

A PEOPLE'S GUIDE TO PLANNING BOWLING GREEN, KY



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**KENTUCKIANS FOR THE
COMMONWEALTH**
38 YEARS OF ACTION FOR JUSTICE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2019, seven residential properties in a historically Black neighborhood in Bowling Green, Kentucky were rezoned to commercial use. The owner planned to displace residents, demolish the homes, and build contractor garages in their places. Several residents spoke in opposition to the rezoning at the planning commission hearing, but the project was recommended for approval regardless. Bowling Green also has a history of facilitating the demolition of historically Black neighborhoods for the expansion of the local university. Lawyers and residents filed suit and won the case claiming a violation of due process and that the zoning change was not compatible with the county's comprehensive plan (Swietek, 2020; Warren Circuit Court, 2019). The properties now have a new owner who plans to rehabilitate most of the homes and build thirteen additional apartment units (Sergent, 2020). This outcome required mobilization of residents and availability of legal counsel to those residents after the rezoning was already approved by the local legislative body.

Mobilization of residents at the end of the planning and development process can be an indicator that the city may have poor citizen participation methods and have a lack of an informed and consistently engaged citizenry. This issue of inadequate citizen participation is not unique to Bowling Green. The nation's poor citizen engagement has been a topic of research for a long time. In 1969, Arnstein created the ladder of citizen participation typology which is often used as a rubric to help people understand the levels of citizen participation that exist in planning spaces. The eight rungs on the ladder of citizen participation are manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. Each rung speaks to the extent to which citizens hold power. Through this typology, Arnstein illustrates the difference between what she calls an "empty ritual" of participation and true citizen power to affect outcomes (p. 216). Most planning processes focus on the bottom half of the ladder where people are heard but have no decision-making power.

To increase participation, professional planners have created general guides for citizens that can fill knowledge gaps and help residents participate in local planning. Non-profits and grassroots efforts have also created educational and strategic guides to help people navigate formal systems like planning. Some cities have tried to increase citizen participation through facilitating citizen planning academy classes which have shown to increase participants' trust in the planning process, build trust with planning staff, build political capital, and increase neighborhood planning skills (Mandarano, 2015).

However, educating residents to participate may only be a start due to the highly political nature of planning. Focusing only on participation overlooks the issue of power or assumes a balance of power, which is not conducive to true deliberation and participation. Planners often think of increasing citizen participation through the formal planning process, but there are informal

approaches that are valuable as well. Legacy (2017) observes that campaigns sparked by the political aspects of planning are informal forms of citizen participation that have the potential to revolutionize participatory planning. Informal approaches to planning such as citizens creating their own neighborhood plans can help people determine actions that do require engagement with formal planning.

The People's Guide to Planning in Bowling Green mixes strategies from professional planners and grassroots organizations and provides a smaller scale and place-specific guide to planning. The guide promotes an informal approach to planning that has the potential to push planning engagement in the city further up Arnstein's latter of citizen participation. Kentuckians For The Commonwealth is a grassroots organization that will be using the guide to organize their own visioning and planning efforts both outside and within the formal planning process for the city of Bowling Green.

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