

THE VIEW FROM DAYTONA BEACH

Give public more voice on growth decisions

People care about the way their communities grow — perhaps more than ever. Most residents understand the link between growth management and the quality of local schools, roads and general quality of life.

A global pandemic hasn't changed that. In fact, strong opinions about growth are likely to have had a significant impact on the outcome of Tuesday's elections.

But the advent of the coronavirus has changed the way people communicate with the local officials who control most growth decisions. Gone — at least temporarily — are the days when opponents of a big development could pack a county or city meeting with supporters, or when representatives of developers could respond to concerns about their plans. Even when governmental entities meet in person, audience space is sharply limited by the need to maintain social distance. Meanwhile, many governments run online questions or commentary through gatekeepers. Opportunities for back-and-forth discussions are limited.

And now, more than ever, people feel they are not being heard.

That breeds frustration — and distrust. People who follow politics in Florida's counties can see that for themselves, as residents take to social media to express their dissatisfaction, in blunt and sometimes disrespectful terms. The result is an armed standoff: Even as residents feel ignored, local officials feel attacked. Too often, nobody is really listening.

There has to be a better way, despite the strange new restrictions demanded by our efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

That makes a white paper by the pro-planning advocacy group 1000 Friends of Florida particularly timely. Released last week, the group's "Best Practices for Citizen Participation in Community Planning" offers good suggestions for maintaining the flow of productive discourse in a socially distanced world — and post-coronavirus as well. Local officials should take notice.

The group recommends adopting policies that govern electronic communication along with in-person commentary. The report encourages the sharing of all online comments with the public as they come in, with ample "talk back" provisions to get conversations started. It also endorses a so-called "citizen's bill of rights" that sets out the parameters for public involvement in planning decisions. The bill of rights offers several appealing proposals, including:

- A "citizen participation plan" element in all major developments, giving residents opportunities to have input throughout the planning process instead of registering 2-3 minutes of dissent right before a final vote;
- A rule against last-minute changes to a development plan and
- The right to challenge development decisions without fear of reprisal in the form of a "strategic lawsuit against public participation."

Some of the other suggestions — including a supermajority vote requirement for any amendments to a local municipality's comprehensive plan, and law changes that make it easier for resident-activists to file suit themselves — will need more consideration. But overall, these are laudable goals and ones all local governments should consider.

"The disruption caused by the pandemic provides an opportunity to enhance the public participation procedures in the local government planning process," the white paper reminds us. "Our laws predate the internet era and do not take into account modern tools for public engagement. Challenges presented by the pandemic lockdowns and cancellation of in-person hearings should not result in the deferral of meaningful public participation. Instead, state and local governments should utilize this period as a chance to future-proof their community planning procedures."

The Daytona News-Journal Editorial Board