



MAR Land Use Academy:

Providing smart growth approaches for land use development

Recently, the Michigan Association of Realtors held the annual Land Use Academy at the Michigania Retreat and Conference Center, in Boyne City, Michigan. While at the retreat, which is nestled against the beautiful Walloon Lake, members listened to a host of speakers, from local government officials to major developers, who shared their expertise in land use issues. The Land Use Academy is an opportunity to gain knowledge regarding various stages of project development and land use and how to implement smart growth ideas into a particular community.

During the Academy, a constant theme that speakers touched on was mixed-use real estate development and the benefit of it in order to revitalize land in a community. For example, Pat Gillespie, of the Gillespie Group, a Lansing-based development company, spoke on his plans to rejuvenate the downtown Lansing area. The Stadium District, a mixed-use development project across from the Lansing Lugsnuts baseball stadium, will provide a wide range of amenities such as restaurants, banks, and workout facilities as well as condominiums and rental units all within one complex. This design will entice consumers who want to live in close proximity to the downtown area and have easy access to facilities that accommodate their needs. This project, as well as several others that have been developed throughout the state, are becoming increasingly popular because they encompass a consumer's residential and commercial needs all within close proximity to each other.

Although many of the projects that were discussed were well received within the community because of the revitalization potential, there were many steps that project developers had to take to get approval. Before the approval process can begin, developers enlist a host of steps to take to get the project off and running. This may include behind the scenes work, such as

reaching out to a community by utilizing a door-to-door campaign to gauge interest of a development proposal, or meeting with local officials to get their response. It was also stressed to the academy participants to be prepared to either win or lose in the battle of development pitches versus local control at any stage of the process.

In some cases, even the most thought out and neighbor-friendly developments to not move past the blueprint stages because of local regulations derived from planning commissions, or because of backlash from the community and media. David Pierson, an attorney with McClelland & Anderson, LLP, spoke about the importance of getting involved with local government councils and knowing the regulations of a particular area. In some rural areas in Michigan for example, mixed-use development is discouraged, while residential development is encouraged. Russ Soyering, planning director for Traverse City, touched on how various plans were in place for the downtown Traverse area that utilize the mixed-use element. Yet, he also cited examples of projects that have caused heated debate with city officials and the community, which have led to litigation and loss of revenue. He also stressed the importance of getting in touch with local government officials first to make the process, however long it may take, run smoothly.

The Academy provided useful tools and information to Realtors involved with development initiatives at the local level on how to address various land use concerns. It was also an avenue for networking and talking with fellow members from around Michigan to hear what other communities are doing to revitalize and enhance property in their respective areas. There has been plenty of good feedback from members who attended this year's Academy, and MAR expects to draw a large crowd at next year's Land Use Academy.