

Visioning Can Be Planning Writ Large

by Elaine Cogan

Many communities across the country are finding visioning to be a unique way of looking into the future, free from the encumbrances of budgetary, political, or other constraints that may give a narrow focus to even the most “comprehensive” planning exercises.

The very open and free-flowing nature of visioning may make planning traditionalists uncomfortable, for at its best, it brings out ideas not likely to surface any other way. There are pitfalls, too. If the vision is not ultimately tied to the reality of everyday planning and what the community agrees to afford, it will fail, and the disappointment and disenchantment can have serious repercussions.

Still, visioning can be exciting and challenging. Some of the key aspects of visioning are that it:

- *Engages a number and type of people who may generally not be involved in a typical planning process.* People respond well to provocative questions such as “What do we want our community to be like in 20-30 years?” or, “Remove yourselves from the immediate here and now; how do you envision our ideal future?” Success requires a commitment from those in charge of the visioning process to reach out to all segments of the community through every means possible, and the time and budget to make sure it happens.

- *Focuses on broad, rather than narrow issues.* People may come to the meetings with concerns about the potholes in their streets, but they are encouraged to take a holistic view of major transportation matters that involve how they get around on these streets. They may arrive saying they want more cops on the beat, then through visioning focus on the broader perspective of community safety.

- *Depends upon a shared agreement.*

This is the heart of the matter in visioning and often takes the most time to get there. Participants are asked to come to common understandings. “What are our values? What is most important as we look into the future? What does our community really mean to us? Today? Tomorrow?”

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- *Evolves separately from the everyday planning process.* Although life does go on and land use and other planning matters need to be acted upon, it may be wise to hold some major decisions in abeyance while the visioning takes place. In addition, many of the elements of the final vision may be beyond what is commonly thought of as planning. They are likely to include education, social services, the environment, and economic development as community participants decide what is most important to them in the future.

- *Requires political support.* The value of visioning is its inherent apolitical nature; that is, it is not captive to one officeholder or agenda. But to succeed, the process must have the tacit if not explicit support of the majority of the community’s elected leadership. At the least, the governing body has to provide the budget for the visioning effort, which may be considerable. Ideally, they should listen carefully to what the citizens say and eventually incorporate the results of the vision into tangible products. The final outcome often involves a range of

governmental and non-governmental partners and can be one of the strengths of the entire process.

STEPS IN A VISIONING PROCESS

Once community leaders decide to embark upon visioning, the first step is to set the timeframe ... usually no less than 10 nor more than 30 years. Then, you are ready to appoint a citizens steering committee. An odd number of people is preferable in case of voting, although the ideal is to reach agreement or consensus on all issues without having to count the yeas and nays. Some communities prefer umbrella steering committees of 30 to 50, while others work better with a group of 15 to 21.

Whatever the number, steering committee members should be chosen to speak for a broad segment of your community, including those commonly under-represented in communal matters. The elected body should make that selection. The committee should meet at least monthly in well-advertised open sessions at a time and place most convenient to its members and the general public.

A summary of other essential steps follows.

- *Engage your local print and electronic media early and often.* Media attention is very important to the success of any visioning effort. It is important to obtain support and coverage from whatever sources people use to gain information. Today, that includes the Internet.

- *Appoint staff.* Proper visioning is a labor-intensive effort. Shortchange the number of staff and you shortchange the whole process. Sometimes, dedicated volunteers can augment paid workers for tasks such as mailings, telephone calls, and discussion facilitation, but they can never replace them. Some communities hire specialists for this effort. Oftentimes,

planning bureau personnel are asked to take on visioning staff responsibilities as they are considered closest to “the people.” Consider that a compliment, although it may appear at first hand to be just an extra burden.

- *Undertake a community profile.* Sometimes called an “environmental scan,” this is a written document that gives a complete picture of your community today, in terms of demographic, geographical and other important factors. You cannot decide where you want to go if you haven’t a clear idea of where you have been and where you are today. The profile also indicates the likely trends if you follow this trajectory. This task often is subcontracted to a consultant. Ask city departments and the steering committee to review the document for accuracy and completeness, but do not change it just if you do not like what it says.

- *Develop a preferred scenario or vision statement.* Building upon what you know of the past and what this may portend for the future, ask the type of questions we noted earlier. This task requires working not only with the steering committee but taking the visioning out to the community at large, and there are many ways to do that.

- *Agree on an action plan.* Now that we know where we want to go in the future, how do we get there? In this step, we transfer the general vision to the specific, and detail goals, strategies and actions with targets and deadlines and ways to monitor progress. The steering committee and the public continue to be involved, as are city agencies and partners.

SUMMING UP:

A well-conceived visioning process can energize the populace and engage

people in efforts they never thought possible. However, for visioning to succeed there needs to be a significant commitment of time and resources, and a willingness in the community and among local leaders to find common ground. It is well to consider if visioning is right for your town, city, or region by carefully weighing its advantages and disadvantages. ♦

Elaine Cogan, principal in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan, LLC, is a consultant to many communities undertaking strategic planning or visioning processes. Her “Effective Planning Commissioner” column regularly appears in the Planning Commissioners Journal.



Q&A with Elaine Cogan

Editor’s Note: we typically circulate draft articles for informal review and feedback. We thought *PCJ* readers might find Elaine Cogan’s replies to several of the comments we received of interest.

From Alissa Barber Torres, AICP, Chief Planner, Research and Strategic Planning Section, Orange County (Florida) Planning Division:

Translation of project materials into languages other than English or listing additional project contacts for staff fluent in other languages might be optimal, depending on the demographics of the community ...

Communities also may want to find out if others are interested in joining their efforts, with regional visioning emerging as such a national trend in the last several years and as a better way to leverage resources and deal with some issues, such as the environment.

Elaine replies: In my latest project, consulting in a city with considerable non-English speaking people, we held visioning meetings in the churches and centers where they congregate, accompanied by translators. The attendees were very appreciative of being spoken with in their own languages and we received much useful information we would not otherwise had been aware of. We also employed an artist to visually depict what people were saying.

Regional visioning also is a good idea. In Portland, Oregon, we developed the regional “2040 Plan,” primarily centered on land use. We asked people a deceptively simple question, “Do you want to grow up or grow out?” with all the density, infrastructure, etc. implications that need to be considered.

The general consensus, after several hundred meetings and other outreach, was that people wanted to preserve our surrounding farm and forest land, and hence accept higher densities around the urban core. Planning policies and political actions have followed.

The primary caution about successful visioning, as I mention in the article, is that it takes time, money, and commitment.

From Lee A Krohn, AICP, Planning Director, Town of Manchester, Vermont:

Just a few quick thoughts. I agree, visioning is important. However, people typically respond more to the small things they can grasp (most recently, a new hot dog vendor) than the big picture issues of community vitality. ...

When we went through a “vision quest” in the mid 1990’s, we held a series of conversations with around 20 different people invited each time. The invited groups were deliberately organized to try to bring people together who did not normally interact. A few refused; most were intrigued and participated fully. I admit to being skeptical at the time, and observed great success in the end.

Elaine replies: There are many techniques about how to have successful visioning. It is my experience that people welcome talking about the big picture, in the right context. Much preparation and organization is needed.

From Irv Schiffman, Chico, California:

If the future envisioned by the participants is limited to what they now experience, the resulting vision may be limited as well. One of the roles of staff should be to bring in information that allows the participants to consider alternative futures. This may mean bus trips to other communities, DVD and PowerPoint presentations as to what is happening elsewhere, guest speakers, and so on.

Elaine replies: Good suggestions. If enough and a good variety of people are involved, they will offer new ideas. Staff prompting can be helpful, too.

From Larry P. Frey, AICP, Bradenton, Florida:

Your article provides a general framework for accomplishing the visioning process. I would like to read more about adding youth to the mix. I think they have already proved in my experience their vital contribution and honesty.

Elaine replies: I have had positive experiences involving youth in visioning. It is very labor intensive and sometimes frustrating if one goes through the educational bureaucracy, but there are other ways to reach young people, and it is worth the effort.