

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:  
COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING IN SAN MARCOS, TX

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors Committee of  
Texas State University-San Marcos  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for Graduation in the Honors College

by

Alexandra Scarborough

San Marcos, Texas  
May 2013

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:  
COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING IN SAN MARCOS, TX

Thesis Supervisor:

---

Mark Carter, M.A.  
Department of Geography

Second Reader:

---

Brock Brown, Ph.D.  
Department of Geography

Approved:

---

Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.  
Dean, Honors College

**COPYRIGHT**

by

Alexandra Scarborough

2013

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to acknowledge Mark Carter, who has been much more than just my thesis supervisor in the four years I have known him. I would not be where I am today without his constant encouragement to think big, believe in myself, and persevere in the face of setbacks. I offer my most sincere thanks to my greatest friend and cheerleader in the Geography Department.

This thesis would not have been possible without the participation of the Planning Department at the City of San Marcos, which provided many resources and opportunities crucial to this research. I would especially like to thank Matt Lewis, Kristy Stark, John Foreman, and Amanda Hernandez for their leadership and passion for planning throughout this process.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Brock Brown for his support of and faith in this project, as well as the staff of the Honors College for all they do to facilitate an environment of intellectual curiosity.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and family. Thank you, Manika, for listening to all my late-night rants, and Elissa, for endless Thai food excursions. Chloe, Granny and Dado – you have been so patient with my lack of availability this semester. My parents have been behind me during every step of this process, reminding me to take care of myself first. Your love, support, and humor have helped me hold things in perspective and keep moving forward.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
LIST OF TABLES .....	vii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	viii
ABSTRACT .....	x
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	4
III. CONTEXT: SAN MARCOS .....	7
Planning in San Marcos, TX .....	7
The <i>Vision San Marcos</i> Process .....	10
IV. METHODOLOGY .....	18
Conceptual Framework .....	18
Research Methods .....	19
Survey Development .....	20
Survey Administration .....	21
Data Analysis Strategies .....	23
V. RESULTS .....	27
Design Rodeo Public Survey Results .....	27
Committee Survey Results .....	34
Comparison of Public and Committee Survey Results .....	38

VI. APPLICATION OF CRITERIA.....	43
(1) Clearly Defined Goals and Tasks.....	43
(2) Equal Stakeholder Representation .....	44
(3) Participant Satisfaction.....	47
(4) Ability to Influence Policy Outcomes .....	48
VII. CONCLUSION .....	51
APPENDIX A: PUBLIC SURVEY COVER LETTER .....	54
APPENDIX B: PUBLIC SURVEY QUESTIONS.....	56
APPENDIX C: COMMITTEE SURVEY COVER LETTER.....	59
APPENDIX D: COMMITTEE SURVEY QUESTIONS.....	60
APPENDIX E: IRB EXEMPTION CERTIFICATE .....	62
REFERENCES .....	64

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. Summary of Criteria for Effective Participation.....	6
2. <i>Vision San Marcos</i> Vision Statements.....	12
3. Walkability and Bikeability Objectives in <i>Vision San Marcos</i> .....	50

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. Citizen Influence in the Planning Process .....	2
2. Dream San Marcos Logo .....	10
3. Visioning Workshop (April 2012).....	11
4. Growth and Preservation Allocation Exercise (August 2012).....	14
5. Design Rodeo Public Meeting (September 2012) .....	15
6. Open House (January 2013).....	16
7. Survey Table at the Design Rodeo.....	22
8. Public Survey Results: Design Rodeo Satisfaction .....	27
9. Public Survey Results: Comprehensive Plan Process Satisfaction.....	27
10. Public Survey Results: Equal Opportunity Participation.....	29
11. Public Survey Results: Effective Comments .....	29
12. Public Survey Results: Top Ranked Interest Areas .....	30
13. Public Survey Results (Natural Resources Respondents): Time Well-Spent.....	31
14. Public Survey Results: Time Well-Spent .....	31
15. Public Survey Results (Homeowner Respondents): Best for Citizens .....	32
16. Public Survey Results: Best for Citizens .....	32
17. Public Survey Comments: Word Cloud.....	33

18. Committee Survey Results: Time Well-Spent.....34

19. Committee Survey Results: Stakeholder Involvement .....36

20. Committee Survey Results: Equal Opportunity Participation .....36

21. Committee Survey Comments: Word Cloud .....37

22. Public Survey Results: Best for Citizens .....41

23. Committee Survey Results: Best for Citizens.....41

24. Public Survey Results: Comprehensive Plan Process Satisfaction.....42

25. Committee Survey Results: Comprehensive Plan Process Satisfaction .....42

**ABSTRACT**

**EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:  
COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING IN SAN MARCOS, TX**

by

Alexandra Scarborough

Texas State University-San Marcos

May 2013

**SUPERVISING PROFESSOR: MARK CARTER**

In the field of urban planning, there has been much discussion of the relative effectiveness of different participation methods; however, there is little research on the overall value contributed by the public. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of public participation in urban planning by exploring citizens' perceptions of their impact on the process as well as the relationship between input and outcomes. The comprehensive plan update of the City of San Marcos, Texas, will be examined as a case study. Two surveys guide this analysis, supplemented by citizen feedback at comprehensive plan events and firsthand observation. This research evaluates the quality of participation using four benchmarks: (1) clearly defined goals and tasks, (2) equal stakeholder representation, (3) participant satisfaction, and (4) ability to influence policy outcomes.

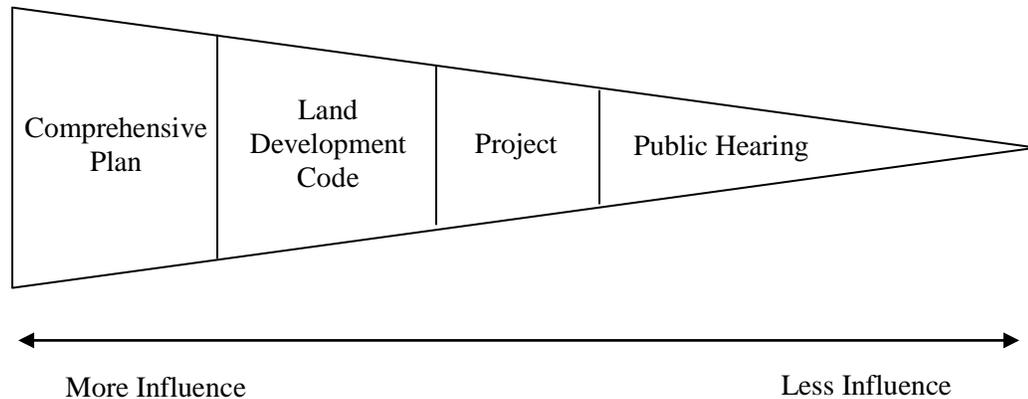
## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

At a 2012 City Council meeting in San Marcos, Texas, a public hearing was held for a zoning change in an environmentally sensitive area. The parcel was to go from single-family residential zoning to multiple-family residential with a planned development district overlay—essentially, a developer wanted to build apartment complexes on the land. Many local homeowners attended the meeting to voice their disapproval of the project. Most were along the lines of Locally Unwanted Land Uses; residents pointed to the problems of traffic increases, a disruptive party-prone student population, and even crime rates. However, one woman who stepped up to the podium had a slightly different approach. She said that while she didn't agree with the project, she didn't feel that much could be done about it at this point. She urged concerned citizens, instead of fighting projects one at a time as developers came forward, to get involved on another level. Take on the city's agenda as a whole—the goal of exponential growth itself has to be challenged by the people of Central Texas, she said. Whether or not she was aware of it, this insightful participant was advocating for something that would be discussed later in the meeting—the comprehensive plan process.

The City of San Marcos planning staff created a visual similar to the one in Figure 1 to explain why citizens should get involved in the comprehensive planning process. It

shows the relative scopes of different stages of development in a city, as well as the opportunity for citizen input. The comprehensive plan provides a big-picture view and the greatest amount of citizen influence; on the other end, the public hearing gives citizens the least amount of influence.



**Figure 1.** Citizen Influence in the Planning Process

In attempting to evaluate public participation, a criterion that often comes up is early and continuous involvement (King 320; Rowe 14). Due to the administrative processes of many municipal planning decisions, residents are often not aware of projects until they come before the Planning and Zoning Commission for a public hearing. At this point, participants have little choice but to choose a side and argue it in a one-way dialogue at the podium. Administrators and elected officials also communicate, providing one-way information in the opposite direction. The public hearing is one of the least effective methods of participation (Rowe 18).

When considering principles of effective public participation in terms of municipal planning, comprehensive planning seems ripe for investigation. This is a process that is not guided as strictly by legal requirements or administrative habits. The

Texas Local Government Code does not require comprehensive planning, though it does stipulate that a plan should consider land use, transportation, and public facilities (State of Texas “Municipal Comprehensive Plans”). Since comprehensive plans are long-term, they are updated less frequently than routine planning cases. This gives more time for and flexibility in process development, and allows cities to gain some of the advantages of citizen participation, including education, empowerment, political suasion, and breaking gridlock (Irvin). But do cities take this opportunity to purposefully design better methods of participatory planning? What is really gained from the public during this process? Using San Marcos, Texas as a case study, I will explore these questions.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This discussion adds to “sparse literature” evaluating the effectiveness of participatory planning (Cunningham 841). Research on this subject has not kept pace with the increase in citizen participation programs, which have been launched by a variety of government entities since the 1950s (Irvin). A lessening of public trust in government has led to concern over citizen apathy and lack of significant impact on the political process, causing administrators to increase citizen involvement in decision making (King 317, 319). The prevailing rationale behind this trend is that a more engaged citizenry will result in a more democratic process (Irvin). Transparency has become an important topic among governmental organizations, and many go beyond mandatory legal aspects. The Texas Open Meetings Act has a complex set of requirements that apply to most governing bodies, including meeting notices to the public (State of Texas “Open Meetings”).

Though there are many comparisons of different methods of public participation, few authors have discussed its overall success. One of the biggest difficulties in determining the effectiveness of participation is the conflicting perspectives of what constitutes good participation. As a result, the literature provides no clear consensus on the criteria to be used for this evaluation (Cunningham 842). Participation is a complex and multi-faceted issue, and a variety of goals and participant expectations impact its

perceived effectiveness (Rosener 458). There are two primary beneficiaries in participation processes such as the one in San Marcos: government and citizens (Irvin). (I will note here that, in this paper, the terms “citizens” and “residents” will be used interchangeably to mean public stakeholders that are not associated with a particular institution.

“Participants” will often be used in the same context.) In addition to these two primary beneficiaries, two groups within the government may have differing views on participation: elected officials and public administrators (Rosener 458). The greatest consensus in the literature on this topic is that “participants (and planners) may disagree about what constitutes a good process,” and “the importance of these differences in shaping how individuals or groups view participation cannot be over-emphasized” (Webler 435; Rosener 458). This indicates that stakeholder identification may be important not only to ensure inclusion of affected groups, but also to understand their participation expectations. Another distinction to make when considering this evaluation is that there can be a difference between process and outcome effectiveness (King 320; Rosener 459). It must be determined whether the participation program is an end in itself, a means to an end, or some combination. It is possible to have a positive process in which participants are heard, yet the end result is not responsive to the citizens’ vision. On the other hand, an excellent policy result can come from a frustrating and ineffective process.

The literature demonstrates that there are many ways to frame the evaluation of participation. However, the most important step of conducting this evaluation is making clear to all involved exactly how the process will be determined as successful. As Rosener summarizes, “We have to make clear what we expect participation programs to

accomplish, and who is to be served by the participation.” (Rosener 460). Table 1 offers a list of some criteria for evaluation which emerge from this literature review.

**Table 1. Summary of Criteria for Effective Participation**

<b>Criterion/Concept of Effective Participation</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>
Representativeness, involvement of affected groups, equality of participation	Rowe, Cunningham, Webler, Barron
Goal and task definition	Rowe, Rosener, Barron
Influence on policy	Rowe, Rosener
Independent, fair, unbiased process	Rowe, Webler
Inclusion of value-based testimony	Cunningham, Webler
Legitimacy	Cunningham, Webler
Transparency	Rowe, Cunningham
Structured decision making, responsible leadership	Rowe, Webler
Early involvement	Rowe
Resource accessibility	Rowe
Cost-effectiveness	Rowe
Minimizing conflict	Barron

## CHAPTER III

### CONTEXT: SAN MARCOS

#### Planning in San Marcos, TX

Before *Vision San Marcos*, the most recent comprehensive plan for the City of San Marcos was the *San Marcos Horizons* master plan adopted in 1996. At that time, the population of San Marcos was 37,011 (City of San Marcos *San Marcos Horizons*). In the 2010 census, San Marcos was estimated at just fewer than 50,000 residents (City of San Marcos *Vision San Marcos*). As the *Horizons* Plan's stated purpose was to "guide the growth of the city over the next decade," it was long past due for an update (*San Marcos Horizons*). Although the city's growth should be "consistent with the goals and policies contained in the master plan," by 2012, *Horizons* was seen as somewhat irrelevant and rarely entered planning discussions (City of San Marcos "The Master Plan"). Without a practical master plan to guide development, San Marcos was operating without a comprehensive vision for zoning changes and growth issues. According to Planning Manager John Foreman, the past 5 years of planning in the city have been focused on individual projects with little long-range consideration (Foreman interview). This has led to frustration among citizens who perceive their limited control over specific cases that come before the City Council.

The Texas Local Government Code provides a framework for, but does not require, municipalities to develop and maintain a comprehensive plan (State of Texas “Municipal Comprehensive Plans”). The San Marcos City Charter, however, does state the requirement for a master plan, whose goals will direct relevant city ordinances (City of San Marcos “The Master Plan”).

John Foreman describes planning in the city as “controversial” (Foreman interview). He explains that, when threatening issues arise, San Marcos residents become highly involved and can be very passionate about planning in their community. Two major issues contribute to this contentious climate: Texas State University and the San Marcos River.

Texas State University-San Marcos enrolls over 34,000 students and is the largest employer in the city (*Vision San Marcos*). Due to the relative population of the university and the city, San Marcos is quintessentially a college town, and the presence of students is felt everywhere from residential neighborhoods to local businesses to the streets during rush hour. A number of vocal residents have a negative view of the student population, portraying them as bad drivers and the causes of late-night noise complaints. This is characteristic of the unique “town-gown” relationship between small cities and the universities which reside there. Blake Gumprecht, author of *The American College Town*, studied these conflicts in college towns across the United States, including San Marcos, TX. He states that “the most persistent source of town-gown tension...over the years has been student behavioral problems” which “cannot be divorced from the geography of housing in college towns” (Gumprecht 298, 312). Approximately one-third of Texas State students live in San Marcos or on campus (Texas State University-San Marcos). As such,

protection of single family neighborhoods is a pressing concern for residents. “Support and sustain single family neighborhoods” was one of the top five ideas in the neighborhoods and housing category for Dream San Marcos’ Ideascale web site (*Vision San Marcos*).

The name of the comprehensive plan, *Vision San Marcos: A River Runs Through Us*, illustrates the centrality of the San Marcos River to the city’s identity. A unique aquatic environment that is home to several endangered species (including the Fountain Darter and Texas Wild Rice), the river is much loved by San Marcos citizens. It offers opportunities for recreation, research, and tourism. When real estate developers try to encroach on the environmentally sensitive areas near the river, this emotional connection often becomes apparent. Much of the western part of the city lies in the recharge, contributing, and transition zones of the Edwards Aquifer. Thus, development decisions in these areas have an increased ability to affect water quality and quantity. The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment is one local organization that researches and provides policy recommendations for natural resource management, and was consulted in the development of *Vision San Marcos*.

Due in part to the city’s location along Interstate Highway 35 in rapidly-growing Central Texas, development pressures exacerbate these tensions, to the point of citizens calling for a moratorium on zoning changes in the spring of 2012. It can be implied from these actions that citizens were unhappy with the direction of growth in San Marcos, which made a new comprehensive plan even more crucial. It was so important, in fact, that within a month of announcing the intention to create a new master plan, the city shortened the anticipated timeline from 18 months to 9 months.

### The Vision San Marcos Process

This truncated process officially began in April 2012 with the appointment of the Steering and Citizen Advisory Committees. However, pre-process discussions and public input began earlier with Dream San Marcos. This was the beginning of the visioning process, and kicked off with an online crowd sourcing exercise in August 2011. The City of San Marcos used the Ideascale online platform to provide an unusual way for residents to voice their ideas for the future of San Marcos. Anyone could create a free account on the web site, then post their own ideas and vote other users' ideas up or down. Over 360 users participated in this exercise between August 2011 and January 2012.



**Figure 2. Dream San Marcos Logo**  
(Image from City of San Marcos)

In November 2011, the City Council and the Planning and Zoning Commission held a joint workshop to discuss growth, and density in the city. This was one of the first times that the upcoming comprehensive plan update was brought to the public. The presentation from the Planning and Development Services Department staff included framing the plan within overall city operations and long-term decisions.

At the City Council meeting on March 6, 2012, staff gave a presentation outlining the process and timeline of the comprehensive plan update. John Foreman, primary staff

manager for the project, described the staff’s intention for a “graphic, approachable, community plan” that was created by San Marcos, for San Marcos (Foreman presentation). Jim Nuse, City Manager, wanted to assemble a team of staff members, consultants, and local resources to produce the plan in-house. The importance of the visioning process was emphasized, because without “common vision and common goals” it would be difficult to build consensus and eventually reach implementation (Foreman presentation).

After setting these intentions, a community visioning workshop was organized for April 21, 2012. Participants worked in small groups (Figure 3) to create vision statements for each of five focus areas: land use and transportation, housing and neighborhoods, parks and public facilities, economic development, and sustainability and the environment. In a series of joint meetings, the Steering and Citizen Advisory Committees used this community input, as well as ideas from the Dream San Marcos web site, to develop the final vision statements to guide the comprehensive plan (see Table 1). These statements were presented to the Planning and Zoning Commission for a public hearing, and adopted by City Council after a second public hearing on June 5, 2012.



**Figure 3. Visioning Workshop (April 2012):**  
Steering Committee Chair Bill Taylor explains the visioning exercise.  
(Photo from City of San Marcos)

**Table 2. *Vision San Marcos* Vision Statements**

We envision San Marcos with economic, educational and cultural opportunities that develop a stronger middle class and grow our local economy. We foresee a vibrant community that strategically leverages the University and all available community assets to support environmentally sustainable industry, technological excellence, local business development and the arts.
We envision San Marcos to be a community of outstanding stewards of our irreplaceable unique natural environment. We value our resource and energy efficiency and our community's health, well being and prosperity.
We envision San Marcos as a community with balanced and diverse land uses that expand our lifestyle choices while protecting and enriching our historical, cultural and natural resources.
We envision San Marcos to have a strong, more comprehensive foundation of safe stable neighborhoods while preserving and protecting the historical, cultural and natural identities of those neighborhoods.
We envision San Marcos with safe and attractive parks, public spaces and facilities which provide a range of amenities and experiences. We envision a connected system of parks and natural areas that focus on our unique cultural and environmental heritage.
We envision San Marcos to have a connected network of efficient, safe and convenient multimodal transportation options while protecting the environment.

The organizational structure of the Steering Committee and Citizen Advisory Committee was adapted from the previous *San Marcos Horizons* master plan. The 11-member Steering Committee included representation from various institutions and interest groups, while any resident was able to apply for the Citizen Advisory Committee. From these applicants, each City Council member appointed three citizen committee members, with an additional three chosen as alternates. At the City Council meeting on April 17, 2012, Planning Director Matthew Lewis discussed the equality of spatial representation on the Citizen Advisory Committee, pointing out that there appeared to be

only one appointee residing east of IH35, who would thus be representing 15,000 people. Aside from that discrepancy, spatial representation seemed fairly even.

These committees held 26 joint meetings on Wednesday nights between April 2012 and March 2013. All meetings were posted (as required by the Texas Open Meetings Act) and open to the public. At the beginning of the process, meetings focused on educating committee members about planning issues by hosting expert panels on such topics as transportation, land use, resource conservation, and economic development. These conversations, as well as access to staff resources, allowed committee members to translate their values and community input into educated decisions that acknowledge the complexity of comprehensive plan choices. After June, meetings were primarily dedicated to drafting the plan's goals and objectives. The committees' goals were adopted by the City Council on November 20, 2012.

On August 29, the "growth and preservation allocation" workshop (also known as the "chip exercise") gave participants the opportunity to identify areas of change and stability in the city. San Marcos' expected 33,000 population increase (by 2035) was represented by lego blocks of varying housing densities. Citizens at the workshop placed these legos on a scaled city map to envision future development and redevelopment, with everything from 1-acre lot single family homes to multi-story residential towers (Figure 4). In retrospect, John Foreman identified the growth and preservation allocation exercise as one of the most effective participation opportunities throughout the process. He believed the event successfully generated city-wide involvement and participants were able to look beyond simply the issues in their own neighborhoods (Foreman interview).

The output from this exercise was nine unique growth maps, each indicating the preferences of a small group of citizens.



**Figure 4. Growth Preservation and Allocation Exercise**  
(August 2012): A participant places low-density housing logos on the map. (Photo from City of San Marcos)

Less than three weeks later, these output maps morphed into a preferred growth scenario during a week-long series of charrettes dubbed the “design rodeo”. A charrette is a “planning event that harnesses the talents and energies of all interested parties to create and support a community plan” (National Charrette Institute). The intent of a charrette is to bring stakeholders and experts together to collaborate and obtain immediate feedback. A team of consultants and City staff members assembled to conduct on-site modeling, sketch designs, produce maps, and prepare for nightly public input sessions. Each evening during the week, alternative scenarios were presented for attendees to help further narrow down the vision for San Marcos’ future development (Figure 5). Since the *Vision San Marcos* plan is guided by the land use map developed during this event, the design rodeo was the centerpiece of the public involvement process and intended to allow

a high degree of input. It was during this event that I administered my public participant satisfaction survey.



**Figure 5. Design Rodeo Public Meeting (September 2012):**  
Attendees discuss a possible growth scenario.  
(Photo from City of San Marcos)

After the design rodeo, the committees focused their energy on the development of objectives to correspond to the plan elements' vision statements and goals. Objectives take the broad and optimistic ideas in the plan down to a policy level; they are specific, measurable, action-oriented, and realistic, and should translate directly into implementation. Though these committee work meetings were open to the public, the best opportunity for the community to submit feedback on the objectives was at the open house on January 23, 2013 (Figure 6). An important means for advertising this event was the Speakers Bureau. Throughout January, committee volunteers and planning staff members visited local organizations to present an update on the comprehensive plan process and invite attendees to the open house. This also served as an informal platform for discussion and answering questions from the public.



**Figure 6.** Open House (January 2013): Senior Planner Amanda Hernandez explains *Vision San Marcos* goals and objectives. (Photo from City of San Marcos)

During the first months of 2013, the planning staff worked with consultants to draft the final plan document. The committees were given the opportunity to comment on and revise the document text as well as the layout. This was a very slow process, due to the amount of material as well as some disagreement among committee members. These discussions included the selection of photos in the plan, as well as individual phrases, so that the diction of the plan accurately reflected the committee's intention. When changes had been finalized, *Vision San Marcos* was presented for public hearing at the Planning and Zoning Commission meeting on February 26, 2013. The commissioners felt that revisions still needed to be made, and requested that the committees meet again to consider their input, as well as give members of the community another opportunity for feedback. Specifically, the commissioners requested additional language concerning 1) the University and 2) workforce development and poverty. The Steering and Citizen

Advisory Committees met for the last time on March 6 to vote on the recommended additions. It was around this time that I administered my second survey (see Chapter 4). Additional meetings of the committee chairs and vice chairs were held on March 18 and 19 to discuss additional input from elected and appointed officials.

*Vision San Marcos* continued through the adoption process with four more public hearings, at which there were few comments aside from various committee members supporting the document. On March 26, the Planning and Zoning Commission recommended approval of *Vision San Marcos*, and it was adopted unanimously by the City Council on April 16, 2013.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### Conceptual Framework

A review of the literature (Chapter 2) shows that there are many perspectives on the evaluation of public participation. Four benchmarks of good participation emerge: (1) clearly defined goals and tasks, (2) equal stakeholder representation, (3) participant satisfaction, and (4) ability to influence policy outcomes. There are many other aspects of effective participation which could arguably be included here, such as early and continuous involvement, transparency, and legitimacy with the public. However, the four criteria stated previously are most appropriate to the scope and nature of this paper. They are both realistically applicable to my research methods, as well as aligned with the verbalized participation goals for the City of San Marcos. The City's goals as described by John Foreman, Planning Manager, focus on the identification and involvement of primary stakeholders, which directly applies to criterion number two of my ideal model (Foreman interview).

## Research Methods

This research utilizes a case study approach to apply these criteria of effective public participation. “As a research strategy, the case study is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena” (Yin 2003). A comparison of the participation in the San Marcos comprehensive planning process against the idea model of participation contributes to the understanding of citizen participation in comprehensive municipal planning.

The primary tool employed in conducting this case study is survey administration and analysis. The only way to determine participant satisfaction (criterion number three in this ideal model) is to ask the participants themselves. This could be accomplished with individual interviews or survey administration. Surveys are a more time-efficient method of collecting a large number of responses. In addition, respondents can answer more honestly if they understand that their surveys will not be individually identified. Surveys do not allow the researcher to ask follow up questions or gain a thorough understanding of why respondents answer the way they do; however, the comments section that some participants choose to complete can give insight in this area.

These surveys are supported by first-hand observation. During the research and writing of this paper, I worked as an intern in the Planning and Development Services Department at the City of San Marcos. As such, I attended many of the events discussed in this evaluation, witnessing citizen interactions and participation. These observations helped me understand the context and tone of participation activities, supporting my interpretation of survey results.

My position as an employee of the City of San Marcos is an important consideration in evaluating and controlling the bias in this research. At most comprehensive plan events, my interactions with the public were as a staff member. However, my research on this topic began before my involvement at the City. I was not paid while administering surveys to the public. Survey questions were developed independently, although they were approved by Kristy Stark (Assistant Director of Planning and Development Services) before administration, if only because I utilized institutional channels to reach more participants. I believe that my educational background and position at the City only enhanced my understanding of this topic, and did not introduce undue bias into the research.

### Survey Development

The design rodeo survey questions were developed primarily from criteria discussed in the literature (see Chapter 2). The purpose of the survey was to gain insight into participants' perspective on the transparency, accessibility, and effectiveness of the design rodeo and the overall comprehensive planning process. Evaluating these issues from a participant perspective provides the opportunity to gauge citizen buy-in on the project.

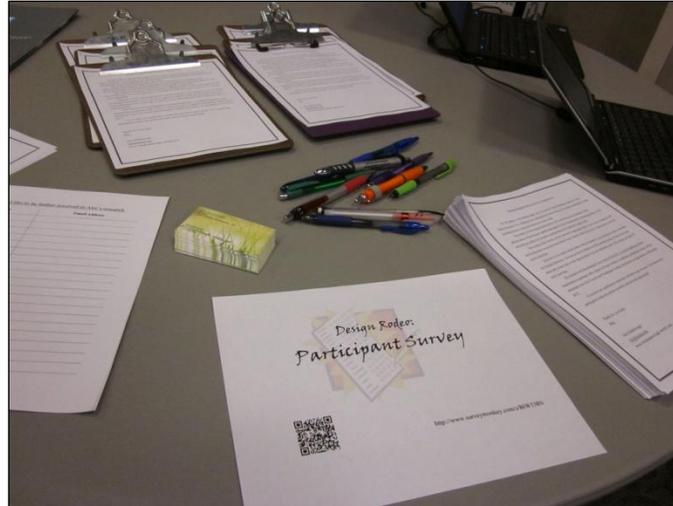
The committee survey, administered six months after the design rodeo, took most questions directly or with some modification from the design rodeo public survey. This provided a basis for comparison of the public perspective with the more informed perspective of committee members. Although one question asked specifically about the design rodeo, this survey was intended as an evaluation of the overall process from the

viewpoint of a heavily involved participant. A complete list of survey questions is included in Appendices B and D.

### Survey Administration

The first survey for this paper was administered during the design rodeo September 10 – 14, 2012. This was one of three major participation events during the process, characterized by heavy interactions between citizens, staff, and consultants. The week-long iterative design process allowed participants to attend as many evenings as they would like, as well as daytime interest groups. Design rodeo attendees were able to complete the survey at the evening public meetings on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Most of these responses were recorded by the participant on a paper copy of the survey. A small number opted to use a laptop provided at the event to access the online version of the survey, which contained the same content. These two response types were combined and weighted equally for analysis purposes.

The sampling method for this survey was voluntary. While some attendees heard an announcement about the survey or noticed the survey table (Figure 7), most responses were solicited by the researcher or one of several students that helped facilitate the survey. Although an effort was made to approach each attendee, only 46 total responses were collected. This may indicate that many participants attended several nights in a row, instead of there being a completely new group of people at each event. In addition, there were a large number of City staff members and hired consultants attending who were not in the survey target audience.



**Figure 7. Survey Table at the Design Rodeo**

Since it involved interface with the general public, this survey required approval from Texas State University’s Institutional Review Board. An exemption for this survey was granted in September 2012, under category two of the six federal categories of exemption, which reads as follows:

“(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:

- (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and
- (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.”

A copy of the exemption certificate can be found in Appendix E.

The committee survey was administered online from March 5 to March 13, 2013. This was after the Steering and Citizen Advisory Committees had approved the final text

of *Vision San Marcos*, though minor changes continued to be made at the request of elected and appointed officials. The survey was administered at this time to allow committee survey participants to look back over the process and evaluate their experience in hindsight. Ideally, this survey would have been conducted at the very end of the process, after adoption. However, due to deadlines for this thesis, the committee survey was administered over a month before final approval of the plan by City Council. See Chapter 3 for a more detailed adoption timeline.

The Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) free online platform was used to administer the committee survey. This software allows survey responses to be collected anonymously and conveniently for those with internet access. An introduction (see Appendix C) and a link to the online survey were emailed to all Steering Committee and Citizen Advisory Committee members on March 5. Sixteen of the 32 committee members completed the survey, with nine writing additional comments at the end. This voluntary sampling gave everyone in the survey's target audience a chance to respond.

### Data Analysis Strategies

After observing the meetings at which the design rodeo survey was administered, I decided to only use the responses collected Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Monday's meeting was an introduction to the design rodeo process and a review of the comprehensive plan update process thus far. While comment sheets were available, the primary purpose of this meeting was providing information rather than gathering feedback. Although not all survey questions dealt specifically with the design rodeo, my research interest was in the participatory aspects of the process. For this reason, the nine

surveys completed on Monday night were not included in the analysis. This left 37 survey responses from the design rodeo and 16 from the committee survey.

Data collected from these two surveys were imported into Microsoft Excel for analysis. Due to the relatively small sample size, responses were generally interpreted using percentage comparisons. In the design rodeo survey, responses were analyzed in aggregate, as well as broken down by demographic group. These “demographic” groups were drawn from three questions. The first series of groups was first-time attendees and those who had been to a comprehensive plan event before. These categories were mutually exclusive, with 5 respondents in the first category and 32 in the second.

The next demographic question allowed participants to select as many categories as applied to them, which resulted in overlap between the groups. These categories are listed below, along with the number of respondents in each.

- I live in San Marcos. (34)
- I work in San Marcos. (22)
- I own a home in San Marcos. (22)
- I am a Texas State student. (7)
- I own a business in San Marcos. (6)
- I am otherwise affiliated with Texas State. (5)
- I am a high school student. (4)

The last demographic question asked respondents to rank their interest in the eight design rodeo focus areas. These areas are listed below, along with the number of respondents who ranked them as their number one interest.

- Natural Resources (14)
- Neighborhoods (5)
- Utilities/Transportation (4)
- Land Development and Realty (3)
- Economic Development (2)
- Education (2)
- Cultural/Arts (1)
- Retail and Small Businesses (1)

These focus areas roughly correlate to the *Vision San Marcos* plan elements, and were taken directly from the focus groups listed in the design rodeo week program. This question allowed respondents to be placed in different stakeholder groups according to their top ranked interest. Eight survey participants answered the question in such a way that their top choice was not clear. These participants were included in aggregate analysis of questions, but were disregarded when questions were analyzed at this demographic level.

In many surveys, demographics questions include such categories as age, gender, income, and ethnicity. While these are of interest in a comprehensive evaluation of public participation efforts, I did not expect these categories to reveal significant differences in level of satisfaction. Instead, in firsthand observations of previous comprehensive plan events, as well as San Marcos City Council meetings, the most distinct and vocal groups seemed to be homeowners, environmentalists, and business owners. Considering the context of San Marcos discussed in Chapter 3, the demographic groups described by my survey questions seemed most relevant to this analysis.

The public survey was only administered at one event, the design rodeo. Although this multi-day charrette had a large and diverse citizen representation, it may not have included those involved earlier or later in the *Vision San Marcos* process. For some respondents, this event may have been their only frame of reference for the overall comprehensive plan update process. In addition, many questions were specific to the design rodeo. Results are therefore highly influenced by this context.

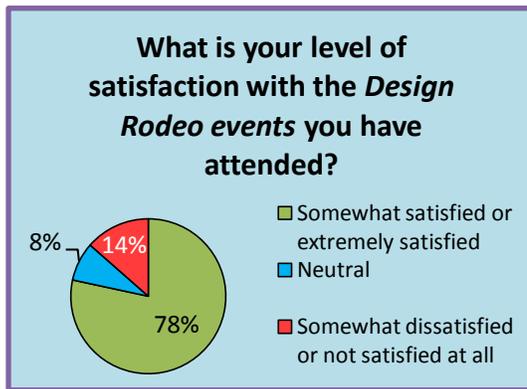
Demographic questions were not included in the committee survey due to the small and specific sample. To assuage any concerns over anonymity, no identifying questions were asked. The priority was to collect candid responses, which would not be possible if committee members felt that their answers could be traced back to them. See Appendix C for the specific language used to communicate this to the committees.

## CHAPTER V

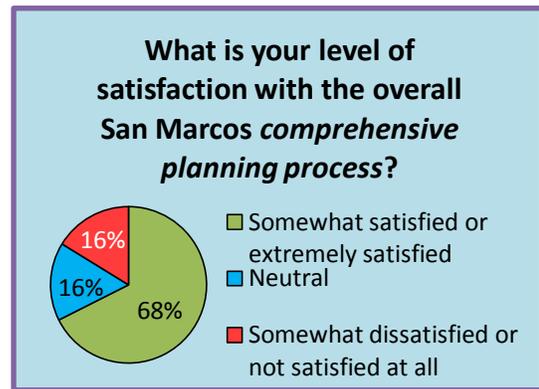
### RESULTS

#### Design Rodeo Public Survey Results

Of 37 design rodeo survey participants (Tuesday through Thursday), 78% were somewhat or extremely satisfied with design rodeo events, and 68% were satisfied with the overall comprehensive planning process (Figures 8 and 9).



**Figure 8.** Public Survey Results:  
Design Rodeo Satisfaction



**Figure 9.** Public Survey Results:  
Comprehensive Plan Process Satisfaction

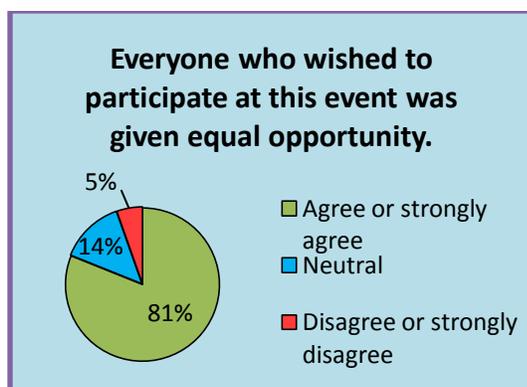
The demographic group most dissatisfied with the design rodeo was those affiliated with Texas State (a group which was differentiated from students). Twenty percent reported being somewhat dissatisfied with the design rodeo events. However, because only 5 participants fell into the “affiliated with TXST” category, this high percentage may not be representative.

Most demographic groups showed a 65-80% satisfaction rate with design rodeo events. Of demographic groups with greater than 5 participants, the least satisfied (18% dissatisfaction) with the design rodeo were homeowners and those who work in San Marcos. The notable exceptions to this trend were the Texas State student and high school student groups, both of which reported 100% somewhat or extremely satisfied. Similarly, student groups were 90% satisfied with the overall comprehensive planning process. These groups accounted for 3% of total respondents.

Only five of the 37 survey participants were attending a comprehensive plan event for the first time. This in itself is interesting, as it suggests that attendees at San Marcos comprehensive plan events may be a small and dedicated group. It could be further extrapolated that information about these events is consistently disseminated to the same groups.

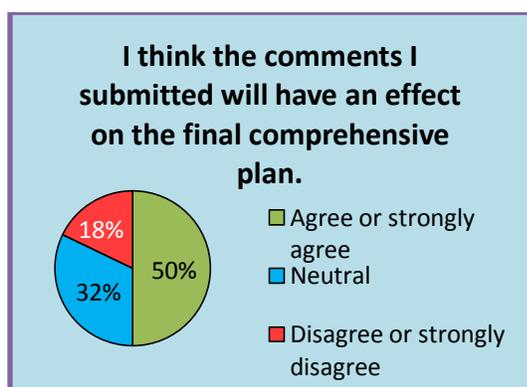
Forty percent of first-time attendees indicated that they knew how to obtain additional information, 80% indicated that they had a better understanding of the comprehensive planning process after the design rodeo, and 100% felt their time was well-spent attending the design rodeo event. Results from this group were generally more positive than non-first time attendees.

The question with the most positive overall results was “Everyone who wished to participate at this event was given equal opportunity,” with 83% of respondents stating that they agree or strongly agree (Figure 10).



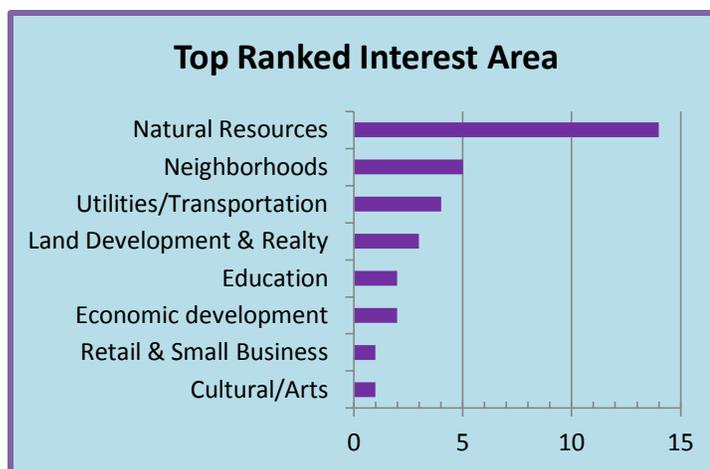
**Figure 10.** Public Survey Results:  
Equal Opportunity Participation

On the other hand, the statement with the most negative feedback was “I think the comments I submitted will have an effect on the final comprehensive plan.” 18% of respondents stated that they disagree or strongly disagree (Figure 11).



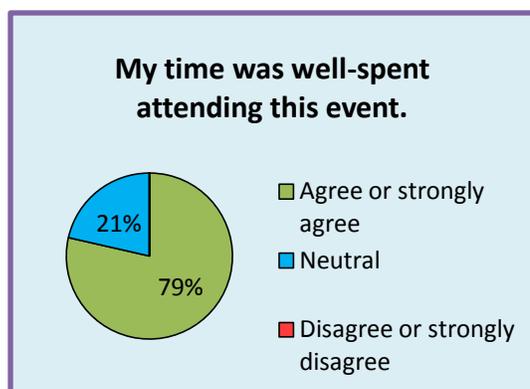
**Figure 11.** Public Survey Results:  
Effective Comments

The topic area most commonly ranked as top priority was overwhelmingly Natural Resources (38%). The next highest was Neighborhoods, with 14%. Least popular were Cultural/Arts and Retail/Small Business, with one respondent each (Figure 12).

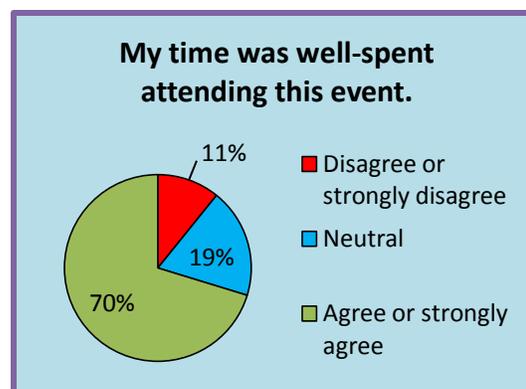


**Figure 12.** Public Survey Results: Top Ranked Interest Areas

Those prioritizing Natural Resources had answers generally consistent with the survey group as a whole. There were a few exceptions to this. Responding to the statement “My time was well-spent attending this event,” 79% of those interested in Natural Resources indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed (Figure 13). This was 19% more positive than the average (Figure 14). This group was also 8% more positive regarding “The staff was receptive and open to public input and new ideas.” Twenty-eight percent of the NR group felt that their comments would affect the final plan, compared to 38% of total respondents. This group was 8% more satisfied than the total survey group with the DR events, and 4% more satisfied with the overall comprehensive planning process.

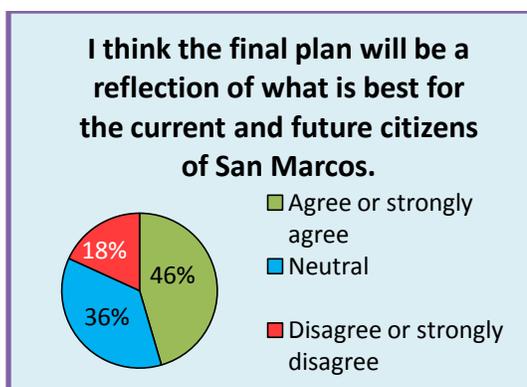


**Figure 13.** Public Survey Results (Natural Resources Respondents): Time Well-Spent

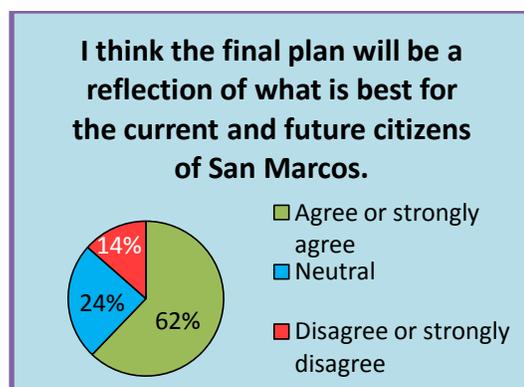


**Figure 14.** Public Survey Results: Time Well-Spent

Another large group was the homeowners. Sixty percent of respondents reported that they owned a home, and 95% of these also indicated that they lived in San Marcos. Sixty-three percent of homeowners indicated that their time was well-spent attending the design rodeo, while 70% of total respondents felt that way. One of the most notable response differences in the homeowner group was for the statement “I think the final plan will be a reflection of what is best for the current and future citizens of San Marcos.” Forty-six percent of this group agreed or strongly agreed with that statement, compared to 62% of total respondents (Figures 15 and 16). This group was also more negative answering the question “What is your level of satisfaction with the overall San Marcos comprehensive planning process?” Fifty-nine percent of homeowners indicated that they were somewhat or extremely satisfied, compared to 68% of total respondents.



**Figure 15. Public Survey Results**  
(Homeowner Respondents): Best for Citizens



**Figure 16. Public Survey Results:**  
Best for Citizens

Overall, the results of this survey were positive. Almost every question resulted in greater than 50% “agree or strongly agree” or “somewhat or extremely satisfied.” As discussed earlier, the exception to this was “I think the comments I submitted will have an effect on the final comprehensive plan.” However, when considering only respondents who additionally indicated that they “submit[ted] verbal and/or written comments at today’s meeting,” the percent of positive respondents increases to 53%.

Eleven of 46 total participants added comments to the end of the survey. One trend that emerges is somewhat surprising, given the responses to the survey questions. Several participants comment on the disproportionate representation of opinions, due to the fact that some event participants are “loud and rude” while others are “civilized” or “meek.” It seems that these participants were more comfortable expressing their opinions in a written format such as this survey. This discussion of “overpowering” citizens seems at odd with the positive results from the question stating, “Everyone who wished to participate at this event was given equal opportunity.” However, it is possible that those who commented may be in the 5% who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, and are not representative of the majority opinion.

Several respondents also commented on confusion relating to the presentation and information presented, mentioning that “charts and data were unclear or missing.” The word cloud in Figure 17 illustrates a word frequency count from the public survey comments.

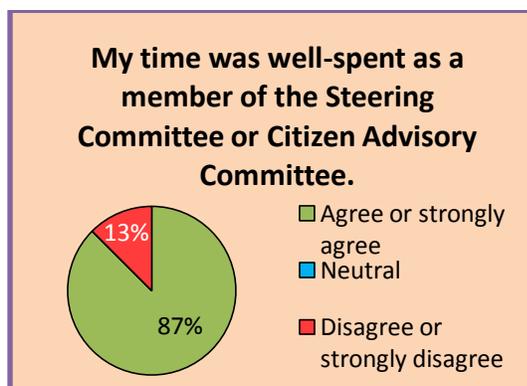


**Figure 17.** Public Survey Comments: Word Cloud

### Committee Survey Results

Sixteen of 32 members of the Steering and Citizen Advisory Committees completed the anonymous online survey administered in March 2013.

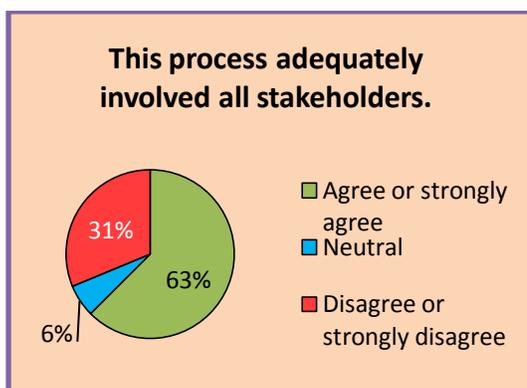
For three of the nine survey questions, there were no neutral responses, indicating that committee members felt particularly strongly about those issues. When asked if they felt their time was well-spent as a member of one of the committees, 87% indicated that they agree or strongly agree (Figure 18). Only 13% (2 respondents) indicated that they disagreed. No respondents selected “neutral” or “strongly disagree” for this question. The positivity of response to this question shows that, without regard to outcome or involvement of other citizens, the committees were utilized fully and had a positive feeling about their own participation. This is reinforced by responses to the question, “As a committee member, my perspective and input had an effect on the comprehensive plan.” 81% indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed, with 13% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing and one respondent (6%) indicating that they were neutral. These responses indicate that committee members felt that their participation in the process was meaningful.



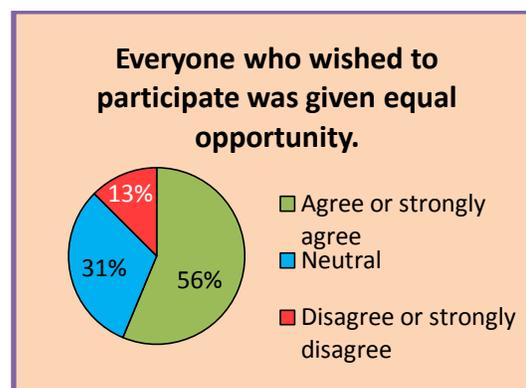
**Figure 18. Committee Survey Results:**  
Time Well-Spent

The most overwhelmingly positive response was to the statement, “The staff was receptive and open to public input and new ideas.” Only one survey respondent indicated that they disagreed, leaving 94% to respond positively. Committee members worked closely with staff throughout the process, spending many hours together at meetings and events as well as extensive communication via email. One survey respondent commented that “overall, staff did an absolutely amazing job.” Another noted that “some of the city staff was great,” while others “needed some manners.”

Two questions in this survey involved stakeholders and equality. One was repeated from the public survey to be used as a benchmark; the other more directly addressed issues of representation. Though these questions dealt with a similar subject matter, their phrasing varied enough to produce different results. For the question “This process adequately involved all stakeholders,” 63% responded that they agreed or strongly agreed; 31% responded negatively, and 6% were neutral (Figure 19). This question had the most negative responses in this survey. For the question “Everyone who wished to participate was given equal opportunity,” 56% responded that they agreed or strongly agreed; 13% responded negatively, and 31% were neutral (Figure 20). A much higher number of participants had no opinion on the second question about equal opportunities than the first question, which dealt with stakeholder involvement. When neutral respondents are removed from the calculation, the balance appears to shift: 67% respond positively to the first question, while 82% respond positively to the second question. This may indicate that committee members felt that, while the process was open and accessible to those who sought it out, stakeholders were not adequately recruited to join the process (or if they were, the resulting representation was still unequal).



**Figure 19. Committee Survey Results:**  
Stakeholder Involvement



**Figure 20. Committee Survey Results:**  
Equal Opportunity Participation

While many of these question responses were positive, the comment section completed by nine of the 16 survey participants reveals a different perspective. On some topics, there was outright disagreement. For example, one respondent states that the business community was given “undue influence,” while another argues that “too little input” was allowed from the business community. While one respondent felt that the overall process was “not well-planned,” another said that it was “a *good* planning process” (emphasis mine). Echoing their responses to the survey questions, the issue participants did seem to agree on was that of unequal representation. Four respondents addressed this directly, noting that the committee was “heavily weighted to one perspective” and that “every group should be treated evenly and fairly.” One committee member specifically addressed the lack of representation from Hispanic and low income populations, which are significant aspects of San Marcos demographics. This respondent felt that the committees were mostly “middle and upper middle class white people,” and acknowledged the difficulty of involving disadvantaged groups in civic events such as the comprehensive plan update. Perhaps the most positive reflection from this survey is the



### Comparison of Public and Committee Survey Results

Several questions in these surveys were used as benchmarks to allow comparison between public and committee opinion. However, it should be noted that the public survey was administered during the design rodeo in September 2012. The committee survey, on the other hand, was administered in March 2013. As explained in Chapter 3, during this time the plan had just been presented for its first public hearing at the Planning and Zoning Commission meeting. There was little response from the public, but the commissioners requested that another committee meeting be held to consider additional input. After almost a year of work on the plan, some committee members expressed frustration that the process would be prolonged. Due to the timing of this survey, these sentiments may have factored especially strongly into participant responses. The benchmark questions are analyzed in the section below. For some, there is slight variation between the public survey and committee survey questions. The exact wording of each is provided, with important differences highlighted, followed by a brief comparison of responses.

*Public Survey Question:* Everyone who wished to participate in this event was given equal opportunity.

*Committee Survey Question:* Everyone who wished to participate was given equal opportunity.

The design rodeo version of this survey question focused on the event itself, while the committee version implied the entire plan process. The intent of the question was to gauge whether all parties expressing an interest in the plan were allowed to voice their

opinions. The public response to this question regarding the design rodeo was 25% more positive than the similar question to the committee regarding the overall process. There were a large number (31%) of “neutral” committee respondents. This may be because a question regarding stakeholder involvement was also asked in this survey, and participants may have perceived this question as similar in intent but too vague.

*Public Survey Question:* The staff was receptive and open to public input and new ideas.

*Committee Survey Question:* The staff was receptive and open to public input and new ideas.

Committee respondents were 16% more positive about staff than public respondents at the design rodeo were. Fourteen percent of public participants indicated that they were neutral about this issue, while all committee members had a definite opinion. This may be because committee members worked closely with staff throughout the process, while design rodeo participants were likely to have less staff interaction at the evening meetings they attended. In addition, the experience that public participants had with staff may have been less personal at these large open meetings, which can lead to a feeling of not being heard. Committee members, on the other hand, often experienced a higher staff to participant ratio at committee meetings. These staff interactions appear to have figured into committee members assessments of the planning process.

*Public Survey Question:* I think the comments I submitted will have an effect on the final comprehensive plan.

*Committee Survey Question:* Citizen comments had a substantial impact on the final plan.

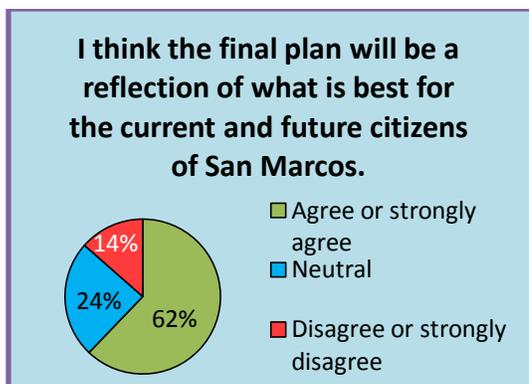
Though phrased slightly differently, these questions asked respondents whether they felt that comments from the public would affect the final plan. Thirty-two percent of public respondents indicated that they were neutral, possibly because they did not submit comments during the design rodeo. Of those who were not neutral, 26% responded negatively to the question. Compare this to 6% of committee members who responded negatively (7% when neutral respondents are not considered). Committee responses were 31% more positive than those from the public on this issue.

*Public Survey Question:* I think the final plan will be a reflection of what is best for the current and future citizens of San Marcos.

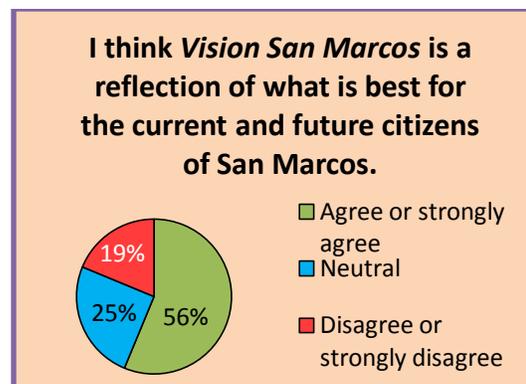
*Committee Survey Question:* I think Vision San Marcos is a reflection of what is best for the current and future citizens of San Marcos.

These questions ask the same thing of these two groups of respondents. The only difference is that, for the committee survey, the plan was already almost entirely complete. At the September design rodeo, on the other hand, respondents needed to imagine what the final plan might look like based on the information they had at the time. The results from these two questions are very similar (Figures 22 and 23). This may indicate that the public's prediction of what the final plan would entail, both positive and negative, was consistent with the outcome. It also implies that the committee does not have an overwhelmingly *more* positive or negative feeling about *Vision San Marcos* than

the public who was involved. (Note that generalizations are limited by sample size and self-selection, and caution should be exercised when extrapolating explanations.)



**Figure 22. Public Survey Results:**  
Best for Citizens



**Figure 23. Committee Survey Results:**  
Best for Citizens

*Public Survey Question:* What is your level of satisfaction with the design rodeo events you have attended?

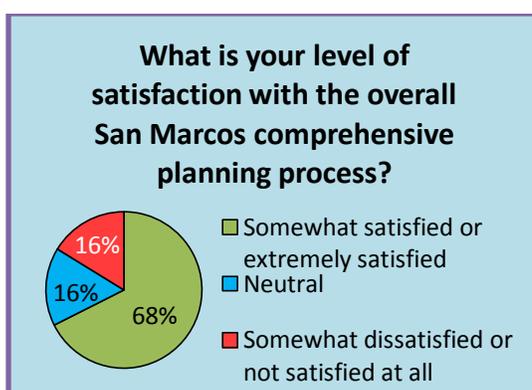
*Committee Survey Question:* What was your level of satisfaction with the design rodeo events you have attended?

Both respondent groups showed a high level of satisfaction with design rodeo events; the public indicated 78% satisfied or extremely satisfied, and committee members, 75%. Both groups showed a more positive response to this question than to a similar question about overall process satisfaction. Four percent more committee members responded neutrally to this question than the public did. This may be because some committee members did not attend design rodeo events, or because they focused their opinions more on other parts of the process.

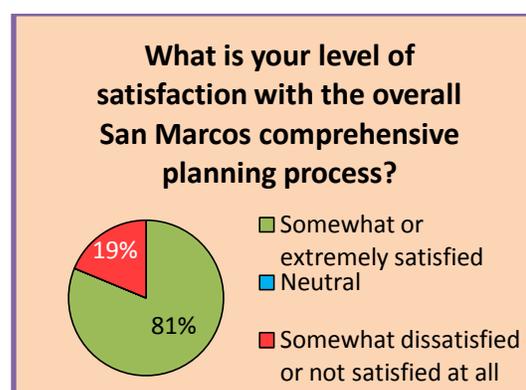
*Public Survey Question:* What is your level of satisfaction with the overall San Marcos comprehensive planning process?

*Committee Survey Question:* What is your level of satisfaction with the overall San Marcos comprehensive planning process?

As previously mentioned, there may be a tendency for committee members and the public to view the planning process on two different levels due to their involvement. The responses to this question, in addition the previous one, support this theory. Here, we see 16% of public respondents indicating that they are neutral in their satisfaction with the overall comprehensive planning process (Figure 24). Not a single committee respondent, on the other hand, responded neutrally to this question (Figure 25). When disregarding these neutral respondents, the public and the committee appear to agree on the effectiveness of the overall process, with 81% responding positively and 19% negatively.



**Figure 24.** Public Survey Results:  
Comprehensive Plan Process Satisfaction



**Figure 25.** Committee Survey Results:  
Comprehensive Plan Process Satisfaction

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **APPLICATION OF CRITERIA**

#### (1) Clearly Defined Goals and Tasks

When asked how he would characterize a good public participation process, John Foreman (Planning Manager at the City of San Marcos) discussed the importance of a clearly stated purpose and context for meetings. This aligns with the first criterion of effective participation articulated in Chapter 4.

The criterion of clearly defined goals and tasks was measured by two questions in the September public survey. The first of these was “The purpose of this meeting was clear.” Seventy-eight percent of respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Similarly, in response to “The design rodeo’s role in the overall comprehensive planning process was clear,” 75% indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed. With a positive response of three-quarters or more for each of these questions, this criterion is met for the design rodeo public meetings as measured by this survey.

## (2) Equal Stakeholder Representation

The criterion of equal stakeholder representation is more complicated to evaluate. However, it must be included here, as it was a primary goal of the City's public participation efforts for the comprehensive plan update (Foreman interview).

Truly equal stakeholder representation involves two aspects. The first is inviting stakeholder groups and having their attendance at meetings and events. This can be accomplished by a thorough identification of affected groups and a concerted effort to reach out to them in an effective way. The second aspect of representation goes beyond physical presence to consider whether the ideas and opinions of these groups are being equally heard and considered. In essence, these parties must not only have a seat at the table, but their voices must all have the opportunity to influence the outcome of the process. This overlaps with criterion number four of the ideal public participation model.

While it is beyond the scope of this research to conduct a detailed identification of stakeholder groups, several survey questions address the issue and provide a way to measure this criterion. In the public survey, the relevant question was "Everyone who wished to participate was given equal opportunity," in reference to design rodeo events. This question had the most positive feedback in the public survey, with 83% of respondents stating that they agree or strongly agree.

In the committee survey, two questions addressed this criterion. These were "This process adequately involved all stakeholders" and "Everyone who wished to participate was given equal opportunity." The percentage of positive responses to each of these questions was 63 and 56, respectively. The phrasing of the first question deals more with

the first aspect described above, of physical representation at events. The second question refers to the second aspect, of equal opportunities for participants to contribute.

Two of the demographic questions in the public survey roughly correlated to possible stakeholder groups. These groups are enumerated in Chapter 4. Both the representation of these groups in the survey sample, as well as the way each group answered the survey questions, have implications for this criterion.

The most noticeably underrepresented group in the survey was Texas State students. Considering that the undergraduate enrollment at the school is 34,000, and the city's population is about 50,000, one would expect a significant student representation at public meetings (City of San Marcos *Vision San Marcos*). However, only seven of 37 design rodeo survey respondents (19%) were Texas State students.

In the last demographic question, a notable result is that there were almost three times as many participants ranking "natural resources" as their number one interest than those of the next highest category, "neighborhoods." This indicates overwhelming representation from the environmentalist perspective, a conclusion that is supported by the researcher's first-hand observation of participant conversations at the design rodeo and other events. To interpret this, it is important to remember that the forced ranking system of this question allowed respondents to put only one interest as their top priority. Therefore, those who might identify with multiple stakeholder groups were assigned to only one, and this may not portray an accurate measure of representatives for each category. However, it is also possible that this representation is not disproportionate. As discussed in Chapter 3, the San Marcos River and its unique ecosystem are part of the city's identity, and many residents may want that to feature prominently in the

comprehensive plan. With this in mind, the large number of those prioritizing natural resources may be an accurate representation of the environmentalist stakeholder group in the city.

A final clue to evaluating this criterion lies in the comments section of each of the surveys. Both aspects of stakeholder representation were addressed here. In the public survey, several respondents described the overpowering vocal comments made by certain attendees, indicating that not all participants were given an equal opportunity to influence the process. In their survey, committee members very clearly stated that the group was disproportionate in its representation. However, they seemed unable to agree on how it was disproportionate, and which groups were under- or over-represented.

While the City made an effort to achieve equal stakeholder representation, the evaluation of their success is mixed. The biggest insight from these mixed results is that, regardless of whether representation is in fact equal or proportionate, participants are most concerned with their own interests being represented. Processes like this one bring together a diverse group with differing opinions, in an often controversial atmosphere. If their perspective is not given significant clout, participants may be inclined to feel underrepresented.

Participant opinion surveys may not be the best way to measure stakeholder representation. As such, it cannot be determined from these research methods whether criterion number two has been met. A more in-depth investigation is needed.

### (3) Participant Satisfaction

Participant satisfaction is the criterion most directly measured by these surveys. It is important because it can affect citizen buy-in on a project, as well as citizen goodwill towards an organization. Three public survey questions addressed this topic, as well as four committee survey questions.

The public survey asked participants to indicate their level of satisfaction with both the design rodeo and the overall comprehensive plan process. Seventy-eight percent of respondents reported being satisfied or extremely satisfied with design rodeo events, while 68% were satisfied or extremely satisfied with the overall process. For the same questions asked of the committee, 75% reported being satisfied or extremely satisfied with design rodeo events, and 81% were satisfied or extremely satisfied with the overall process.

Another question used as a measure of participant satisfaction was, “I think the final plan will be a reflection of what is best for the current and future citizens of San Marcos.” This question resulted in 62% of the public respondents answering that they agree or strongly agree. A similar question, phrased in the present tense and asked of the committee members in March, resulted in 56% agreement rate.

Additionally, the committees were presented with the statement, “My time was well-spent as a member of the Steering Committee or Citizen Advisory Committee.” Eighty-seven percent responded positively to this statement.

These results indicate that the criterion of participant satisfaction has been met.

#### (4) Ability to Influence Policy Outcomes

The ability of participants to influence policy and other outcomes of the process can be analyzed in two ways. The first is in the participants' perception of their influence on outcomes. This can be directly measured with these surveys. The second is the actual influence on outcomes, which can be determined using methods of document analysis and careful observation and recording of the participation process.

The statement correlating to this criterion in the public survey was, "I think the comments I submitted will have an effect on the final comprehensive plan." This received the least positive response of the design rodeo survey questions, with only 50% indicating that they agreed or strongly agreed.

The committee survey asked similar questions from two perspectives. The first stated, "As a committee member, my perspective and input had an effect on the comprehensive plan." The second question stated, "Citizen comments had a substantial impact on the final plan." For each of these statements, 81% of respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed.

This is where the two surveys diverged most strongly. From the public's perspective, it is not clear whether this criterion is met. However, from the committee perspective, the criterion is strongly met.

Comprehensively measuring this criterion based on the actual influence the public had on the plan is beyond the scope of this research. However, one participation opportunity in the comprehensive plan process resulted in a clearly articulated opinion from the public, and can therefore be easily compared to the final document.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the City began gathering public input for the new comprehensive plan with the Ideascale crowdsourcing web site. This platform allowed users to write ideas for the city's future, and then vote ideas up and down. Those ideas with the most net votes ("up votes" minus "down votes") rose to the top. By the end, the entry with the most net votes (191) was "Make San Marcos more walkable and bikeable" (City of San Marcos *Vision San Marcos*). At the City Council meeting on April 16, 2013, Planning Director Matthew Lewis discussed the participatory nature of the plan development. He specifically stated that input from Ideascale was "incorporated into the comprehensive master plan throughout the process." Evidence of this can be found in the final plan document itself. These topics are mentioned in two of 25 general goal statements in *Vision San Marcos*, as well as numerous objectives. These objectives are listed in Table 2. (Some of these objectives may seem repetitive because they are drawn from different plan elements, and overlap is common as the plan elements are all interrelated.)

In addition, the preferred growth scenario advocates dense development in the Downtown and other intensity zones, a land use pattern which encourages alternative modes of transportation such as walking and biking. The Preferred Growth Scenario is one of the driving visions of the plan, and the method of its development is an important commentary on the participatory nature of the *Vision San Marcos* process. As described in Chapter 3, this scenario began in a community exercise in which participants allocated new San Marcos residents by housing density onto a map of the city. These results were the starting point of the design rodeo, at which consultants and the public worked in an iterative process to produce the final scenario.

Considering the survey results, Ideascap incorporation, and preferred scenario development process, I conclude that the fourth criterion of effective participation has been met.

**Table 3.** Walkability and Bikeability Objectives in *Vision San Marcos*

Develop and maintain a high quality system of parks, natural areas, greenways and trails to draw visitors and encourage new business opportunities
Adopt a program to implement the greenway system that is identified in the preferred scenario and integrate this trail system with the Parks Master Plan
Create connected network for nonautomobile travel
Require all developments dedicate adequate right-of-way to accommodate all modes of transportation
Create a Sidewalk Master Plan
Develop a full comprehensive wayfinding system for City, including all transportation options
Create a Greenways Master Plan
Focus on non-vehicular transportation improvements in updated Transportation Master Plan
Obtain “Bicycle Friendly Community” designation
Create a Sidewalk Master Plan
Develop and implement a complete streets policy for coordination with other transportation related entities to properly integrate all modes of transportation into the transportation network

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

The process for developing *Vision San Marcos: A River Runs Through Us* included many opportunities for citizen comment and participation. Those events featuring small group collaboration, such as the visioning workshops and the growth preservation and allocation exercise, facilitated discussion between diverse viewpoints as well as allowed participants to have a tangible impact on the final plan. The design rodeo was the centerpiece of the participation process, providing citizens with numerous ways to give feedback. Throughout the development of *Vision San Marcos*, the Steering and Citizen Advisory Committees served as liaisons between the public and the staff, and made key decisions based on citizen input.

The surveys administered as part of this research provide insight into participants' view of the planning process. The results of both surveys were generally positive, indicating a feeling of overall participant satisfaction. When analyzed in terms of the four criteria of the ideal model, the *Vision San Marcos* process is found to be effective. It clearly meets three of the four criteria. While criterion number two could not be thoroughly evaluated with these research methods, survey results indicate that it may have been met to some degree.

A comprehensive evaluation of the *Vision San Marcos* participation process in terms of this ideal model will require a textual analysis of the final plan document to identify key themes and ideas. A comparison of these ideas to participant comments throughout the process will provide a more accurate picture of whether criterion number four was met. Criterion number two can be more completely evaluated with a detailed identification of stakeholder groups, an examination of their representation at various events and an enumeration of the inclusion of their values and ideas in the final plan.

Stepping back from the detailed analysis of this process, we can look at the big questions of participation which inspired this research. What substance was gained from the public during this process? Is there widespread citizen buy-in and faith in the final plan? Although there is some apprehension from the public that the plan may not be followed or implemented fully, many residents seem to believe that the document represents a positive future for San Marcos. The influence of the public is most clearly seen in the preferred growth scenario, the seeds of which began at the growth and preservation allocation exercise in August. In fact, when faced with proposed changes to this map by the City Council, Planning Director Matt Lewis defended the document, reiterating that the community identified the growth areas and that is why they are included on the map (Lewis).

In what can be a highly controversial planning environment in San Marcos, citizen agreement on a comprehensive document for the city's future is a major accomplishment. Partly responsible for this are innovative participation strategies that facilitated discussion instead of forcing attendees to take sides. The City took the opportunity of the comprehensive plan update to design a more effective participation

process. After seeing the success of this method, the City should make an attempt to involve citizens earlier in the planning and development process, allowing a more meaningful form of participation than simply the required public hearings. Rather than measuring participation by the number of residents speaking for or against an item, the City ought to reconsider its public feedback strategies in terms of the ideal model presented in this paper. This will contribute to continued success in the City's efforts to involve residents in the planning process.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **PUBLIC SURVEY COVER LETTER**

Hi! My name is Alix Scarborough, and I'm a senior Urban Planning student at Texas State University. I'm working on an undergraduate honors thesis about public participation in the planning process, using San Marcos as a case study.

The results of the design rodeo survey will contribute to my evaluation of the effectiveness of San Marcos' public participation in the comprehensive planning process. It will also help me refine an evaluative method that can be applied to other cities.

The results of this survey will be reported in aggregate; that is, your survey responses will not be discussed on an individual basis in my research. Since the survey is anonymous, you will not be identified.

However, if you wish to help further with my research, I am looking for some volunteers for focused interviews. You can do this in addition to filling out the survey. Please write your name and contact info on the sign-up sheet if you are interested, and I will contact you later if I need your help.

This research will be presented in my thesis in May 2013, in partial fulfillment of the requirements to graduate with a minor in Honors Studies. In addition, preliminary results will be presented to the City Council and Planning & Zoning Commission, as appropriate, in November 2012.

If you have any questions or comments, feel free to get in touch. Your interest and participation make this project possible, and are much appreciated!

Thanks for your help,

Alix

Alix Scarborough

Alix@txstate.edu

[www.AlixScarborough.weebly.com](http://www.AlixScarborough.weebly.com)

**APPENDIX B**  
**PUBLIC SURVEY QUESTIONS**

Design Rodeo Public Survey	
<p>How many <b>comprehensive plan</b> events have you attended before the Design Rodeo? (Such as the Growth and Preservation Allocation Exercise or visioning events)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> This is my first event</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1 event</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2 or more events</p> <p>The purpose of this meeting was clear.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p>The Design Rodeo's role in the overall comprehensive planning process was clear.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p>I have a better understanding of the comprehensive planning process after attending the Design Rodeo.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p>I know how to obtain additional information about this process.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p>My time was well-spent attending this event.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p>	<p>Did you submit verbal and/or written comments at today's meeting?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>I think the comments I submitted will have an effect on the final comprehensive plan.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> N/A</p> <p>I think the final plan will be a reflection of what is best for the current and future citizens of San Marcos.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p>What is your level of satisfaction with the <b>Design Rodeo events</b> you have attended?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Extremely satisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat satisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat dissatisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not satisfied at all</p> <p>What is your level of satisfaction with the overall San Marcos <b>comprehensive planning process</b>?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Extremely satisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat satisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat dissatisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not satisfied at all</p> <p>Check all that apply:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I live in San Marcos.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I work in San Marcos.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I am a Texas State student.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I am otherwise affiliated with TXST.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I am a high school student.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I own a home in San Marcos.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I own a business in San Marcos.</p>

<p>The staff was receptive and open to public input and new ideas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</li></ul> <p>Everyone who wished to participate at this event was given equal opportunity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</li></ul>	<p>Rank your interest in the following Design Rodeo focus areas. (Label from 1 to 8, with 1 being the most interesting to you.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>_____ Economic development</li><li>_____ Natural resources</li><li>_____ Cultural/Arts</li><li>_____ Utilities/Transportation</li><li>_____ Neighborhoods</li><li>_____ Education</li><li>_____ Retail &amp; small business</li><li>_____ Land development &amp; realty</li></ul> <p><i>We welcome your additional comments about the Design Rodeo or the comprehensive planning process on the back of this page.</i></p>
---	--

## APPENDIX C

### COMMITTEE SURVEY COVER LETTER

Committee members,

You may remember the public survey I administered at the design rodeo in September. These results are a primary part of my undergraduate honors thesis on the effectiveness of public participation in the urban planning process, which uses Vision San Marcos as a case study and will be published in May.

As heavily involved participants, your insight on the Vision San Marcos process is especially important. My hope is that the results of these surveys will deepen the understanding of the comprehensive plan process and guide future participatory processes in the City.

Please take 5 – 10 minutes to complete this committee survey. A copy of the questions is attached to this email for your review. When you are ready to answer, please follow the link below. Your answers are anonymous and will not be individually identified. Feel free to contact me with any questions.

Thanks for your input, and for your dedication to this process for the past year.

Sincerely,

Alix Scarborough

**APPENDIX D**

**COMMITTEE SURVEY QUESTIONS**

Citizen Steering and Advisory Committees Survey	
<p>My time was well-spent as a member of the Steering Committee or Citizen Advisory Committee.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p>The staff was receptive and open to public input and new ideas.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p>This process adequately involved all stakeholders.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p>Everyone who wished to participate was given equal opportunity.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p>As a committee member, my perspective and input had an effect on the comprehensive plan.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p>	<p>Citizen comments had a substantial impact on the final plan.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p>I think Vision San Marcos is a reflection of what is best for the current and future citizens of San Marcos.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree</p> <p>What was your level of satisfaction with the <b>Design Rodeo events</b> you attended?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Extremely satisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat satisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat dissatisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not satisfied at all</p> <p>What is your level of satisfaction with the overall San Marcos <b>comprehensive planning process</b>?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Extremely satisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat satisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neutral</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat dissatisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not satisfied at all</p> <p><i>We welcome your additional comments about your experience with the comprehensive planning process.</i></p>

**APPENDIX E**

**IRB EXEMPTION CERTIFICATE**



**Institutional Review Board**

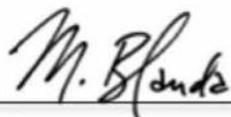
**Request For Exemption**

**Certificate of Approval**

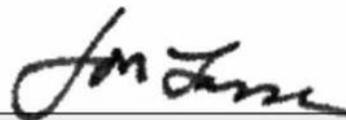
**Applicant: Alexandra Scarborough**

**Request Number : EXP2012I9300**

**Date of Approval: 09/12/12**



Assistant Vice President for Research  
and Federal Relations



Chair, Institutional Review Board

## REFERENCES

- Barron, Wendy. "An Assessment of Participation in the South Central Texas Regional Water Planning Group" (Master's Thesis, Texas State University-San Marcos, 2006).
- Creighton, James. *The Public Participation Handbook: Making Better Decisions Through Citizen Involvement*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.
- City of San Marcos. *San Marcos Horizons*. Comprehensive plan, San Marcos, Texas, 1996.
- . "The Master Plan." *Code of Ordinances*. Part I, Sec. 7.03. San Marcos, Texas.
- . *Vision San Marcos: A River Runs Through Us*. Comprehensive plan, San Marcos, Texas, 2013.
- Cunningham, Catherine. "The Effectiveness of Public Participation: Public Engagement in the Re-Permitting of a Smelter in El Paso, Texas" (Master's Thesis, Texas State University-San Marcos, 2006).
- Foreman, John. Personal interview. 5 March 2013.
- . San Marcos City Council. City Council Chambers, San Marcos, TX. 6 March 2012. Staff presentation.
- Forester, John. *The deliberative practitioner: encouraging participatory planning processes*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999.
- Gumprecht, Blake. *The American College Town*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008. Print.
- Irvin, Renée A., and John Stansbury. "Citizen Participation In Decision Making: Is It Worth The Effort?." *Public Administration Review* 1 (2004): 55. *JSTOR Arts & Sciences IV*. Web. 4 Mar. 2013.

- King, Cheryl Simrell, and Kathryn M. Feltey. "The Question Of Participation: Toward Authentic Public Participation In Public Administration." *Public Administration Review* 4 (1998): 317. *JSTOR Arts & Sciences IV*. Web. 4 Mar. 2013.
- Lewis, Matthew. San Marcos City Council. City Council Chambers, San Marcos, TX. 16 April 2013. Staff presentation.
- National Charrette Institute. *NCI Charrette System*. 30 April 2013.
- Rosener, Judy B. "Citizen Participation: Can We Measure Its Effectiveness?." *Public Administration Review* 5 (1978): 457. *JSTOR Arts & Sciences IV*. Web. 4 Mar. 2013.
- Rowe, Gene, and Lynn J. Frewer. "Public Participation Methods: A Framework For Evaluation." *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 1 (2000): 3. *JSTOR Arts & Sciences II*. Web. 4 Mar. 2013.
- State of Texas. "Open Meetings." Title 5 *Government Code*, Chapter 551. Online.
- . "Municipal Comprehensive Plans." Title 7 *Local Government Code*, Chapter 213. Online.
- Texas State University-San Marcos. "Fact Book Pivot Tables."  
[<http://www.ir.txstate.edu/Facts/xfacts.html>]
- Webler, Thomas, Seth Tuler, and Rob Krueger. "What Is A Good Public Participation Process? Five Perspectives From The Public." *Environmental Management* 27.3 (2001): 435-450. *Environment Complete*. Web. 4 Mar. 2013.
- Yin, Robert K. *Case Study Researchh Design and Methods*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2003.