

CASE STUDY: Meckenheim's Motto,
Interference wanted

SECTOR: Transport
COUNTRY: Germany

BACKGROUND

The results of the Ideas Competition regarding Meckenheim station was the subject of the transport committee's meeting in spring this year. A large number of residents had watched carefully what was happening around the old station and had been influential participants in the development of the site. Action regarding the station was needed as it no longer fulfilled the requirements of a representative entry into town. In autumn 2000 all residents had been called upon, to submit their ideas and vision to a *Zukunftswerkstatt* (futurevision workshop). No restrictions were imposed by the town. Residents discussed ideas amongst themselves and drew up proposals for redesigning the station site.

The results of the *Zukunftswerkstatt*



were publicly documented and used as a basis for the invitation to an Ideas Competition in which seven planning offices took part. They worked on their designs in a one-week open workshop and residents were invited to look at the progress made, to comment and give guidance. It was quite a success.

The process co-ordinator of the *Stadtplanungsbüro Zimmermann* [town planning bureau) confirms the added

value of such a procedure: "We don't know the place as well as the residents do." To him this means that a realistic link with the area is guaranteed. "The *Zukunftswerkstatt* and above all the active contributions by residents lead to high quality results." Rolf Westerheide, moderator of the *Zukunftswerkstatt* of the *Technische Hochschule Aachen*, confirms this success: "The combination of three aspects was decisive: an open-minded administrative authority, motivated residents and proper co-ordination. The town of Meckenheim offers a good basis for the development of resident-orientated projects."

The lady mayor, Yvonne Kempen, had already stated her support for new ways towards residents' participation during the election campaign of 1999. Numerous events, workshops and reports in the local paper, *Stadtnachrichten*, and other media called upon people to participate. The intensive public relations work and the projection of ideas outward also fostered a positive climate: residents were well informed, felt included into the administration's decisions and showed commitment. "The administrative authority, in turn, was unable to retract its statements since they had been made publicly and had to justify them", explains Ingrid Sönnert, the town's spokeswoman for Public Relations. Committed residents entered their names in lists, applied to take part in working groups and actions and showed initiative. "Such processes have to grow, they don't succeed from one day to the next", says the lady mayor. There had to be a re-thinking process in the administration, areas of competence had to be re-organized and the residents' participation enshrined in the administration.



Various forms and methods of residents' participation have in the meantime been implemented in Meckenheim: The instrument of a "Planning Cell" was the basis for a residents' survey which in turn was the basis for drawing up a building plan for a new housing district. Numerous working groups dealt with subjects such as cleanliness, town development or town marketing. They all felt the town took them seriously - and that motivated them. The result was that "their identification with their town can be felt", says Ingrid Sönnert, "because they have become aware that they are able to 'move' something".

Due to the very successful planning of the station site, initial scepticism within the administrative authority has by now been replaced by a positive attitude towards residents' participation. One of their most important experiences has been the fact that such processes will only develop successfully, if there is intensive communication and feedback between all participants. The residents also become aware of it, their positive experiences have by now helped to build up trust in the administration's work. They are sure that the town takes their ideas into account and will continue to include them in these processes. The next step towards re-designing the station area has already been taken: the administrative authority will now create the legal and commercial bases for the implementation of the proposals developed. The minutes of the Transport Committee's meeting state: "The area

development plan still has to be approved, in August/September results can be submitted; the budget also provides for a planning committee for 2002, which will continue to work on this subject; further funds are envisaged by the committee for the town's new traffic concept into which the station is integrated. These statements will be recorded in the minutes."

Interference wanted. This is the motto with which the town of Meckenheim hopes to achieve its residents' continued and direct participation in planning events from the earliest stages onwards. On the one hand residents can thereby share in decisions and are able to introduce and implement their ideas and suggestions, and on the other the town benefits from their knowledge as experts within their own living space. The lady mayor, Yvonne Kempen, sees this as a chance to make further progress in reducing the distant attitudes towards politics, to strengthen residents' responsibility for themselves and to create further opportunities for residents to identify with their own town.



"To build proposals on residents' wishes leads to a considerable increase of their acceptance of administrative decisions", stresses Ingrid Sönnert. "Confrontation just costs time, since the proposals developed by the administration frequently take up a great deal of time and in the end are still not accepted." Although the preparation of residents' participation processes is indeed

somewhat demanding for her, the overall savings in time due to mutual co-operation is indeed very great. Because firstly, the implementation of projects is more effective; secondly, residents feel responsible for their own actions, and thirdly a new consciousness for the town is created. This is why the setting up of youth clubs or the implementation of festivities is already firmly in the hands of residents.

Ingrid Sönnert is as convinced as are her colleagues of the results of this new approach and together with the lady mayor intends to continue pursuing this course. And the politicians, too, are on her side. As far as Deputy Albert Bergmann is concerned "there is no way back".

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Meckenheim (Town in North Rhine Westphalia, Germany)
25,000 inhabitants