Community Visioning with Google Sketchup

Community Visioning requires the committed participation from residents of a community and a team that is able to present ideas and concepts so that decisions can be made and policies can be formed. Visually representing elements of design in a 3D environment is a tool that can be utilized to assist in visioning processes and is becoming increasingly popular within the Planning profession. For years, many municipalities have been contracting out the development of 3D illustrations and models for reports to staff, and presentations to committees, council, and the general public.

As a Planner you may be charged with establishing policy for building height and massing. How can you expect to gain a proper appreciation of policy effects without first seeing the conceptual effects of a building on surrounding properties and the overall streetscape? We as Planners and Planning Technicians need to accurately portray the effects of policy so that communities believe in our processes and adopted policies to assist in bringing community design ideas to fruition.

Google Sketchup is capable of transforming ideas and concepts to graphic representations to assist a community in determining what they would like their neighbourhood to look like in the future.

Models can be created to focus on building height, massing, setbacks, parking locations, roof pitch, canopies, stepbacks, and the location of land uses. The community can become involved by voting using the "dotmocracy" method to select an overall preferred design as well as to indicate which elements are desirable and which are not.

The ability to view designs from the perspective of an individual driving or walking along a street is a valuable tool that Google Sketchup possesses as it provides a visual representation of the effects of various building setbacks, height and massing policies. These views can be presented as either static images or fly through animations.

Sketchup models from the Dartmouth (HRM) Main Street Plan Review for future redevelopment options.

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Community Visioning with Google Sketchup continued...

When establishing policy for building height and massing, one may need to consider the effects of shadows on neighbouring properties. Google Sketchup allows you to specify the geographic location of your model along with a specific month, day, and time.

Sketchup can accommodate all of your graphic needs from very basic building forms, to complex roof pitches, to detailed architectural features. Included are an array of building materials and components that you can add to building forms to bring a level of realism to your models. Should you be looking for something specific such as a mansard roof, you can simply access the 3D Warehouse and use the search feature to locate models and components that you can add to your models.

GIS and site plan data can be incorporated into your models to provide an accurate representation of terrain and the location of roads, driveways, and waterbodies. Images of aerial photography can also be imported and painted on your terrain to add yet another level of realism.
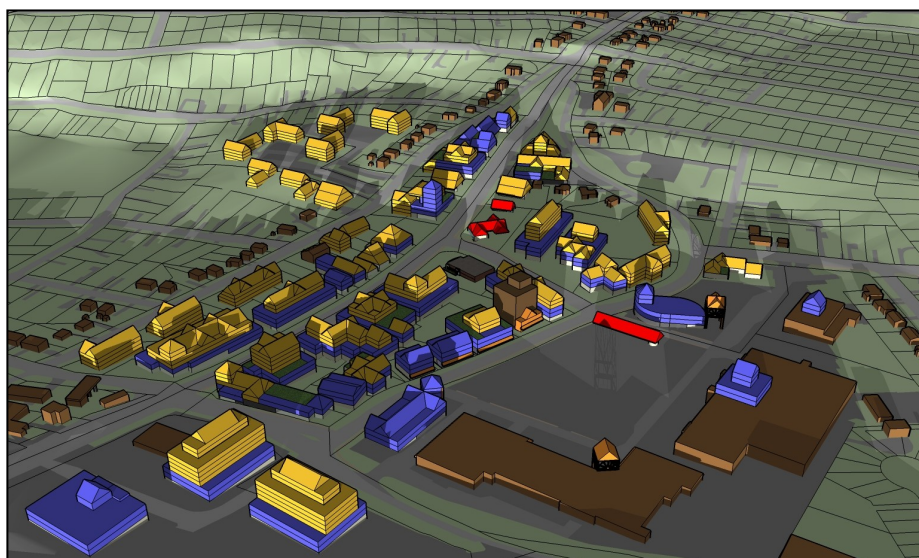
Tools such as Google Sketchup assist in engaging communities and representing their ideas for the future growth and development of a community. I have witnessed first-hand the level of appreciation a community has when viewing and interacting with 3D modelling. Although modelling can take considerable time to produce, depending on the level of detail required, it is an invaluable tool in understanding the effects that land use polices can have on a community.

I encourage each of you to delve into the exciting world and Sketchup to see how it can assist you, your team, and your communities.
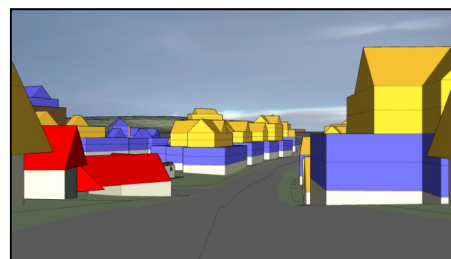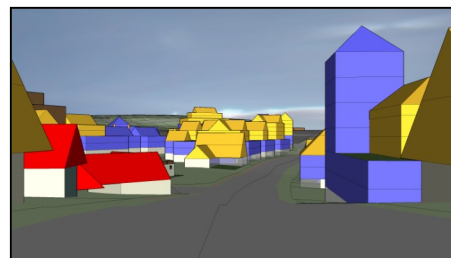
Happy Modelling,

Scott LeBlanc, Planning Technician
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Sketchup shadow model from the Dartmouth (HRM) Main Street Plan Review.

Sketchup model (conceptual) from Fall River (HRM) Community Visioning.

Sketchup model animations from the Dartmouth (HRM) Main Street Plan Review.