

BERKSHIRE PLANNING TOOLS



One in a series of "toolbox" items to accompany the Regional Plan for the Berkshires

June 2001

Community visioning

"Community visioning is both a process and an outcome. Its success is most clearly visible in an improved quality of life, but it can also give individual citizens and the community as a whole a new approach to meeting challenges and solving problems." (from Community Visioning and Strategic Planning Handbook, 1992)

Visioning is a process by which a community envisions the future it wants, and plans how to achieve it. Through public involvement, communities identify their purpose, core values and vision of the future, which are then transformed into a manageable and feasible set of community goals and an action plan.

A key to this process is that the goals and action plans are firmly rooted in the purpose and values of the local community. The process also places a great deal of emphasis on public participation, not only at the beginning stages, but throughout the entire planning process.

Visioning is an absolute must for virtually any planning project for both political and practical reasons. Visioning should be initiated at the very outset of any planning project, and it should be continued throughout the duration of the project.

Approaches to visioning should be varied, and they should be tailored to the individual community and circumstances.

The results of visioning should have a strong presence in the resulting planning document, both in substance (i.e., ideas) and in style (i.e., images & quotes).

Visioning is used as an accepted step in many strategic planning processes. Community strategic planning efforts usually begin with a scan of where the community is headed, which may involve some assessment of demographic, economic, social and fiscal trends in the area. The next logical step is to develop a common view of where the community should be headed, which usually involves some form of visioning processes.

The visioning process may be considered so important that it is given its own event. A community may convene a special meeting, or series of meetings, to develop a community vision. The primary product of such an event would be a guide for subsequent planning. Usually, the vision is followed by the development of specific strategies and an action plan the community wishes to follow.

The Visioning Process

Creating a common vision is a several step process. Here is how it might go! Over the course of several working sessions:

- ❖ Brainstorm ideas and capture on flip charts or other means.
- ❖ Break into smaller groups and discuss and record ideas more fully.
- ❖ Present small group discussions to the larger group.
- ❖ Group similar ideas together.
- ❖ Assign responsibility for gathering the additional information needed.
- ❖ Determine focus areas to ascertain if environmental, economic and social attributes are captured.

Once the additional information is collected, bring together stakeholders to:

- ❖ Develop scenarios for alternative futures.
- ❖ Produce a pictorial/graphic representation of the alternative future (s).
- ❖ Create the first draft of the Vision Statement
- ❖ Circulate the draft Vision Statement and gather feedback from community members.
- ❖ Revise the Vision Statement and recirculate.
- ❖ Create the Final Vision Statement.

Please note that creating a Vision Statement may take time and work to achieve broad consensus. Public review and outreach to the community via newsletters or newspaper articles may facilitate the process.

Ideas for Public Reviews:

- ❖ Meetings with community organizations
- ❖ Reviews with City Council and Commissions
- ❖ Public Surveys or questionnaires
- ❖ Presentations or displays at community events
- ❖ Articles in local news media and community newsletters

Using Graphics to Illustrate the Vision

When embarking on a visioning process, don't forget about the graphics! In general five types of graphics can be used in the visioning process. Each employs a different type of imagery and contributes to the process in a slightly different way. Combinations of these techniques can be used to visually represent your community's Vision.

Data Graphics

Graphs, tables, pie charts, etc. can display and interpret statistical information and trends. They are easily developed with readily available computer software or hand-drawn.

Maps

Maps are widely available and can be enhanced with mylar or plastic overlays. Land use maps are most frequently used to display impacts of different scenarios and the resulting trade-offs.

Planning and Architectural Graphics

Site plans, renderings, and panoramas provide two- or three-dimensional perspectives on the future landscape. These kinds of graphics can assist a community to illustrate the physical aspects of their vision which may include village plans, community parks, and riparian restoration plans.

General Illustrations

Artists' concepts, sketches, photographs, etc. are a powerful way to highlight a community's final vision statement. They can be used to focus on particular features of the Vision Statement such as viewsheds or vistas that are to be enhanced in the future.

Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

A GIS is a sophisticated system which gathers and analyzes data spatially which can then be produced as maps. GIS' is a powerful tool which can integrate nearly any combination of data such as census tract information, site locations of natural features, or zoning codes. Much of the

information and data referenced in Green Communities can be used as part of a GIS.

When You're Done, Celebrate the Vision!

A great way to reward your community for the hard work which resulted in a Vision Statement is to celebrate! This will also highlight the effort and inform the community at large of the process and its outcome. There are many ways to celebrate. Here are some examples:

Open House: Invite the community to an open house at a local landmark that may figure in the Community Vision. Be sure to have large display copies of the Vision Statement and the visual representations of the alternative futures so that people can see the result of their efforts.

Contests: Engage the community in developing a logo or name that will move the visioning process into the next phase of action planning and implementation. Advertise in the local newspapers, through community newsletters, schools and other community organizations.

Community Fairs: Piggyback on local fairs or festivals. Design a booth or display that illustrates the Vision Statement and Alternative Futures. Be sure to have some hands-on activities so that the community members can join in the celebration and look forward to future activities.

Visioning Models

Chattanooga, Tennessee, is one of the most well known examples of a community addressing its problems through a visioning process. Chattanooga utilized a creative, consensus building, participatory process, to formulate a shared "vision" of the future. Through this process the community set goals to achieve that vision, designed action plans, and implemented projects to achieve their goals throughout the community.

In 1983, community members were meeting to discuss ways to improve conditions in Chattanooga. Real change began in 1984, when citizens decided a new approach was needed. They realized that profound changes would only result from a public, consensus-building process in which a shared vision for the future was created. Hence, the non-profit organization, Chattanooga Venture was established. This organization would design and facilitate a strategic planning effort working with citizens and community leaders to identify a series of shared goals.

In 1984, Chattanooga Venture organized Vision 2000, a broad-based, public forum that used heavy publicity to draw citizens from all parts of the community. At the heart of the process was the shaping of a "vision" for the future of Chattanooga, a descriptive synthesis of all the citizens' brainstorming ideas produced during the series of public meetings.

At the heart of Chattanooga's visioning process was the creation of a shared vision for its own future. To develop this shared vision, Chattanooga Venture hired a facilitator with special expertise in establishing community visioning processes. While a consultant guided the process, a large pool of volunteers assisted: professionals and citizens adept in facilitation and organizing.

The visioning process was divided into three groups of meetings, with each group designed to produce a specific outcome. The first group of meetings was designed to generate ideas. The second group was aimed at organizing the ideas generated in the first set of meetings. At this point, the community had developed a series of community goals and recommendations. The third and final set of meetings allowed the community to make a commitment to the vision.

Several other regions have developed visioning programs that have much in common but they also differ in some important respects:

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The Oregon Model. Probably no state has been more involved in community visioning than the state of Oregon. The Oregon model has four basic steps: a community profile ("where are we now?"), a trend statement ("where are we going?"), a vision statement ("where do we want to be?"), and an action plan ("how do we get there?"). This model suggests that a target year be chosen that is at least ten but no more than 25 years in the future. A simplified version of this model can be completed in 6 months or less, while a comprehensive version can take a year or more.

The Pennsylvania Model. This model, developed by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, is an example of a visioning process where quality of life is the object of visioning. Some questions to stimulate forming a vision under this model are: "What five things would really improve the community?", "What are the community's principal values?", and "What things in the community should be preserved?" The process itself is broken down into five tasks: defining the community boundaries, inventorying and analyzing community resources, writing and adopting a vision statement, developing an action plan, and implementation

The Missouri Model. This model has in common with the Pennsylvania model an orientation toward visioning the future community as a whole. The object is to focus on future possibilities rather than being limited by present

or past problems. The centerpiece of the process is an "Action Planning Workshop" that takes 3 to 5 hours and is typically held over 1 or 2 days. The workshop is almost entirely about formulating a vision and developing action plans to carry out the vision; community strengths and weaknesses and relevant trends are not considered.

The Arkansas Model. This model is similar to most of the others in that it focuses on four basic questions: Where have you been? Where are you now? Where do you want to go? How will you get there? Participants are asked to identify what they would like to see in their community in the future, and they may be prompted in specific areas such as economic development, education, parks and recreation, etc.

These models tend to vary with regard to how participation occurs in the visioning process, how and when data are used in the workshops, and the length of time prescribed for conducting the process. Most are geared toward developing a broad community vision and action plan in a relatively short time period (1-2 days).

For more information on conducting a community visioning session or if you would like assistance with your community-visioning project, please contact the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission.

This publication is one in a series of "toolbox" items to support the Regional Plan for the Berkshires. If you would like to receive additional copies of this or other toolbox items, please contact the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, 33 Dunham Mall, Pittsfield, MA 01201 or call (413) 442-1521. Copies of the toolbox items are also available on the web. Visit www.berkshireplanning.org

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