

# Are We There Yet?

by Jim Segedy, FAICP and Lisa Hollingsworth-Segedy, AICP

Remember family vacations? If yours were like ours, you and your siblings sat in the back seat of the car and periodically whined the universal utterance heard on family vacations certain to set the parents' teeth on edge: "Are we there yet?"

Traveling to a new place was always exciting yet frustrating to Lisa as a child. There were new sights to see, but no familiar landmarks. Finally, after hearing the vexing whine for the umpteenth time, Lisa's father handed her a map and said, "I don't know. Why don't you tell me?"

Taking on the tasks identified in your community's plan may be a little like riding in the back seat of a car for a road trip where you don't know the landmarks.<sup>1</sup> So how do you know if you're "there" yet?

Some plan implementation tasks are easy: planting trees along your boulevard or installing a "Welcome to Our Town" sign are the kinds of tasks that have a definite start and finish. When they're done, you can check them off of the to-do list. But other plan implementation projects are not so clear-cut, and it may be difficult to tell if you've achieved them.

We intend this column to help you find the right road map so you can tell not only when your community is "there," but more importantly, that you're making progress. The techniques we find helpful are benchmarking,

<sup>1</sup> In this column we use the term "community plan" to encompass the kind of local comprehensive plan common in many parts of the country. We recognize that the local planning process, and what plans cover, varies from state to state. In some states, review of plan implementation is highly structured. For example, in Florida, as we learned from PCJ Assistant Editor Larry Pflueger, community-wide "comprehensive plans" are reviewed every 7 years by the state Department of Community Affairs, which then issues an "evaluation and appraisal report." The main point, however, is universal: the importance of measuring progress towards implementation of plans.

indicators, regular reviews, and plan accountability, and we believe that some combination of all of these will help keep the implementation of your community's plan on track.

INDICATORS HELP MAKE SURE THAT YOUR PLANS ARE SPECIFIC, RATHER THAN JUST A COLLECTION OF BROAD GOALS. THEY BREAK EACH GOAL DOWN INTO SPECIFIC STEPS

## I. Benchmarks and Indicators

Developing a community plan is an exercise in forward-thinking. As a community, you've decided who you are, where you are going to go, and how you are going to get there. Your plan sets the course, and it contains tasks your city or town has probably undertaken before, as well as new activities to address new circumstances.

In looking at the community's agenda in the plan, you may feel like Captain Kirk, "boldly going where no one has gone before." This is where benchmarks and indicators come in handy.

A benchmark is a reference point, a landmark that your community establishes for itself along the way to a completed task. It will help you know when you're making progress, like looking for the big tree on the way to Grandma's house or seeing that familiar exit sign on the highway.

An indicator is what you're measuring. Indicators can be specific and measurable. They can take the form of something as simple as a checklist of tasks accomplished. Indicators help make sure that your plans are specific, rather than just a collection of broad

goals. They break each goal down into specific steps assigned to responsible parties; when each step is complete, there's a box that can be checked off or a result measured.

Identifying multiple, small steps along the way is much more effective than waiting for a long time to see if a policy or program is working.

A good indicator system also helps overcome the discouragement that may arise in the community when a large project is underway and it seems like nothing is happening. As a planning commission, you can call attention to all the checked boxes to show that there are successes – even if the task is long and the way difficult.

There are several important points to remember about using benchmarks and indicators. First, there are no universally correct answers. Benchmarks and indicators come out of your community's understanding of "Where are we now and where are we going?" Second, it is tempting to turn an indicator into a goal – don't. Indicators are measurements of progress towards a goal, they are not themselves goals.

Take a look at one example of the use of benchmarks and indicators. As the Lincoln and Lancaster County, Nebraska, Benchmark Indicators Report notes:

*This Report is designed to evaluate and monitor changes in the community, and assess whether the assumptions in the [Lincoln-Lancaster County 2030] Comprehensive Plan are valid and its goals are being achieved ... Community indicators are bits of information that, when combined, generate a picture of what is happening in a local system. They provide insight into the overall direction of a community: whether it is improving, declining, or staying the same, or is some mix of all three.*

*A combination of indicators can*

therefore provide a measuring system to provide information about past trends, current realities, and future direction in order to aid decision making... If updated on an annual basis, community indicators can show progress, or the lack of progress, in accomplishing community priorities.

## 2. Regular Reviews

We were driving through the Laurel Highlands a couple of weekends ago, and the landscape was alive with the colors, textures, and aromas of spring. It was a delightful journey, but after an hour of being on the road, we realized that there was so much to look at along the way we'd forgotten where we were going. We weren't even certain we were going in the right direction.

A community's plan can end up this way too, particularly when economic conditions and opportunities change. If your community loses its major employer, then the basic assumptions on which your plan was built may no longer be valid. If the state highway department builds a new road, your community may experience growth pressure that tempts you to redirect your infrastructure service area.

A regular review of your plan will help your community determine if any mid-course corrections are needed to make sure that your plan continues to answer the questions, "Who are we?," "Where are we going?," and "How will we get there?"

As the planning commission, you are in an ideal position to facilitate this review, and to make sure that any additions to or deletions from the plan find their way into the plan amendment process. Plan progress should be identified regularly and often and presented to the elected body on a periodic basis. It's all part of the planning process.

## 3. Plan Accountability

That "A" word, Accountability, has been highly visible the past few years.



Just some of the benchmarks and indicators that are more fully described in the Lincoln-Lancaster County Community Indicators Report; available at: [www.lincoln.ne.gov/City/plan/cpanrev/benchrpt/bench09.pdf](http://www.lincoln.ne.gov/City/plan/cpanrev/benchrpt/bench09.pdf)

Though some people would argue that a plan is simply a set of goals that may or may not be reached by a community, we believe that an accountable plan is the best way to build a strong community. When citizens invest their time, knowledge, and effort in participating in the development of a plan, they want the satisfaction of seeing it put into action.

Not carrying out the actions called for in your plan is the same as a broken promise, and you may be sending the message that the citizens aren't important. As a planning commissioner, one of the most empowering things you can do is make certain the community keeps the promises it makes to itself as reflected in the plan.

Doing "what we said we were going to do" is different than "getting what we thought we'd get." It's not a negative reflection on you or the plan if things don't turn out the way you had hoped they would. But it is a problem if you do nothing about it. That's accountability.

As a planning commission you also need to provide oversight when plan

elements, such as landscaping in downtown, are portioned out to groups (for example, the local garden club). Delegation of plan implementation tasks to citizen groups – something we discussed in our previous column – is important because it fosters plan ownership and community involvement. However, just because a group outside of government is taking responsibility for a project doesn't mean you can forget about accountability.

Because of the planning commission's unique status as a reviewing and recommending body, you are in a position to help make things happen. For policy changes that may not result in physical community alterations, or for longer-term projects that don't create immediately visible results, the planning commission can be invaluable for checking those benchmarks and validating to citizens that indeed the community is making progress.

Just as Lisa's dad handed her the map and introduced her to navigation, you as a planning commissioner can facilitate the community's recognition and celebration of progress.

In our next column, we'll look at ways that a planning commission can keep the community focused on the plan when the going gets tough. ♦



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