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Public approvals: lessons learned, better projects produced

The city of Aspen is legendary for its public approval process. Each stakeholder on every decision must be heard. In our vast experience working within the city of Aspen, we have learned much about the process, how to manage the process, the benefits of the process, including some successes and failures along the way. Through research, communication and community outreach, the public approval process can become a valuable experience that produces better projects through consensus building, community engagement and problem-solving.



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Case Study: The Crandall Building

The Crandall Building received City Council approval in early December. This approval marks Aspen's first voluntary commercial post-war landmarked building. The city of Aspen's Ordinance 48 allows a property owner who has been identified by the city as having a potentially historic building to volunteer for historic designation. Choosing this option certainly produced positive results. The decision initiates a 90-day negotiation period involving an effort to reach a mutually acceptable agreement through incentives. The developer chose to preserve the building's original unique form and fenestration with a rooftop addition that

complements the existing modern architectural vocabulary.

With respect to the late artist and architect, Thomas W. Benton, the remodel/addition of the Crandall Building will bring this iconic 1970s build-

ing up to 21st century standards. Significant upgrades to the mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems will maximize energy efficiency and sustainability. The most significant sustainability decision was to redevelop rather than demolish the original structure. In addition, existing tenants, many of whom are longtime locals, will have the opportunity to purchase their spaces at affordable rates. City Council's approval brings affordable commercial real estate to Aspen by allowing those businesses to stay in place. The new third level is a three-bedroom residential unit that is significantly set back from the primary facade resulting in a large rooftop deck. This new use allows the building to be truly mixed-use. Enclosing the existing three-

story exterior courtyard creates a conditioned atrium gallery space dedicated to displaying Benton's artwork to the general public. The success of the Crandall Building approval is rooted in our methodology of research, communication and community outreach.

■ **Research.** Stack the room in your favor. Start this on Day One of the project. The primary goal of the overall project is to not only satisfy your client's goals, but also to gain community support. Make a list of neighbors, community leaders and other stakeholders. Anticipate their concerns and objections with regard to the emotions of the property. We call this "emotional management." Then perform due diligence, overcoming those objections before they happen in a public meeting. From this standpoint you will find greater efficiency in the design process by knowing where the risks exist.

■ **Communication.** Listen to and observe both supporters and opponents – be inclusive! Prior to any city meetings seek out known stakeholders for a one-on-one conversation. Create opportunities for the "opposing sides" to meet each other and discuss their individual concerns. Being proactive reduces the surprise factor in city council meetings. Communicate the benefits of the project to all stakeholders and opponents. Your opponents will appreciate

the opportunity to voice their concerns and gain respect for the development team even if they still oppose the project.

■ **Community outreach.** The community outreach portion of the project should coincide with the design. Plan and host relevant events that gather and inform the public about your project during each phase of design. Be proactive in addressing previously stated concerns as members of the community may be just joining the process for the first time. These types of events can be your "dress rehearsal" prior to a city council meeting. For the Crandall Building, we had several open house events at our office, in which we gathered information about community concerns and that prevented us from being caught off guard during public meetings.

In conclusion, through research, communication and community outreach, the public process can become a valuable experience that produces sustainable projects through consensus building, minimizing risk and communicating benefits at all times. It is important to never lose sight of the project goals, client and community. Our approach is that the more stringent the public approval process, the more humble we need to become as we build a foundation of community support.▲