



Marg Sanders enjoys living by a prairie lake in rural Alberta, Canada. She is dedicated to hosting circle conversations that matter ... that acknowledge and uncover wisdom quietly lying below the surface in people who gather together in response to a need. Her Circle Tale took place in the city of St. Albert, Alberta, Canada, and demonstrates how circle enabled new possibilities in municipal public process. Visit her website at (<http://mindsprings.ca>).

Her partners in the project were Beth Sanders (<http://populus.ca/plan>, a professional planner on contract to the city for this process) and Peter Spearey (a professional landscape architect).

Circle Tale, February/March 2011

Circle as Public Process

The mayor's back was against the wall. City council had hopes that Habitat for Humanity would develop homes on a portion of parkland, originally intended for a school. Homeowners surrounding the parkland along with others in the community vehemently opposed development in the area, particularly development that would increase density. Public hearings on the subject had been loud and angry.

Desperately wanting a successful outcome, the mayor acted on the suggestion of city staff to meet with our team of three. He agreed to fully support hosting a new kind of conversation and we set dates for a series of gatherings with and for residents. The communications director crafted an invitation which was immediately posted on the city's website, placed in the local paper, and sent to all people who had attended the public hearings.

The first evening, about 40 people arrived in the large meeting room to find a circle of chairs arranged around a centre of colourful building block structures. When everyone was seated in the circle with us, including the mayor, several councillors, and Habitat for Humanity representatives, we began by posing a problem. "Grandma has to move in with you. She must live on the main floor and she must have easy access to a bathroom. How could you reconfigure your home to accommodate Grandma?"

We invited each person to quietly take a moment to draw the footprint of the main floor of their home or apartment on an index card, and to think about where Grandma could live, and what changes could be made to accommodate her. Speakers all around the circle described possibilities: moving the home office to the basement and giving Grandma that space with a nice window; giving Grandma the master bedroom and we move to the spare room upstairs; converting the garage to a living space with a bathroom; kids double up in a bedroom to free up a room.

Having set the stage for accommodating need, we were ready to move forward. People re-arranged themselves into groups of 4 at tables. They had aerial maps of the specified park area to scale including existing homes adjacent to the green space, unit blocks of wood to scale, and various other materials. Their task was to configure the Habitat for Humanity community, complete with housing size and configuration, roadways, green space and connections to the surrounding established neighborhood.

At each gathering, the vast majority of people poured their souls into finding solutions. There were many versions, but themes did emerge. Council adopted bylaws to accommodate the proposed Habitat for Humanity development. The project can go ahead. The original design was altered based on collective learning through circle and conversation. And, at the end of each evening when we returned to circle for closure, people spoke positively about the process saying things like, "Everyone got 'air time,'" and "It felt good to come together," and "we dealt with different points of view."



A bold political move to more broadly engage the public significantly informed the end result – a result that accommodates new members into a community both by physical design and a sense of welcoming spirit. The community struggled **together** to deal with tough issues that politicians and planners face in isolation every day.

If you have a tale to tell, contact the PeerSpirit office and we'll help you share it.

*For more information on many applications of circle, visit our web site at www.peerspirit.com and subscribe to our monthly Circle Tale newsletter. Your e-mail address will **not** be shared or used by anyone other than PeerSpirit, and you can unsubscribe yourself at any time.*