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Abbey Chambers: Better engagement would lead to better developments

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VIEWPOINT

An underappreciated aspect of development is its role in catalyzing residents into action for their communities.

For example, when a redevelopment plan was proposed for the dilapidated Devington Plaza strip mall at East 46th Street and Arlington Avenue, nearby residents responded with overwhelming opposition. Although they encourage development that will bring economic opportunities, the proposed project would have created more than 500 rental housing units in an area that already has a disproportionate share of rental housing, much of it poorly maintained by landlords. Residents believe

the Devington Plaza site has the potential to be more than just another housing development.

After several months of hearing continuances, residents' persistent and unified activism culminated in the developer withdrawing the zoning variance request. Residents saw this as a win and a golden opportunity to have more control over their community's economic future. Had the request been granted, those residents would have had few future opportunities to impact the development.

Residents who opposed the proposal came from neighborhoods spanning north of East 56th Street and south to East 30th Street, representing about a dozen neighborhood and homeowner associations. Many of the association leaders who became involved in the opposition did not know one another until the development proposal spurred them into collective action. These new connections have strengthened residents' resolve in advocating for their communities.

A few years ago, a similar thing happened when Cook Medical announced that it was going to build a manufacturing facility and then a grocery store at East 38th Street and Sheridan Avenue, a site not far from Devington Plaza. However, the outcome has been very different. Namely, Cook's projects have been built, whereas Devington Plaza's developer is back to the drawing board.

Key to Cook's success was the company's effort to engage residents deeply and intentionally before drawing site plans or filing variance requests. Doing this, Cook was able to get residents' buy-in and create plans based on their feedback.

Like Devington Plaza, the site Cook developed had long been an eyesore, and residents were eager to see it redeveloped.

They not only participated in meetings specifically about the developments but also increased engagement in their own neighborhoods. Neighborhood associations that had paused meetings during the pandemic resumed them.

This activism has continued over the past few years and become stronger as every new investment along East 38th Street has called for neighborhood engagement, and residents have responded accordingly.

Neighborhood leaders from seven associations spanning East 46th to East 30th streets and  **Keystone** to Shadeland avenues have become close collaborators, addressing their communities' challenges and working toward their collective goals. These leaders call themselves the G7, short for the Gang of Seven Neighborhood Associations.

When the Devington Plaza opposition movement, which started with residents in the Brendon Park neighborhood between East 46th and East 56th streets, wanted to expand its message, the movement's leader only had to contact one member of the G7 to suddenly have the message spread down the east side all the way to 30th Street.

The takeaway for those investing in community development projects is that they should engage with community members early in their planning processes. Community members in disinvested areas generally welcome development, but they want to work with responsible developers to create projects that are mutually beneficial. Developers should bring community members along with them and not attempt to slip their plans past them; they might find themselves sent back to their drawing boards.

The city also has a role. It can act as an honest broker that motivates developers to engage in deep and intentional ways with residents early in their development processes. This would go a long way to activate neighbors' participation in shaping their communities' futures. Engaged communities that are on board with good development projects lead to more efficient approval processes and better development outcomes for all. •

Chambers owns and operates Justways Research, a consultancy that focuses on economic development and community engagement to advise on better policymaking.

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