or no resident representation on neighborhood issues at all.

This presentation is based on Athens-Clarke County's Neighborhood Notification Initiative. I am proposing it for Unincorporated Cobb County, as a way to recognize, inform and engage Cobb County Neighborhoods

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This is accomplished by allowing neighborhoods to voluntarily register and be recognized by the county, and by providing targeted planning and zoning information to the appropriate registered neighborhoods and civic groups. Over time this will increase participation by many more of Cobb County's neighborhoods.

It doesn't create another layer of government, as some have claimed. What it does is to create a more modern approach to governance, enabled by technology. It will enable better local representation of people's concerns and be less representative of special business interests. It will also help to ensure that that folks who claim to represent the neighborhood really do.

It will also increase transparency in the process and reduce uncertainty for residents. The politics that are sometimes associated with how a rezoning case is handled will be replaced by a codified process.

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Why are codified neighborhood programs a good thing?

Including citizens in decisions about their community gives policy and planning legitimacy.

Increased participation improves the quality of representative democracy.

When citizens feel they are heard it increases their confidence in officials, and that the system “works”. It also increases their own sense of effectiveness.

Inclusion of marginalized communities may be the best way they can get their issues on the agenda.

Communities have different character and different needs- a codified program recognizes that fact and supports pluralism in planning, not one size fits all.

The American Planning Association has recognized the importance of citizen participation, stating: “Planning is a collective activity and it involves issues in which citizens have a large emotional stake”(Levy 2000).

Here's another quote from further back in history:

"Divide the counties into wards of such size as that every citizen can attend, when called on, and act in person. Ascribe to them the government of their wards in all things relating to themselves exclusively . . .by making every citizen an acting member of the government, and in the offices nearest and most interesting to him, will

attach him by his strongest feelings to the independence of his country and its republican Constitution." --Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, 1816. ME 15:37

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Q: Some Commissioners may already be getting information out to neighborhoods, and some neighborhood or civic group representatives know how to find zoning information online. Why do we need this?

Answer: Because the practices of district commissioners can vary widely, and a relatively small number of residents know how to get the information they need, or understand the process.

So regardless of what a current commissioner or civic group is doing at this time, codifying neighborhood participation creates a permanent and official structure that transcends today's activists, elected officials and staff. It will be there for Cobb's future residents and their communities.

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Most US states have some cities or counties with formally recognized neighborhood participation.

They are meant to be self-organizing, from the grassroots up, not created by the local government or district commissioners from the top down.

They are geographically based and not meant to be organized around partisan issues.

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In Georgia, Atlanta has NPU and

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Athens-Clarke County has Neighborhood Notification.

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ACC Registration form

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Most of the program is administered online, it is an information based model, similar in many ways to PENS (Police Email Notification System). PENS does not create another layer of government, it is a two way exchange of information between Cobb Police and residents about law enforcement issues.

Think of NNI as a Planning & Zoning version of PENS.

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ACC Brochure, NNI web page and Cobb PENS Precinct 4 web page

What might a Cobb Neighborhood Website look like? Perhaps similar to PENS, only the neighborhood maps and directory for each commission district are available for the public to see.

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Which neighborhoods can register with the county?

Neighborhoods with existing HOA can register, older neighborhoods without HOA can register with some minimal requirements, or they can join with other smaller nearby neighborhoods to form a civic group, much like Canton Road Neighbors did in 2005. Geographically based Civic organizations can also register: All registration is voluntary and the applications must be approved by the BOC. Once approved, the neighborhood and civic group would appear online on an interactive web map, and be listed in a directory of neighborhoods.

They would then be sent planning or zoning information as it affected their neighborhood.

All registration is voluntary and participation is voluntary

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Additional suggestions for Cobb's geographically based civic groups:

Consider the civic groups as an overlay, and neighborhoods within the area can also register. They can interact with the civic group or not, it is their decision. All registered neighborhoods are to be recognized in their own right.

The civic group traditionally defers to or supports the concerns of the neighborhood on zoning and variance cases.

The county should post downloadable PDF files of the rules and procedure for residents who plan to engage in Zoning and Variance cases.

Existing and new civic groups should be held to a higher standard than neighborhoods.

Boundaries

should not overlap and claims of representation of an area should be backed up by membership with

dues-paying neighborhoods or by having an advisory person from that neighborhood in the organization. Civic groups should be incorporated and have regular elections.

The chairperson or Zoning committee chair should be encouraged to attend the Atlanta Regional Commission Planning Academy or the equivalent as a refresher course in zoning law and current planning topics

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FAQs

Will this system be unfair to those neighborhoods that don't register?

No. All neighborhoods have the opportunity. Think of it as registered voters: not every eligible citizen registers to vote and not all registered voters vote in every election.

How will neighborhoods that don't register know about zoning cases near them?

They will still receive a letter from the zoning applicant if they are within 1,000' of the property being rezoned, and a yellow sign will still be posted.

Will a county employee represent me on zoning cases?

No. You will continue to represent your neighborhood or civic group.

What are the benefits of registration?

Registered neighborhoods and civic groups will receive information earlier. They won't have to take the time to search for it online, or miss it if they are busy. There will also be additional information of interest to the community posted on the Neighborhood page.

I can already go online and find what I need. Why do I need this?

Because relatively few citizens know how to do this or have the time to sort through all the county information on a regular basis.

My Commissioner sends me the information I need. Why do I need to register?

The approach taken by the Commissioners can vary widely. You may have a Commissioner who supports participation now, and in the future have a new Commissioner who doesn't think it is very important, or that residents don't need to get in the way of business.

A codified process gives certainty to all residents- and to zoning applicants as well.

An interactive map and neighborhood directory will let applicants know how to get in touch with the neighborhood leadership. It will also let other residents know how to contact you and hopefully become volunteers.

Why should taxpayers have to pay for this?

Because this creates a reliable, non-political and permanent process for neighborhoods county-wide. This is important because we are a procedural republic.

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Cost:

Based on comments made by Athens-Clarke County Planners, this program is fairly inexpensive and not very labor intensive. I recently received the same information from the City of Denver.

Athens-Clarke County hired a Planner II to handle the NNI, but it takes less than half of her time- the rest is devoted to other departmental needs. Their IT department handles most of the notification.

The City of Denver Budget office and Planning staff stated that the NNI takes only 10-20% of the Communication staffer's time and it takes less than that for the GIS tech.

Denver's population of 620,000 is smaller than Cobb's 688,000 but a closer match than Athens-Clarke County.

The Cobb Communications department recently stated that content delivery would not be a challenge. It would also not increase their expenses by a significant amount.

The problem is that the Planning Division is currently understaffed and could not accommodate an additional 10%-20% work load. There is also an unfunded GIS position.

This is why Community Development would need to hire 2 full time staffers and perhaps a part time administrative person to handle this program.

It is important to remember two things:

- 1. The Planning Department is understaffed and can not quickly handle current requests from Cobb residents.**
- 2. If additional staff were hired, the NNI would take at most, 20% of their time. The balance of their time could be devoted to meeting the current demands of Cobb residents and business owners.**

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That concludes the presentation. You can find it at our civic group's web site

www.cantonroadneighbors.org. I am not asking for Board of Commissioner action on this issue at present, but I am asking for further policy guidance.

Thank you for your time.