



The Planning Partnership: An Initiative of the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission

DESCRIPTIVE NARRATIVE

The Planning Partnership is a groundbreaking alliance of government, planning, civic and private organizations focused on planning the future of Hamilton County (Cincinnati) Ohio. With 49 local planning commissions in our county this new alliance works to harness the collective energy and vision of its members so that mutual goals related to physical, economic, and social issues can be planned for comprehensively and achieved collaboratively. In 1999, the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission, in collaboration with its stakeholders, developed a strategic plan for reorganization of the Commission. The purpose was to assure a solutions oriented organization that fits Hamilton County's needs in the 21st century.

In May 2000, to implement its new strategic plan ("A Plan for Planning"), the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission, in collaboration with the County Commissioners, began the process of establishing cooperation agreements with its 49 local governments, 49 planning commissions and key civic and private sector organizations engaged in planning in the County. The result --The Planning Partnership-- now includes committees and task forces that are successfully addressing everything from funding strategies to marketing, from stormwater management to neighborhood revitalization. Its first official meeting of representatives was held in September 2000.

The Planning Partnership includes dedicated men and women tightly focused on long term cross-jurisdictional and multi-sector issues rather than parochial short term issues (e.g., development review) typical of most government planning commissions. Already, that long-term focus is having an impact. Through training programs, data collection and analysis, reports, recognition programs, forums and constant dialogue, The Planning Partnership has shared and developed resources and talent and built consensus on action plans to achieve a unified vision for Hamilton County's future.

AWARD CRITERIA

Program implementation:

- * Strategic Plan and study of reorganization alternatives was initiated in February 1998.
- * New organization was established in September 2000.
- * The program is designed to be sustainable and continuous.

Problem Scope:

Hamilton County, saddled with 19th century obsolete jurisdictional baggage, formed its Planning Partnership to assure that planning makes a difference in the 21st Century. With 49 political jurisdictions in Hamilton County, over 600 planning and zoning commissioners, 22 school districts and 16 countywide special districts, as well as dozens of civic and private sector planning initiatives, the County has rampant fragmentation in community planning and a lack of a collective vision. The multitude of planning organizations and hundreds of "players" chip away at many local issues but fail to pull together in the same direction. A partnership of planning and implementation organizations was needed to effectively address major countywide issues such as the following:

- Hamilton County communities are experiencing population loss (over 80,000 people since 1970) and related disinvestment that cannot be effectively reversed by any individual jurisdiction working alone. Any effective and sustainable attack on metropolitan problems must treat urban and suburban areas as indivisible parts of a whole;
- The multitude of political jurisdictions brings divergent voices, and therefore reduced effectiveness, to regional policy and funding;

- Internal or intra-metropolitan competition, functioning as if the County contains 49 separate economies, reduces our real economic competitiveness as a region. Older suburbs are spiraling into decline due to erosion of population, population aging, exodus of younger workforce, deteriorating housing stock, and loss of jobs and tax base;
- Implementation of fragmented local plans, without fully considering the interconnectedness of, and impact on, neighboring actions, results in adverse or suboptimized regional consequences. The cumulative effect of such independent development decisions threatens our quality of life through gridlock, flooding, air and water pollution, and degradation of neighborhood character. The lack of development coordination undermines the County's ability to improve mobility, implement mass transit corridors, avoid social and economic polarization and physical banalization, balance land use, and achieve air quality standards, economic vitality and desirable growth

Mission:

To bring together public, private and civic sector organizations engaged in community planning in Hamilton County so that mutual goals related to physical, economic and social issues can be planned for comprehensively and achieved collaboratively.

Time Frame:

(Development and Implementation)

- 1) Developed Strategic Plan and reorganization alternatives (Feb. 1998. to Jan. 2000)
- 2) Developed consensus on Resolution of Cooperation (Jan. 2000 to May 2000)
- 3) Adoption of individual Cooperation Agreements (May 2000 to Apr. 2001 -- 49 meetings)
- 4) Established The Planning Partnership (Sept. 2000 -- first official meeting)
- 5) Development of Bylaws (Jan. 2001 to Mar. 2001 - 6 meetings)
- 6) Development of Organizational Strategy / Strategic Plan (Dec. 2000 to Sept. 2001 -- 21 meetings)
- 7) Implementation of Action Strategies (Sept. 2001 +)

e.g., Countywide Values Survey, Countywide Vision, Training Program for Planning Commissioners, Stormwater Management Program, Community Revitalization Initiative, Revitalization Tools Resource Book, Property Maintenance Initiative, Cost of Government Services Study, Etc)

Program Focus:

- The Planning Partnership provides new planning services, such as training and collaborative problem solving, through new revenue sources including membership fees and foundation grants
- The Planning Partnership enabled enhanced funding and new levels of effectiveness for long range comprehensive planning previously unfunded and largely ignored by the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission.
- The Planning Partnership successfully engaged over 3000 persons in a process to build consensus on a vision for Hamilton County's future and 30 key initiatives for achieving the collective vision. As a result, public awareness of the importance of long range comprehensive planning is better understood and now supported by most of the 49 governments in Hamilton County.
- The Planning Partnership provides essential data for local government decision making, including conversion of complex census information into usable maps, charts and graphs in various reports to meet the needs of member communities.
- The Planning Partnership established cooperation agreements with public, private and civic sector organizations and produced strategic plan for the organization that identifies shared problems. It developed a standardized planning process for producing strategic plans and action plans.
- The Planning Partnership developed a standardized process for developing indicators of community results and performance measures for evaluation program results. Intergovernmental cooperation results from the identification of a collective vision, common ground and opportunities to leverage local capacity in resolving cross jurisdictional problems.
- The Planning Partnership developed and implemented a results accountability process for all planning processes – comprehensive plans, strategic plans and action plans. The results accountability process requires a focus on desired results, selection of key indicators of success, and measurement based on

baseline trends,

3. Measurable Outcomes / Results

The Planning Partnership has exceeded its expectations in *membership*, now having 80% of the county's geographic area as members, which includes about 90% of the County's population. The Partnership has also achieved its most daunting challenge – building *consensus on a countywide unified vision*. The Vision for Hamilton County's Future was endorsed unanimously by the Planning Partnership on January 9, 2003.

Working together on community planning and implementation has leveraged local resources and achieved the following concrete benefits for Hamilton County communities. **As a result of participation and investment in Planning Partnership projects and initiatives, communities can:**

- *Access professional assistance* through the HCRPC staff as well as expertise from affiliate organizations and members of the Planning Partnership's listserv -- PlanningPartnerNet
- *Increase the effectiveness of planning*, and defensibility of development review decisions, through the Planning Partnership's Planning Commissioners' Training Program
- *Better coordinate planning and development efforts* and lobby for regional and state policy with a more unified voice using the Community COMPASS framework provided by "The Vision for Hamilton County's Future" and related implementation initiatives -- developed through the Planning Partnership and adopted by the Board of County Commissioners
- *Promote local strengths* in specific industry clusters using Community COMPASS research findings on industry cluster trends in your community and in the region
- *Revitalize aging neighborhoods and business districts* through the Planning Partnership's Community Revitalization Initiative
- *Find essential data and utilize research findings* from Community COMPASS State of the County reports (on economy, mobility, governance, etc.) as benchmarks for local planning and community development decisions
- *Have immediate and easy access to information* on over 200 organizations and programs that fund a gamut of projects for economic development and community revitalization through the Planning Partnership's Community Revitalization Tools Resource Book
- *Meet education/outreach requirements* of the Ohio EPA NPDES Phase II Permit mandate through the Planning Partnership's Stormwater Management Education Program.
- *Access technical assistance* and specialized libraries through various Planning Partnership memberships in national advisory services of community planning and management organizations and through www.planningpartnership.org
- *Keep up-to-date on the latest planning news and best practices* through the Planning Partnership's newsletter – "UPDATE"

Lessons Learned

1. We learned to "start where we can – not where we can't". We had to develop leadership with "champions and explorers" and enable "settlers" to continue at their own pace. We learned not to invest time in convincing hard core opponents. We learned that, for some commitment only follows results and performance had to be demonstrated and sustained.
2. We learned to plan only as far as we can see and to refine the plan when you can see farther. While we developed a 30 year vision, the action plans could only address what looked realistic now.
3. We learned to create a culture of planning – not just a program. And learned that naming a program (like our long range plan -- Community COMPASS) has some adverse consequence in that others may perceive "the program" as belonging to an agency or department rather than belonging to the community. The planning and community organizing philosophy has to be more important than the program.
4. Processes for strategic plans and action plans must be designed carefully to avoid the common tendency to "apply more Band-Aids to broken eggs". The process has to get to the root cause of breaks in the context of the larger picture or system.

5. Systemic change for sustained long term impact is not easy or popular in our “silo” political culture (a home rule environment with 49 governments, 49 planning commissions, etc. in one county) which has a natural tendency to tamper with systems for short term impact and political expediency. Managing by short term results has encouraged tampering with systems and crisis management rather than continuous system improvements.
6. “The truth will set you free – but first it will piss you off”. Our initial negative messages about trends and projections in our aging county related to declining population, tax base and quality of life, and overall deterioration of our communities was not welcomed by elected officials and chambers of commerce. This deficit based approach had to be balanced with asset based or strength based discussions and processes to gain broader acceptance and support of initiatives and strategies.
7. Consultants are useful to build capacity, but only at start up. Sustainability depends on the degree to which the planning culture and processes are integrated into the community and participating organizations – i.e., “you can’t hire someone to exercise for you”; you have to integrate exercise in your lifestyle”).
8. The goals of the Planning Partnership have to be approached as a marathon – not as a sprint. Commitments have to recognize that real value can not be measured during the first couple years (e.g., farmers can’t measure crops during the first couple months; instead, we have to focus on nurturing growth).
9. Start with ends and work to means. Be clear about what do we want, how we will recognize it, and what will it take to get there.
10. Identify appropriate accountability and separate community accountability from agency accountability. The whole community is responsible for results affecting the whole population. Specific programs and organizations are responsible for results for their customers.
11. Use data (indicators) to drive analysis (it saves a lot of time), to drive decision-making, and to gauge success or failure against a baseline. Separate community results indicators from organization / program performance measures.
12. Involve a broad set of partners including those who can help turn the curves of selected indicators
13. Demonstrate how all the pieces fit together – clarify individual roles and well as the big picture
14. Move from talk to action as soon as possible while also recognizing that conversation is an action step.
15. The traditional planning and community improvement process of organizing around conversations of problem solving, deficiencies, and holding others (our leaders) accountable, need to be balanced with a newer model of community change – a culture of community accountability – by inviting change and creating breakthroughs through citizenship and engagement (holding ourselves accountable – i.e., we must be part creator of the improvement effort).
16. The process needs to foster connectedness, and activism in order to release the untapped possibilities of citizens to make a difference in our future.
17. Sustainable progress requires a shift in leadership towards associations and associations of associations (which are self-created, self governed and volunteer) rather than professional agencies – like Business, Health Care, Education, and Government players (which are system constrained, externally controlled, and mandate reactive). We need to convene associational leadership to Identify the right conversation to have and to convene strategic conversations. Association partnerships enable a reduction in government parenting , (which enables patriarchy, isolation, entitlement, passivity).
18. We must constantly remind collaborators that we are developing emergent strategies – rather than destination (final) strategies. We need to organize around emergent initiatives – as community and citizens’ initiatives, rather than solely by professionals and system agencies (they may be conveners and participants, but not the only participant). Our mission is to create the condition where civic engagement actions can make a difference and can create an alternative emergent future.
19. Sustainable progress requires a shift in accountability toward personal and communal responsibility for the well being of the whole (a community of accountability) – rather than total leader dependence (and blame) and the resulting culture of entitlement and passivity.
20. To improve the community conversation we have to change the questions. Answers sometimes build resistance; questions can build commitment and accountability by engaging people, especially opponents, with each other and inviting them to co-create the future.