

Putting Vision In Our Plan – Part I

by Michael Chandler

Various philosophies and concepts have been advanced regarding the role planning can play in our society. One of planning's early champions, Daniel Burnham, believed we should "make no little plans" because they "have no magic to stir men's blood." Burnham maintained that we should "make big plans" and "aim high in hope and in our work."

This past November, I spoke at Nevada's annual land use conference. One of the topics discussed was the extent to which our planning efforts, to paraphrase Burnham, actually move the hearts and minds of the citizens we serve. Some planning commissioners felt their plans reflect Burnham's ideology. Most did not. When we discussed why some plans are documents of consequence that truly excite the spirit of a community, we discovered several themes. One of the most prominent was that plans of consequence are vision driven.

DEFINING VISION

Vision comes from the Latin "visio" meaning "to see." A scan of the dictionary reveals several definitions of "vision," including seeing something in a dream, and the act or power of imagination. To have a vision means to look ahead; to imagine the future. The ability to imagine or dream the future — to create in our minds something beyond our present reality — is a distinctly human skill. History has shown that seeing something in the mind's eye is often the first step to actually achieving it.

As used in planning, visioning is a process by which a community envisions its preferred future. It chronicles the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of a community and helps citizens agree on what they want their community to become.

WHY VISIONING?

Communities everywhere are being buffeted by the winds of change. Many are scrambling just to keep pace, while others

find themselves stuck in a hand-to-mouth cycle of trying to stretch scarce resources from one fiscal year to the next. In such an environment, communities will oftentimes conduct business in a reactive mode with little or no regard for the long-term.

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In response to this, communities have been searching for ways to become more proactive. Taking time to step back from present day concerns and envision how things should be in the future has emerged as a preferred strategy for getting ahead of the "change curve." Visioning has gained popularity, in part, because communities have come to realize that they do not have to be at the mercy of their environment. Through the power of planning communities are discovering that they can choose to act — rather than wait to be acted upon.

CREATING THE VISION

Visioning is often used as a prelude, or supplement, to the preparation or revision of a comprehensive plan. (See "Developing the Comprehensive Plan: Part II" in PCJ #11.) Visioning tends to focus on a wide range of issues, is geared to identifying community values, and uses alternative scenarios to explore the future. It can help get citizens involved and excited about local planning.

As might be imagined, there is no one best way to conduct a visioning process. Looking for a visioning strategy is like

shopping for a new car; there are many models to choose from. However, just as automobiles share certain characteristics, most visioning strategies share some common steps:

1. Taking the Community's Pulse.

This step provides a clear picture of the community's current position. Trends, statistics, and community characteristics are collected. In addition, a statement of community values is usually developed.

2. Identifying Possible Futures.

The development of future scenarios highlights this step. A current trend scenario (what the community will be like if current trends continue) is developed, as are several possible futures. The possible futures are a by-product of the first step.

3. Selection of a Preferred Future/Vision.

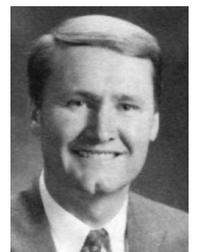
Once the possible futures are identified, the community is challenged to review each, and then select a preferred future. This step usually features public forums and increased citizen input. The driving issue with this step involves deciding what kind of future the community wishes for itself.

4. Bringing the Vision to Life.

Once the vision has been agreed upon, an action plan to bring the vision to life must be created. Establishing a time frame and assigning responsibilities are key parts of this critical step.

In the next issue, we'll go through these steps in greater detail to give you a better feel for what's involved in a visioning process. ♦

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Putting Vision in Our Plan — Part II

by Michael Chandler

In my last column, I noted that visioning is a process by which a community envisions its preferred future, and provided an overview of a four-step visioning process. In this column, I want to examine each step in the visioning process in greater detail.

STEP ONE TAKING THE COMMUNITY'S PULSE

The ability to respond to the question "where are we now?" is the underlying function of the first step. Various strategies can be used to produce a viable answer. Developing a community profile, replete with socio-economic, demographic, employment, political, cultural, housing, and attitudinal data, is a common practice. Most profiles feature a ten or so year horizon in order to provide the reader with a sense of the past, as well as the present.

Another strategy for taking the community's pulse, which can be done either in conjunction with or independent of the community profile, involves surveying local residents. A well-designed survey can yield significant insights regarding residents' attitudes, priorities, and values across a broad range of issues and topics. Community strengths and weaknesses, as well as perceived opportunities and threats, can also be identified.

Regardless of the methodology employed, the end product associated with taking the community's pulse must be a clear understanding of the community's current position and the value or importance residents attach to the notion of "where are we now."

STEP TWO: IDENTIFYING POSSIBLE FUTURES

The second step in the visioning process involves deciding what kind of future the community envisions for itself. In most cases, a locality engaged in a visioning process will answer the "where are we going" question by projecting future trends,

based on the information generated in the community profile. Trends are often projected ten, fifteen, or twenty years into the future. The end result is a picture of the community assuming the continuation of current trends.

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Most visioning processes also produce alternative futures scenarios — matching the community's strengths and assets (also a by-product of the first step) with its identified values and priorities. They are usually developed by the leadership group responsible for the visioning process. The identification of alternative futures is critical, and highlights to the community that the future can be a matter of choice.

STEP THREE: SELECTION OF A PREFERRED FUTURE

The third step in the visioning process focuses on the selection of a preferred future — the community deciding "where it wants to be" in the future. William Jennings Bryan's admonition that destiny should be a matter of choice rather than a matter of chance is apropos to this phase of the process.

In answering the "where we want to be" question, most visioning efforts choose to involve the public. A broad spectrum of strategies ranging from community forums and interactive television programs to "future fairs" have been used with success. Focus group discussions, neighborhood meetings, and community surveys are

additional ways of engaging the public. Selection of a preferred future is usually the most exciting part of the visioning process. However, facilitation and consensus decision making skills are a must.

STEP FOUR: BRINGING THE VISION TO LIFE

A common challenge facing most visioning processes involves deciding how the preferred vision will be brought to life. In some communities the vision is incorporated into the comprehensive plan. In other instances, the vision may be separately adopted by the governing body.

After all the effort put into developing the vision, equal effort should be put into assuring that it does not languish because of a lack of accountability. Specific strategies should be developed to avoid this. One good approach involves the use of "action teams" charged — usually by the governing body — with following up on implementation of specific parts of the identified vision. A variation involves the appointment of a "citizens vision council" responsible for overall monitoring and reporting on the vision implementation process.

SUMMING UP:

Taking the lead in helping craft a vision for the community is one of the best contributions a planning commission can make. Your community's vision is something to be achieved, not waited for. ♦

Michael Chandler is an Associate Professor and Community Planning Extension Specialist at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg. Mike also conducts planning commissioner training programs across the country, and is a frequent speaker at workshops. His column regularly appears in the PCJ. For a more detailed look at one town's visioning process, see Walter Cudnohufsky's "Dreaming the Future: Community Vision Planning," in PCJ #11 (Summer 1993).

