21st Century Technology Gathers Input From Disengaged Voters: An innovative, new public involvement technique employing youthful exuberance and cheap new technology is currently being used in the City of Portland, Oregon to gather input on planning issues from residents who traditionally don’t get involved.

Portland is well known for its extensive use of citizen-involvement – an effort that has kept the city at the cutting edge of land use policy and livability for over 30 years. The City’s current visioning process is employing the usual strategies: round-tables, neighborhood meetings, focus groups, and questionnaires printed in multiple languages. However, Mayor Tom Potter, looking for something fresh and new, last year made some competitive small grants available to anyone with a good idea for gathering input from residents who don’t normally get involved.

Enter a pair of young architects who had an idea for harvesting input from Portland’s large population of young, creative, but politically disengaged residents. According to architects Lindsay Utz and Morgan Currie, if you’re going to reach out to young, creative types, you have to go where they are. With a grant of $11,217, the pair produced a unique, light weight-structure, essentially a tiny, mobile recording studio crossbred with a ballot box that can be rolled up and moved from place to place. Called the Vision Vessel, it is designed to “rocket democratic discourse into the podcasting age by fusing racy design and cheap, readily available technology” — all wrapped up in a package that will attract the youth of the City.

Resembling a transparent, outdoor shower stall, the 23-foot vinyl wall of the Vision Vessel coils around a centerpiece – an eight-foot column with a keyboard and a video screen flashing a “start” icon. After pushing the button, users are asked a rotating series of open-ended questions about Portland’s future posed by youthful, enthusiastic narrators. Participants can answer via keyboard, or cut an audio podcast. The Vessel (code named “Vern”) is currently making the rounds of Portland’s art festivals, farmers’ markets, colleges, and street fairs and gathering piles of input on the project’s website. At the conclusion of the city’s visioning project, the mayor’s office will fold the participants’ ideas into its larger effort to reimagine the city’s goals and inner workings.

To view this delightful contraption and see how it works, visit the project’s website at www.visionvessel.org. Although appropriate for use by anyone in the community, the Vision Vessel seems designed to attract more youthful, tech-savvy residents. However, Portland’s idea to offer community residents small grants for techniques that will gain input from underrepresented populations might be a useful policy for increasing community participation from any of a number of groups.

Cities Employ Smart Growth for Community Economic Development: According to a recent publication by the International Development Council, many communities have failed to consider the economic impact of their land use planning decisions. This has led to automobile congestion, pollution, pedestrian-hostile neighborhoods and sprawl. Today, however, economic development officers are realizing that it’s important to increase the tax base without impacting the very qualities that have made their communities pleasant places to live.

A 2003 report from the Brookings Institution underscores the disadvantages of setting aside considerations of community quality in favor of attracting economic growth. Their research uncovered the fact that Pennsylvania’s land development practices, which had the effect of decentralizing growth and weakening the state’s established communities, have contributed to the decline of the younger population resident base and job and wage stagnation.

Since the mid-nineties, numerous research reports have documented that it takes places that are distinctive, attractive and rich in amenities to attract an educated workforce. According to authors Ed Blakely and Ted Bradshaw, “industry and businesses regard livability as an important location factor” and conclude that local governments need to “identify their quality of life attributes, build on them and promote them to the business community.”

The Urban Land Institute and Price Waterhouse Cooper’s annual “Emerging Trends in Real Estate” have favorably rated 24-hour markets (places where residences, jobs, retail, and entertainment are all within walking distance of
one another) for over a decade, recognizing that these neighborhoods attract young professionals and empty nesters.

While the New Economy depends upon an educated work force, it also depends upon interaction between employees, related businesses and even competitors. Clustering similar businesses improves a firm’s access to ideas, suppliers and resources. Today, the International Development Council reports that office space in mixed-use settings is achieving higher occupancy rates, property values and lease premiums than buildings located in the traditional office park model.

In cities across the country, smart growth projects are now bringing in jobs, increasing tax revenues, creating business growth and improving quality of life, and contributing to economic development. In Arlington, Virginia, for example, a policy decision to run a subway line underground and target density around the corridor’s five stations has had major economic benefits. Over the past 30 years, 75 percent of the county’s roughly 30 million square feet of new development has been concentrated in this subway corridor. Although the corridor makes up only 7.6 percent of the county’s land area, it contributes 33 percent of its real estate revenue.

In Portland Oregon, a light rail system has sparked $3 billion in new transit oriented development since it was first initiated. A streetcar that began operating in 2001 has generated an additional and astounding $1.4 billion in development along its 4.7-mile loop. This includes 5,200 new housing units, and $3.6 million of commercial development.

Transit-oriented development can also be utilized to bring new life to ailing downtowns. In 1998, planners in Montgomery County, Maryland, targeted four square blocks for downtown development around a transit stop. The initial $400 million town center funded by public and private sources has created a surge in investments expected to reach $1.8 billion.

The National Main Street program’s work to revitalize town centers has realized huge economic benefits. According to a 2004 analysis, since the program’s inception in 1980, 76,000 new businesses have been established, 308,370 jobs have been created, and over $23.5 billion has been invested in the approximately 1,800 Main Street communities. In Burlington, Iowa, a downtown revitalization project has resulted in scores of new businesses and 500 new jobs since 1986. The private sector has invested $33 million in downtown projects, including the restoration of 396 historic buildings. Accordingly, the city’s property tax revenues in the neighborhood have increased 33.9 percent.

In Lakewood, Colorado, a city without a town center, a declining 1.4 million square foot mall was remodeled to become the downtown the community never had. Today, close to 3,000 people work in Belmar’s over 60 offices, stores, restaurants, and entertainment and cultural venues and 7,000 more are expected in the next 3 years. Property tax revenues increased from $400,000 in 2002 to $2.4 million in 2005.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the redevelopment of a declining commercial corridor has nearly doubled the per capita income in that area of the city and reversed serious population decreases by creating or retaining over 3,500 jobs.

For more project details and numbers, download the International Economic Development Council’s guidebook, Economic Development and Smart Growth from the Council’s website: www.iedconlie.org.

Guidebook on the Ahwahnee Water Principles Now Available: Responsibility for balanced, effective water management in California is increasingly borne by government at the local level. Many communities have been meeting their water needs by purchasing water from outside their own regions. In light of the rapidly expanding population in the western states and inconsistent water supply due to global warming, getting water from somewhere else is going to become increasingly difficult. It’s time to address how to figure out future water problems.

The Ahwahnee Water Principles, produced by a panel of national, regional and local experts and adopted by the LGC Board of Directors earlier this year, provide a blueprint for those local governments that wish to increase the regional sustainability of their water supplies.

A new 85-page guidebook, The Ahwahnee Water Principles: A Blueprint for Regional Sustainability, describes each principle and provides model projects and contact information for communities that are already implementing the strategies. It provides important background information about federal and state laws that impact local government and offers references to additional resource materials and information.

Also included is a special section on water elements that provides model general plan language gleaned from existing general plans and other planning documents adopted by communities throughout the State.

The full document can be downloaded from the web by visiting www.lgc.org. A bound copy can be ordered from the LGC via our web-based bookstore or by calling Vallia at 916-448-1198 x 327. The cost is $20 + S&H.

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