

Amity Creek Charrette

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Intro: This is Superior Science News. Today's program explores the use of a charrette to further sustainable development near Lake Superior.

Few people may have heard of a charrette, and, if you're drawing a blank about what it is, you're not alone. A charrette is simply a focused effort to resolve community development challenges in a short period of time. Often, a charrette can avoid drawn-out battles between communities and cities over development. Such is the case with the Amity Creek Charrette that took place in April last year. Amity Creek is a stream that runs through one of Duluth's residential neighborhoods and into Lake Superior. Community members like Kevin Skwira-Brown had concerns about future developments nearby.

"Amity Creek was and is a priority. Amity Creek is one of Duluth's natural trout streams. It already has some development pressure in terms of being impaired because of development activity. We certainly didn't want development in the area to impede that creek."

City Planner Kyle Deming says the charrette opened doors and provided options for community members, developers, and the city.

"This process was important because it helped us figure out in more detail how to go about developing the land in a manner that's sensitive to the characteristics of the land--the natural characteristics of the land. The presence of wetlands, the slopes, also--the key factor--the proximity to Amity Creek."

However, planning new developments that meet everyone's needs can be challenging, according to Architect Doug Zaun of the Northern Minnesota Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

"It's really difficult to do in Duluth just because of the terrain and all the creeks that run through it, so really economically developable properties are scarce. There's a lot of these parcels or sort of ragged areas along the creek that weren't developed previously because of impact issues and cost issues. But, now perhaps, there's opportunity to develop them to keep the density, but do it in a way that's compatible with the creek."

Those involved in the charrette realized the situation required creative thinking and solutions -- that from participant Kris Larson, conservation director with the Minnesota Land Trust.

“Usually what happens in a charette is they come up with a beautiful plan that maybe the citizens who live around it could tolerate it and like. Maybe the developer even agrees with, but quite often they couldn’t be built because the city codes or ordinances wouldn’t allow it today. That’s the case in Duluth and many other communities.”

New regulations or city ordinances will have to be put in place to best serve all parties involved with development around Amity Creek. Minnesota Sea Grant’s Jesse Schomberg says there’s much more to be done.

“The biggest challenges are upcoming and trying to actually get this development done. The city was obviously very heavily involved in the process, but again there would need to be regulation changes to allow this to go forward. It follows along with the city’s comprehensive plan. These are changes that the plan calls for, but they haven’t actually been made into the new regulations yet.”

At any rate, Kevin Skwira-Brown says the charrette is proof of a growing desire to see sustainable development on the shores of Lake Superior.

“Here in Duluth and in the northland, we recognize the value of green space. We don’t all need to have our own green space, but if we can preserve some communal green space, then we can all get access to it.”

And developments that incorporate existing environments can save time and money in the long run.

Larson: **“If nothing else, everybody at the end realizes that there is more than one way to potentially do business and explore all those avenues before approving plans that no one really likes and doesn’t get us the desired community outcome we want.”**

Deming: **“In the city planning world, you don’t often times find a solution that everybody loves. Usually, you’re trying to achieve a solution that everyone can live with. A solution where people say, ‘Alright, I don’t like that part of it, but I can live with the end result.’ I think we got that.”**

For Superior Science News, I’m Marie Zhuikov.

Outro: This is a production of Minnesota Sea Grant and KUWS radio.