

# Community visioning and strategic planning

## Introduction

There are many examples of communities that have faced highly complex issues and reached their goals through sheer determination and a collaborative spirit.

These communities succeeded in large part because they were willing to convene different players and undergo an extensive planning process. Not allowing the plan to sit on the shelf, these communities continued on and persevered throughout the plan's implementation. All sectors – government, business, nonprofit, and the citizens themselves – participated in the development of a common agenda. In addition, the community at large received ample opportunity to provide input.

Because all sectors of these communities were involved in the creation and ongoing development of programs for the future, such programs received widespread support and encountered minimal resistance. Some communities allow the future to happen to them. Thriving communities recognize that the future is something they can create. These communities take the time to produce a shared vision of the future they desire and employ a process that helps them achieve their goals. Achieving the desired future is hard work. Yet successful communities understand that the things they dream about will only come true through great

effort, determination, and teamwork. One way of achieving these community goals is through a community-visioning project. Such a process brings together all sectors of a community to identify problems, evaluate changing conditions, and build collective approaches to improve the quality of life in the community. The participants must define the definition of a community. Some projects define their community as a neighborhood; others a whole city or town; many projects have focused on regions that include multiple cities, towns, and counties.

### **Process principles**

Collaboration and consensus are essential – successful community efforts focus on ways in which business, government, nonprofits, and citizens work together.

In reviewing successful collaborative efforts around the country, it has been found that all possess the following ingredients:

- People with varied interests and perspectives participated throughout the entire process and contributed to the final outcomes, lending credibility to the results.
- Traditional “power brokers” viewed other participants as peers.
- Individual agendas and baggage were set aside so the focus remained on common issues and goals.
- Strong leadership came from all sectors and interests.
- All participants took personal responsibility for the process and its outcomes.
- The group produced detailed recommendations that specified responsible parties,

timelines, and costs.

- Individuals broke down racial, economic, and sector barriers and developed effective working relationships based on trust, understanding, and respect.
- Participants expected difficulty at certain points and realized it was a natural part of the process. When these frustrating times arose, they stepped up their commitment and worked harder to overcome those barriers.
- Projects were well timed – they were launched when other options to achieve the objective did not exist or were not working.
- Participants took the time to learn from past efforts (both successful and unsuccessful) and applied that learning to subsequent efforts.
- The group used consensus to reach desired outcomes. These ingredients make up the essence of collaboration itself. True collaboration brings together many organizations, agencies, and individuals to define problems, create options, develop strategies, and implement solutions. Because they typically involve larger groups, collaborative efforts help organizations rethink how they work, how they relate to the rest of the community, and what role they can play in implementing a common strategy. Many times, it becomes clear that no single organization has the resources or mandate to effectively address a particular issue alone. A group effort can help mobilize the necessary resources and community will. If citizens are provided with a forum in which their ideas and opinions are

heard, seriously considered, and incorporated into the action plan, they will be less inclined to resist or ignore new initiatives. Community “ownership” of a plan and willingness to assist in its implementation often corresponds directly with the public’s level of participation in the plan’s development. As a result, projects can be completed in timely fashion through the consensus building process. In collaborative processes, the sharing of information and pooling of resources build understanding and lead to better decisions. Special interests are not as inclined to block implementation of the plan, since it reflects their own interests and efforts. While collaborative problem solving is not appropriate for every issue and situation, it is an absolute necessity for a community visioning project. Collaborative problem solving should be used when:

- The issues are complex or can be negotiated.
- The resources to address the issues are limited.
- There are a number of interests involved.
- Individual and community actions are required to address the issue effectively.
- People are interested and willing to participate because of the importance of the issue.
- No single entity has jurisdiction over the problem or implementation of the solutions.

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. Citizens of all types who care about the future of their communities conduct community-visioning projects. These people are collectively called “stakeholders.” The stakeholders in successful visioning efforts represent the community’s diversity – politically, racially, geographically, ethnically, and economically – lending different “stakes,” or personal and group interests, to the process. They form the core planning group for the visioning effort, perform community self-evaluation, set goals, and develop the action plan and implementation strategy. To ensure the success of the stakeholders’ work, effective process design and structure are essential.

### **Phase one: initiation**

#### **Providing the groundwork for the process**

The process of building a solid foundation for an effective community-visioning project includes a number of key tasks. The first is the selection of an initiating committee – a small group of 12 to 15 individuals who represent a slice of the community. Their job includes:

- Selecting a stakeholder group that reflects the community’s interests and perspectives.
- Designing a process that will reach the desired outcomes of the community effort.

- Forming subcommittees that will play key roles throughout the project.
- Addressing key logistical issues such as staffing, siting, scheduling, fundraising, and the project name. The initiating committee focuses on process, allowing the broader stakeholder group to work on content (identifying problem areas, formulating action plans). Preparation and completion of logistical tasks can send the visioning effort on its way toward success. These individuals must be willing to invest a substantial amount of time over roughly three months in the development phase of the project. They may or may not wish to continue on as members of the stakeholder group for the planning effort itself. The initiating committee needs to reflect the community's diversity in terms of race, gender, economic sector, and place of residence and employment. Each member of the initiating committee should wear "multiple hats" or represent multiple interests. The initiating committee will make the first statements about the visioning initiative to the community, so it must be credible and well balanced. The two crucial attributes of the initiating committee are diversity and credibility. A good question to ask while forming the group is: "Will any community member be able to look at the initiating committee membership and say, 'Yes, my perspective was there from the beginning'?" If this isn't the case, then the missing perspective must be identified and a credible individual recruited to participate. The purpose of the initiating committee is to focus on the process and logistics required to move the

project forward. The content of the community vision will be developed during the broader stakeholder-planning phase. The diverse voices on the initiating committee must create and agree to methods by which stakeholders can equitably address complex and controversial issues. In order to create a safe environment for discussion of difficult issues, the initiating committee must complete a number of tasks.

These tasks are made up of the following fifteen actions:

***1. Identifying who must be at the table***

A sample of categories for identifying the stakeholders in the community may include:

- Pro-growth/no growth
- Business (small, corporate, industrial)
- Old/new resident
- Conservative/liberal/moderate
- Geographic location
- Age
- Ethnicity/race
- Service provider (seniors, different abilities, youth)
- Income level

- Education reform/back to basics
- Elected/appointed leadership
- Single-parent/dual-parent house
- Institution type (schools, police)
- Inside/outside city boundaries.

## ***2. Designing the process***

It is important to note two fundamental premises about the community-visioning process. First, key leaders and the community as a whole must empower the stakeholder group to make decisions. If the process works correctly, honoring the conclusions should not be a problem, since the “power” people were a part of building the same conclusions. Second, the orientation of the entire process, from the very beginning, has to be proactive. Too many community task forces have been convened over the years with marginal results. on.

## ***3. Setting the project timetable***

The time frame will depend on the nature and needs of the community, local scheduling realities, and the urgency surrounding issues in the community. The timing of stakeholder meetings is an important factor. Successful visioning projects have made accessibility and participation in the project a priority. Therefore, stakeholder meetings often took place in the evenings to allow working people to participate on a regular basis.

#### ***4. Designing structure to coordinate the project***

The project should have a project chairperson, at least three small subcommittees, and adequate staffing. Stakeholders, not those individuals staffing the project, must lead committees. Though initiating committee members may take leadership positions on subcommittees in the early phases of the project, new leaders may be available after the project kickoff once stakeholders are more involved and further recruitment can take place.

#### ***5. Selecting a chairperson***

All successful community projects have strong and fair leadership. Therefore, the selection of the project chairperson is critical. She or he must be (and must be perceived as) open, fair, neutral, and likeable. The chairperson's duties include:

- Formally opening and closing every stakeholder meeting.
- Chairing the meetings of the coordinating committee.
- Appointing the chairs of the other committees, representing the project in the press.
- Leading the fundraising effort.
- Being the spokesperson for the project to the broader community.
- Resolving any disputes within the group, and putting out any fires that may flare up during the course of the project.
- Working with the facilitation team to ensure that the meetings run effectively and

a safe environment for discussion is maintained. The chairperson also submits recommendations for the composition of the coordinating committee to the initiating committee. Every process goes through challenging periods, and heated discussions may take place during meetings. The chairperson has a crucial role to play during these periods. She or he must work closely with the project facilitator to remind stakeholders of the project purpose and goals and to keep the environment safe for discussion from all perspectives. If she or he is accountable, the entire group is more likely to be accountable. She or he must be willing to devote a substantial amount of time to the community-visioning project.

### ***6. Forming a coordinating committee***

The first subcommittee is the coordinating committee. This group of stakeholders manages the process, but not the content, of the project. Its members guide the plan and schedule; serve as liaisons with the stakeholders; fundraise; supervise the other committees and the project staff; and generally, keep the effort on track. They will also “own” the project on behalf of the entire community to ensure that the visioning process does not become merely an advisory effort. The coordinating committee will need to hold a planning/debriefing meeting for each meeting of the larger stakeholder group. Work will often have to be done between sessions, and the coordinating committee, with the support of staff, will need to ensure its completion. Some members of this committee, which begins its service

at the kickoff and continues into the implementation phase, will likely have served on the initiating committee and, in some cases, may continue on into the implementation committee.

### ***7. Forming an outreach committee***

The second subcommittee is the outreach committee. This group of stakeholders will take ownership of the community-outreach process, ensuring an active exchange of information between the stakeholders and the community at large. If the outreach strategies are successful, the community as a whole will have played a large role in developing the vision and action plans. All individuals will have had opportunities to provide input, and their interests, perspectives, and concerns will have been represented within the stakeholder group.

### ***8. Forming a research committee***

The third subcommittee is the research committee. Its purpose is to provide the stakeholders with information to help them determine current assets and challenges the community faces. This group of three to five individuals joins project research staff to develop at least two sets of documents:

- Preliminary materials for the external environmental scan on global, national, and regional trends that influence community quality of life.
- Local indicators and a profile of where the community is today (e.g., growth, population, crime rates, employment rates). This information may also be used to

educate the general public.

### ***9. Staffing the project***

Administrative staff play a crucial role in the visioning process. The staff's ability to coordinate and complete the many logistical tasks involved often makes or breaks the overall effort. Administrative staff handle the following types of tasks:

- General communications (phone and written correspondence with stakeholders, committee members, and the community).
- Coordination of mailings and meeting reminder postcards.
- Coordination of speaker and information requests.
- Preparation of meeting room and other meeting logistics (refreshments, supplies).
- Taking of attendance at stakeholder sessions.
- Preparation of meeting materials.
- Taking of meeting notes.
- Copying and other general administrative tasks.

### ***10. Selecting a neutral, outside facilitator***

In visioning projects, it is helpful to have an experienced outside facilitator run the community visioning meetings. Such a facilitator or facilitation team can assist in several ways including:

- Helping to design the process.
- Keeping the effort true to its purposes and values.

- Ensuring that the process stays on track and on schedule.
- Helping to identify experts from around the state and nation on various issues of priority importance to the community.
- Facilitating the large group stakeholder meetings

### *11. Identifying funding sources*

Visioning projects require financial resources and in-kind contribution of other resources where possible to cover administrative, logistical, research, outreach, and facilitation costs. Successful visioning efforts have made a point of gathering financial and other resources in a cooperative fashion from throughout the community to ensure broad ownership of the project. Developing these resources early can help ensure success in the planning phase and guarantee the availability of adequate funding for those portions of the action plan requiring financial investment and other resources. In developing a project budget, a community must consider the following questions:

- What types of resources are required (and in what amounts) for the successful completion of the planning phase of this project? Costs may

include:

- staffing;
- facilitation costs;
- food;

- printing, copying, and office/ administrative costs;
- travel;
- community meeting-related costs;
- outreach-related costs;
- research-related costs;
- equipment and meeting materials;
- the final report;
- the community celebration.
- What money and in-kind resources can be raised from within and outside of the community for implementation of the various action plans determined by the stakeholder group?
- Who will take the lead on resource development?

### ***12. Creating a project name***

Giving the visioning process a name is an early way to develop project identity and a following for the project. Project names should give the stakeholders a sense of ownership and enable the general public to identify with the effort.

### ***13. Selecting a neutral meeting site***

An accessible and neutral meeting site with a large and open layout, adequate parking, and supporting facilities is a must. If possible, avoid governmental and organizational facilities to prevent the perception that the effort is being driven by

that entity. The site should have quality lighting, good acoustics, and no pillars to block the sight of participants. The room should have adequate wall space for the hanging of flip charts. The building should have adequate parking, restrooms, air conditioning, tables, chairs, a kitchen, and separate rooms for childcare needs. Community centers, schools, or churches typically serve as good neutral sites for meetings. In considering a site, room layout considerations must be taken into account. One end of the room should be reserved for the facilitators, flip charts, screen, and an overhead projector.

#### ***14. Recruiting the stakeholders***

A broad-based community visioning effort should start with an initial list of 300 to 400 prospective stakeholders. This list will be whittled down to a committed stakeholder group of 100 to 150 individuals who will attend all regular planning sessions. Past visioning projects have regularly shown that 50 to 70 percent of prospective stakeholders initially agree to participate in the effort. Of these, 5 to 10 percent never attend stakeholder meetings. An average of 15 percent of those invited turn down the request because they are unable to attend a regular session at any given time.

#### ***15. Planning For the project kickoff***

The final tasks of the initiating committee are to ensure that all logistical details are covered and that significant public awareness of the community planning effort

exists leading up to the kickoff. All staff and committees – especially the research and outreach committees – should be in place and carrying out their tasks by that time. Composition of the stakeholder group and committee may require finetuning through the first one or two stakeholder meetings. In addition, the stakeholders will be strongly encouraged to assist in the outreach effort by spreading the word to other community members and through other strategies developed by the outreach committee. The initiating committee must devise a plan to bring early attention to the project and focus media and public attention to the kickoff. Press conferences, public events, and other communication means have proven to be effective in building community awareness.

### **Creating a parallel outreach process**

An essential key to the success of the community visioning process is an active community outreach effort. Despite all efforts to recruit a stakeholder group that is representative of the community's diversity, there will be some gaps. For a variety of reasons, certain groups cannot or will not participate in stakeholder meetings. If certain groups cannot come to the stakeholder meetings, then the means must be developed to go out to them. Different strategies must be employed simultaneously to ensure that all sectors and segments of the community's population are kept informed throughout the life of the project. An effective two-way dialogue between the stakeholders and the community is a critical component

in creating a relevant, widely supported, and effectively implemented action plan.

An outreach effort running parallel to the stakeholder planning process, with activities at several key steps along the way, is necessary to test current thinking within the community and allow citizens to have input on an ongoing basis.

### ***Project kickoff***

The project kickoff has two primary audiences. The first consists of the stakeholders, who hold their first regular session and become familiarized with the project purpose, the planning process, and their colleagues. The second audience is the community as a whole. The kickoff can be the most effective way of introducing the visioning initiative to the media and the citizens whose support will be required throughout the project. Visioning teams often hold a public event/press conference prior to the kickoff to generate publicity.

### ***Surveys***

At certain points throughout the community visioning process, the stakeholders will need specific feedback from the community in order to direct or refine their planning actions. Surveys and focus groups are common instruments for gathering such information. An entire industry centers on the effective use of these very powerful research tools. In this limited space, therefore, the subject can only be introduced and participants encouraged to seek professional

assistance or to read further about these tools before using them to enrich the community project. There are many types of surveys, and any number of them may be used depending on the information needed. Standard surveys characterize a given problem after it has been identified but before a solution has been selected and implemented. Surveys should contain specific questions about individual topics, although multiple topics may be addressed in a single survey. Survey data may provide guidance on the most appropriate methods to use in addressing a given issue. In addition, surveys may be applied during any phase of the process to monitor the effectiveness of approaches being used. Survey questions must be specific and designed to minimize the chances of misinterpretation by respondents (something that can skew the results). Moreover, questions must be relevant to the target population or, again, the results will be inconsistent. Finally, the analysis of the survey results will be invalid if it does not take historical patterns into account. Surveys may be administered in person, over the phone, or through forms filled out anonymously by large numbers of people. It is often effective to code the forms by the respondent's area of residence, income group, organization, and/or other characteristics. Citizens from all walks of life in Mobile County,

### ***Focus groups***

Focus groups are a form of survey designed to identify and solve problems.

Surveys help communities determine a course of action once a problem/issue has been identified; focus groups help communities find what problems/issues actually exist and how they should be defined. Focus groups are in-depth, specific interviews with people representing a cross-section of the community based on ethnicity, race, age, socio-economic status, perspective, and so forth. Focus groups are time-consuming, usually requiring a minimum of one month to assemble and conduct. It is critical to ask the right questions of the right people and then base the conclusions on historical trends and community background. The focus group leader must make sure the respondent pool reflects the demographics of the community to ensure a valid sampling of perspectives. Because focus groups (and surveys) must be designed carefully if they are to achieve sound results, it is advisable to look carefully at your group's capacity before undertaking such projects without guidance. If no one on the planning team has extensive experience with surveys, college research departments or outside professionals should be consulted or even hired to do the job. A few tips for surveys/focus groups include keeping the language on the survey simple to allow participation by people of all levels of literacy/language proficiency. In addition, surveys should be translated into the language of non-English-speaking residents; focus groups for non-English-speaking residents will need a translator. Finally, allow sufficient lead-time for each method to give the designers a quality sampling of the community.

***Town meetings***

Town meetings are large gatherings at which the stakeholders and planners can inform the public about the project and receive valuable feedback from community residents. Anyone may attend to listen, learn, and voice his or her opinions, interests, and concerns. An effective town meeting includes presentations by the planners, but most importantly it allows for public input. Individuals from all sectors of the community are encouraged to attend through carefully planned, highly proactive recruitment strategies. People tend not to come to meetings without a strong sense of their importance – especially the types of folks whose input is most critically needed. It is precisely the most marginalized community members who typically do not participate in such activities. It is recommended that at least three major town meetings be held during the planning phase of the visioning project. The first meeting should take place after the “current realities and trends” stakeholder session, immediately prior to the first visioning session. This meeting is intended to get the word out about the purpose and nature of the project and to solicit ideas from citizens on their visions for the future. The second town meeting should come after the visioning sessions and prior to the key performance areas (KPAs) sessions. At this gathering, stakeholders present their consensus on the vision and receive community input on KPAs and ideas for “trend-bending” action strategies. The third meeting takes place after the

stakeholders have reached a rough consensus on the action plan and implementation strategy but before they have finalized that work. The community has the opportunity to give suggestions and help fine-tune the strategies prior to final consensus. A strong turnout by community members and interested parties is crucial for town meetings. The outreach committee can employ various strategies to ensure adequate participation representative of the many sectors of the population. To begin with, the stakeholders themselves can spread the word. In addition, the outreach committee can send press releases to print, radio, and television media; mail flyers to key contacts or place them in conspicuous places; translate written materials for non-English speaking populations; offer assistance with transportation and day care, and so forth. Neighborhood meetings are a variation on the town meeting theme. Such gatherings can target specific parts of a community whose residents might not attend larger meetings in other parts of a city.

### ***Press releases***

Communities must enlist the aid of local experts in working with the media. Their knowledge of how to approach and follow up with news organizations can be crucial in effectively getting the word out about the community effort. A first step in publicizing a town meeting, the kickoff, or any major part of the visioning process is to maintain regular contact with the media. The most common

tool in this effort is the press release, a very specific document announcing an event or major benchmark. Press releases will frequently need to be drafted and sent to predeveloped contacts at each print, radio, and television news organization in the region. This mailing should always be followed up by a phone call to answer any questions and to lobby for coverage of the news item in question. The press release should be accurate and succinct. Media will cover events that are well supported (i.e., those with large attendance numbers, community leader participation, and so on). Press releases should be delivered to local, regional, and even statewide news organizations if appropriate. The papers that print the announcement will sometimes translate the text for specific non-English-speaking populations.

### ***Flyers***

Flyers advertise upcoming events on single, brightly colored sheets of paper that give the group's name, date and time of the event, location, nature of the event, a contact phone number, and specifics regarding refreshments, transportation, and childcare. Flyers may be posted in public places and/or handed out to individuals on busy street corners. Flyers that catch the eye, are positive, and evoke an atmosphere of importance and fun are most effective.

### ***Speakers' bureau***

Stakeholders can utilize their public speaking talents to spread specific messages to

the community about the progress of the community visioning project. This is an effective way to receive input, share information, and promote visioning efforts in the community. Within certain pockets of the population, such as communities of color, it may be best to have a face-to-face meeting with elders or other community leaders to explain the program. Once they buy in, they may be able to inform their community and recruit new participants more effectively than “outsiders” could on their own. If these individuals do not have time to assist the outreach committee, ask for names of other people within the community who may be available. It is important to train members of the speakers’ bureau together and provide them with good fact sheets and an overview of frequently asked questions so that they will deliver a consistent message to the public. In addition, preparation will assist in effectively reaching the targeted population. Consider the following:

- Accountability and follow-up plans should be addressed. The group needs to ask itself the following questions: “How can we ensure that people will show up for the meetings?” “How can we keep their attention once they are present?”
- A sign-in sheet for attendees should be used. The individual’s name, address, and phone number may be valuable as the group attempts to recruit new members and to keep the community updated. Such information also supplements the record of the meeting itself.
- Finally, a contact person or persons should be designated so that those who did

not offer feedback at the town meeting may do so at a later date, if desired.

### *Op-ed articles*

Opposite-editorial articles (“op-ed” stands for “opposite editorial,” as in “opposite the editorial page”) are written by non-journalists, usually community leaders and citizens, and are printed periodically by newspapers. They offer insight into local happenings, express grass-roots perspectives and interests, and update ongoing community programs. A newspaper’s ultimate goal is to sell papers; for this reason, publishers want articles that are of high quality, are timely and in the public interest, and are positive in nature. They want to produce something the public will want to read. To get an op-ed article published, begin with a query letter to the editor. This letter should be short and to the point, including such facts as what inspired the effort, who is involved, how the project arrived at its current stage, where it is headed, and how specific plans will be implemented. This correspondence needs to be well written – the editor will look upon the letter as a sample of the author’s writing ability. The language of the article itself should be positive, focusing on the action the group is taking. Write about specifics – the obstacles the project has overcome, how breakthroughs were achieved, changes in team members’ thinking. Focus on what the project is about, what it has accomplished, and what it will accomplish in the future. The writing should be

inspiring for readers and leave them wanting to be a part of the effort, or, at the very least, highly supportive of and informed about its progress.

### ***Public service announcements***

Radio and television stations were once required by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to provide public service announcements (PSAs). Many stations still do so as a community service. A PSA is a 30- or 60-second spot, provided free of charge, that informs the public about a cause, issue, program, service, or opinion. When contacting a broadcast outlet, ask for the individual in charge of PSAs, ask what the station's preferred PSA format is, and follow it carefully. Many PSAs are not broadcast because they do not follow station format. When working with the media, always strive to minimize the amount of work they must do.

### ***Websites/project home pages***

In the technology age, an effective way to get the information out to the community is through a project home page. Most projects have stakeholders or other professionals who will gladly donate their time to create a project home page. These home pages can provide "surfers" with background information and the work to date. In addition, the home page can give users the opportunity to add their input through online surveys or feedback boxes on the website that the outreach committee or staff access and distribute to the relevant committees.

## **Phase two: the stakeholder process**

### **Community visioning**

Many communities begin their visioning project by determining the vision or desired future. Others look at where the community currently finds itself before identifying the desired future. Both approaches have produced quality results in visioning projects around the country. However, starting with the vision statement is preferred because it sets a positive tone for the process from the very start. This process convenes residents holding very diverse perspectives who come into the process with personal agendas. By starting the process with the development of vision themes, participants recognize early on that despite the different views, there are many areas on which they all agree. Experiencing such a “win” early on in the process sets the tone for participants to work toward agreement throughout the process.

### ***A vision is a “stretch”***

In spring 1961, President John F. Kennedy, seeking increased funding for space exploration, described a most ambitious vision: to land a man on the Moon before the end of the decade and return him safely to Earth. At the time, the United States had only launched an astronaut into “sub-orbital” space, let alone going to the Moon. The vision, in the midst of the space race, was inspiring and motivating. The country vowed to move ahead on the vision and the ambitious timeline.

Achieving the vision had its costs. In 1967, three Apollo 1 astronauts perished during a launch practice session because, some say, the timeline was too demanding. Staff within the space program learned from the tragedy, changed their approach, and continued working toward Kennedy's goal. On July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin walked on the Moon and returned safely to Earth with fellow astronaut Michael Collins. Kennedy's clear vision with specific outcomes, the timing of the space race, the program's ability to bounce back from loss, the enthusiastic commitment of the masses, and a number of other variables produced a technological achievement for the ages. On a summer day in 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed the masses at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. His "I Have A Dream" speech stirs as many souls today as it did on that memorable afternoon. Communities continue to struggle toward the future he described for all of the country's children and people.

**Step one: developing the vision statement**

The process of refining the vision statement and its component points can be lengthy and arduous. There is no shortcut to working through the process as a group. Although groups often get caught up in "wordsmithing" the statement, it is more important to reach agreement on the themes of the vision. The stakeholders may have to be reminded that the vision is the "end state," the final result. They

will determine the specifics of how the vision will be reached later in the process, during the action-planning phase. The time required to generate a clear vision statement that expresses explicit themes can vary widely from one community to the next. It is unlikely that a broad group of citizens would complete the process in fewer than eight hours of working time, but they should not require more than 15. One effective format is a weekend visioning retreat. Typically, however, stakeholders work on vision statements over two nonconsecutive evenings. Through the visioning process, people draw heavily on the values that are important to them. The process translates these individual and collective values into a set of important issues that the community wants to address. With a clear vision statement articulated and the component points serving as a beacon for the future, the stakeholders can shift to determining their priorities.

### **Step two: understanding trends, forces, and pressures**

A community scan is a brief but important step in the community visioning process. It enables stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of the major events, trends, technologies, issues, and forces that affect their community and/or will do so in the future. National and global realities often have a significant impact on a community's ability to meet its challenges. It is not necessary for the group to reach true consensus on these observations, but all participants should recognize how their community relates to the world around it and how broader

issues affect local choices. The research committee presents its first piece of work during this phase by providing to the stakeholder group a preliminary list of key current and future trends. The factors might include:

- The influence of population growth, age, and funding trends on the educational system.
- The effect of in- or out-migration on housing quality and affordability.
- New technologies, their costs, and the impact on jobs and the community's quality of life.
- Changes in funding and/or policies of national, state, and local government programs.
- Global trends regarding trade, the environment, and labor.

At an early initiating committee (IC) meeting, the research committee members, with the assistance of the IC, should generate a list of issues for a preliminary scan. However, this should only be considered as a first step; the preliminary scan should spark further discussion of the influence of these factors on the community's current and future quality of life. The final environmental scan must reflect more than merely the "experts' view." Community knowledge and perceptions of these larger issues must be considered during the stakeholder process. Following the presentation by the research committee, the stakeholders can discuss the issues in a large group format and then work in small

groups to encourage greater participation. The small groups then report back to the larger group, discussing priority areas in greater detail. This step combines the findings of the research committee and community perceptions in general. While some of the issues raised during the environmental scan are beyond local control, their influence must be addressed if the community is truly to move to a new level. The discussion of these regional, national, and global forces sets the stage for identification of *local* realities and trends.

### **Step three: gauging the community's civic infrastructure**

Scholars and practitioners of urban and community affairs are beginning to sense that associations and traditions play an integral role in the health of the communities, whatever their size. The National Civic League refers to the formal and informal processes and networks through which communities make decisions and solve problems as “civic infrastructure.” Successful communities honor and nurture their civic infrastructures. They do not look primarily to Washington for money or program guidance. Rather, leaders in America's most vital communities recognize the interdependence of business, government, nonprofit organizations, and individual citizens. In particular, these communities recognize that solving problems and seizing opportunities is not the exclusive province of government. They carry on an ongoing struggle through formal and informal processes to

identify common goals and meet individual and community needs and aspirations.

Examples of civic infrastructure include:

- What once was an impossible dream became reality when citizens of Broomfield, Colorado, embarked on a collaborative visioning process that led to Broomfield becoming its own city and county, the first change on the state map in over 94 years.
- In an effort to give citizens input in government decision making, the city of Fort Wayne developed community-oriented government where citizens take issues to one of their 227 different neighborhood organizations and work directly with city staff.
- Santa Maria, California, divided by racial and cultural barriers, instituted in 1997 a first-ever Peace Week designed to help erase violence and prejudice and bring Santa Maria residents together.
- After the closing of a major air force base in Denver, Colorado, the city created an unprecedented economic development partnership with the neighboring jurisdiction which was most affected by the closing. What accounts for the different experiences of these four communities in addressing problems? In each case the strength or weakness of the civic infrastructure, the invisible structures and processes through which the social contract is written and rewritten in communities, determined success or failure.

**Step four: selecting and evaluating key performance areas**

By this point in the process, the stakeholders will have discussed and reached consensus on where their community is today, where it is likely to be heading, and where they would like it to go. The next step in this results-oriented process is to decide how the community can get from where it is today to where stakeholders want it to be in the future. This step involves the selection and development of key performance areas (KPA's). KPA's are highly leveraged priority areas for which specific actions will be developed to redirect the future of the community.

Implementation of the strategies developed for the KPA's will bend the trend from the likely future (as determined by the community profile) toward the desired future (as articulated by the stakeholder group). Successful community visioning projects have prioritized their visions into four or five KPA's. They reasoned that only some issues are of high-level priority; moreover, not everything can be done at once. Choices must be made. Secondary priorities can be tackled later. The KPA's can be broken down in a variety of different ways – by sector (e.g., business), by issue area (e.g., homelessness), or by project (e.g., community center).

**FORMING TASK FORCES**

Successful visioning projects have formed task forces either by assigning interested stakeholders or by choosing members at random from the stakeholder

group. Either way, additional expertise and perspectives are usually added to help balance the group and develop comprehensive plans. Task forces vary in size from as few as 15 people to as many as 50. Each KPA task force should:

- Assign a convener who is responsible for convening the sessions, keeping the group on task and focused, and reporting the updates back to the large stakeholder group.
- Assign a facilitator to run the meetings (he or she may or may not be the convener) and a recorder to keep minutes and write up the work in a presentable format.
- Plan a number of meeting sessions (how many depends on the timeline) around the large stakeholder meetings. For each key performance area, the task force and the stakeholder group as a whole will complete the following tasks.

***Recruiting outside expertise.*** One of the task force's first assignments is to look at the group's composition and ask, "What interests and expertise are missing from our group?" The task force members should generate a list of people who can fill in the gaps and recruit those individuals to participate. Just as balance was important in filling out the large stakeholder group, the same consideration must be given to the smaller task force groups. Although presentations to the larger stakeholder group will often "safeguard" any domination within the task forces by individuals with special interests, developing the plan with diverse perspectives

always enhances the plan's credibility and likelihood of implementation.

***Evaluating the community's current performance within the KPA.*** Task forces will assess the community's current performance in each priority area using the work of the research committee, surveys, and past discussions in the stakeholder group. This is also the time to integrate the findings of the Civic Index if utilized in the visioning process. Much of the work from this stage will provide the rationale for proposals to address this key area. It will also help members identify what benefits they want to result from implementation of the action plans. These benefits should be developed into a "mini-vision" that will drive the action planning in this specific KPA.

***Developing goals.***

Task forces will develop specific goals to reach the desired future for each KPA. There may be numerous goals and objectives within a specific KPA. For instance, for a KPA of economic development the goals may be:

- Starting an incubation program for small business development.
- Attracting new corporations to headquarter in the community.
- Retaining and enhancing current businesses based in the community.
- Building and retaining the skills of the labor force in the community through mentorships and scholarships. It will be up to the task force to prioritize the goals and make recommendations on which ones should receive the greatest emphasis.

*Specifying “who will do what by when and how.”* Task forces must delineate specific action steps, identifying what resources will be required and the options for acquiring them, where they will come from, what the time frame for action is, and who will be responsible for ensuring that implementation occurs. It is during this step that the specific benchmarks and actions of the Civic Index will be integrated into the appropriate KPAs to build community capacity. By now the vision has been translated into practical and attainable outcomes to be achieved through specific tasks and actions. This step crystallizes the vision into a tangible program.

*Reporting back to the stakeholder group and receiving feedback.* As the KPA task forces proceed through the plan development, they will periodically meet with the larger stakeholder group to share their findings and coordinate overlapping efforts as appropriate. When reporting back to the large group, each task force should hand out written summaries of the work done to date, with highlights transferred to overhead transparencies for viewing by the group. The task forces should incorporate feedback from the stakeholder group into their planning to ensure agreement on the direction being taken. Although many of the action plans developed will require financial and other resources, sometimes in significant amounts, communities can take certain actions to increase cooperation or shift to approaches that require little or no financial resource outlay. As the

whole stakeholder group reaches consensus on the work of each KPA task force, the high-priority projects must be identified and a rough consensus reached on their inclusion into the final action plan. If successful to this point, the stakeholders will have reached a general agreement on the individual goals, objectives, action plans, implementers, resource needs, and time frames identified by the task forces. Once the KPA evaluations have been completed, it is necessary to integrate all of the goals and recommendations into a final action agenda with a formalized implementation strategy. Certain goals and action steps will be complementary and will need to be combined in some way to create a coherent overall strategy. The stakeholder group should publish a report on its community visioning process and final action plan, but it is essential that the work should not stop here. Too many visioning projects end with a report that eventually gathers dust on the shelf. The community visioning process is designed to produce action and results. Reports do not, in and of themselves, assure any action.

***Building a final consensus.*** Consensus on the final action plan is the final – and occasionally most difficult – phase of the community visioning process, the phase in which previous agreements are tested and a final community consensus is reached. The stakeholders meet in large and small groups to confirm the soundness of their goals and plans and the projected results of their implementation strategies. Some action plans may require initiation of new projects. Others may involve

support for existing efforts. Some may entail the termination of an existing activity. Because the actions will be varied in nature, it is essential that the entire community and its diverse sectors be behind them. Some action plans may embrace policy initiatives or changes; some may involve significant financial investment; and others may simply pose new approaches to current practices. All may involve the development of new cross sectoral partnerships. As the visioning action plans and implementation strategy are finalized, the stakeholders must specify who will take responsibility for what. Some issues will clearly fall within the purview of a specific government agency or nonprofit service provider. Other action steps might not immediately suggest a “champion,” and the group will have to engage some entity to take the lead. Although an accountable organization or group of organizations may not initially be found for every action step, this is an essential part of the process that cannot be left incomplete. It may be necessary to assign a group of entities to locate a champion for a specific action area. The general rule is: there will be no action without an implementer. As the formal planning steps of the process draw to a close, stewardship of implementation becomes the responsibility of the stakeholder group and the community as a whole. If the process has been effective at developing a sense of ownership and true consensus, it will be possible to hold the whole community and all its citizens and organizations accountable to their commitments. This

point highlights the importance of the community outreach process. The investment of time and resources made earlier to ensure full community representation and participation comes to fruition here.

***True consensus and rough consensus.***

At the end of this phase, the stakeholders should have reached consensus on the content of each KPA. Sometimes a full consensus cannot be reached. If a large number of stakeholders cannot live with the plan, then the group must take the time to discuss the reasoning of the disagreeing viewpoint and look at ways to fine-tune the approach so that all participants can live with the final plan. If one or two people continue to dissent after all discussion and alternatives have been addressed, it is important to move ahead while making sure that the differing viewpoint is noted and placed in the final report.

***The community celebration.*** Celebration is an essential part of a community-based visioning project. There should be a celebration to acknowledge the commitment of individuals involved in the planning phase of the initiative and the results they achieved. Such an event brings citizens together around shared values and aspirations, and nurtures the seeds of change in building a better community.

**Step five: implementation of the action plans**

In the community visioning effort, a minimum of two years following completion

of the planning process is recommended for intensive focus on project implementation. For many communities, this will be a multi-decade effort.

Successful implementation processes contain the following ingredients:

- The establishment of implementation structure such as a committee with staff that oversees and ensures that a variety of areas (that follow this bullet) are addressed.
- Clarity of goals/desired result for both the implementation committee and implementers.
- Criteria (established by the stakeholders or implementation committee) that will be used to prioritize projects.
- Prioritized projects based on the applied criteria.
- Implementers/champions for each project.
- Identification of barriers to implementation and steps to overcome them.
- An overall timeline based on the prioritized goals, barriers, and resources.
- Coordination of all efforts being implemented from the action plan.
- Ongoing community outreach of successes and ideas. Community and outside resources will be needed to implement the action plan. The initiating committee should have laid the groundwork for this resource development process, but more work will likely remain. The implementers named in the action plan will need to champion these efforts. Resource development will be most effective if it begins

immediately, capitalizing on the momentum from the publication of the report and the community celebration.

***Choosing or establishing an implementation entity.***

Implementation efforts should follow the plans created during the planning process. Lead implementers must confirm the commitments already agreed upon and begin their work, drawing on the momentum created by the celebration and publication of the final report to facilitate rapid progress. From the kickoff until this point, the coordinating committee has provided process management for the community effort. Some of its members will be ready to leave the committee, and others will be ready to serve in a more active manner. This process should leave current participants with a strong sense of accomplishment and invite the participation of others. The coordinating committee may retain its original form and become an implementation committee, or it may choose to change its structure as well as its membership. Typically, retaining the cross-sector, broad based citizen form is the most successful approach as it avoids controversy and keeps the focus on community-wide participation. Some communities choose to create a separate nonprofit organization to serve the ongoing effort. The coordinating committee may also be embraced by an existing entity deemed neutral and inclusive, although this can be risky if the organization attempts to hoard the effort or takes actions that dampen community-wide ownership in implementation.

**Monitoring and tracking.** There are three primary areas where active, ongoing monitoring and tracking are required in order to:

- Ensure follow-through on the implementation of action plans and policy recommendations.
- Provide ongoing support for implementers.
- Measure changes in the community quality of life indicators developed earlier in the community scan effort.

During the first two years, the implementation committee or other implementation entity should consider providing updates at least quarterly to the community on project and policy actions. In subsequent years such updates can be made annually.

### **The final report**

The report on the work of the community visioning process serves many of the same objectives as the celebration (i.e., acknowledging contributions to date, building momentum, and enrolling new implementers). At the same time, it is a flexible tool that may be used to inspire organizations and companies to embrace the community vision and frame parts of their own strategic planning around it.

The report also serves to remind implementers and the community of their commitments and provides future efforts with something on which to build. The important thing is that it is used, not simply published, bound, and left to gather dust on the shelf.

## **Conclusion**

It should be stated that the community visioning and implementation process described in this Lecture is an overview of a model. This model has been successfully used and tested in different forms in many communities around the nation in recent years. Each community should work closely with experienced facilitators to adapt the model presented here. Use it as a guide to the design of local process; customize it to match specific needs, priority areas, and available resources.