

WHAT IS STRATEGIC PLANNING?

STRATEGIC PLANNING IS A SYSTEMATIC PROCESS to identify why your local government exists, whom it serves, benefits derived from the services you provided and your administration's vision for serving its citizens. Your strategic plan serves as a blueprint to achieve your vision. It also answers three basic questions: Who are we? What do we want? and How are we going to get what we want? At each stage of the process, you will need to involve various people and groups and this is where the power of strategic planning comes into play.

Does strategic planning sound like a long, drawn-out process? Well, it can take a while to do it right — "Anything worth doing, is worth doing right." This may be quite true, but there needs to be a lot of benefits for embarking on a time-consuming and sometimes difficult process. Participants at CML's "The Path to Strategic Planning" workshops

determined a number of benefits for undergoing this process:

- Helps engage the community and involve a wider group of stakeholders
- Creates a plan that has the community in mind
- Focuses on broad issues
- It's fun to envision the future
- Identifies clear impacts and decisions
- Helps us keep a focus
- Proactive versus reactive (not crisis management)
- Assesses resources, strengths, and weaknesses
- Makes it easier to measure success
- Adds to the stability of the community
- Gives us a sense of achievement

- Provides stability through term-limits/changes

There are many approaches to strategic planning, however, there are a couple of common threads among most plans. The predominant starting point is a solid understanding of the organization: its vision, mission, values, history, key contributors, accomplishments and setbacks answering the question "Who are we?" Being able to see the organization within the environment in which it operates is also beneficial. There are a variety of environmental scans that help organizations understand the pressures and dynamics that are affecting them and that could affect their strategic plan.

In the workshops, participants are asked to conduct an environmental scan on trends in local municipalities. Here are some of the trends they came up with:

PERCEIVED TRENDS IN LOCAL MUNICIPALITIES

Emerging Trends

More partnerships
Increasing public involvement via technology
State-local government changes
Revenue limitations (TABOR)
Succession planning
Demographic changes
Interest in parks and trails
More technology
Focus on performance measurements
Environmental concerns
Increasing senior population
Leadership gaps due to baby boomers retiring

Existing Trends

Lack of public involvement
Lack of long-term thinking
Gap between "haves" and "have nots"
Special interest focus
Expectation of technology
Term limits
Lack of economic sustainability
Resource challenges
Increasing demands, decreasing resources
TABOR
Entitlement
Public disconnect with government
Citizen apathy
Budget issues
Economic development
Growth versus no-growth
Competition for resources
Senior and youth issues
Erosion of local control

Disappearing Trends

Public engagement
Trust in public officials
Face-to-face personal interaction
Personal responsibility
Volunteers
Trust in government
Voter turnout
Civic involvement
Time
Community involvement
Rural/historic characteristics
Sense of community pride
Trust in media
Neighborhoods
"Mom & Pop"
"Handshake" operations

What would you add to these trends?

The final plan should include specific information about goals, objectives and clearly defined action steps, required resources, when the action item is due and how you will monitor progress and measure success.

Still answering the “Who are we?” question, one common thread in most strategic planning processes is to conduct a SWOT analysis to explore the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of the organization. The Technology of Participation ToP®* strategic planning method also looks at the Benefits of Success and the Dangers of Success (unanticipated consequences of success that you might want to plan for).

Once the group has a pretty good handle on its identity and environment, the next couple of steps have to do with setting goals, objectives and strategic directions and developing action plans to accomplish them. This helps identify “What we Want and How We’re Going to Get It”. The ToP®* method includes the a “process map”:

Strategic planning is not an easy process. It requires a strong commitment from both your executive level and governing board. To secure top level support you will need to assess the resources needed to develop and implement a successful plan. Resources to consider include staffing needs and compensation for their time, hiring a professional facilitator, your organization’s technological ability to design, implement and monitor the plan, and meeting and facilities expenses. If the roof has caved in and you’re in crises mode strategic planning is not the best method for dealing with the crises. Take care of the crises first, then consider creating a strategic plan.

Additional challenges include identifying who makes the decisions at each stage of the process and when you need to build consensus. Using a skilled facilitator can guide you through this and utilizing participatory method, when appropriate, can make it a more inclusive process. Making sure you have included all important stakeholders will help you avoid creating a plan that is unsupported. When done right, strategic planning should engage and excite your staff and citizens in shaping the future direction of your local government.

The final plan should include specific information about goals, objectives and clearly defined action steps that identify who is responsible for each action item, what resources are needed, when the action item is due and how you will monitor progress and measure success. As a basic rule, you should regularly review your action items; a good practice is to conduct quarterly and annual evaluations. However, more frequent than four times a year may be necessary depending on external circumstances. To keep people committed and on track, communicate and publish results regularly and acknowledge departmental and individual accomplishments as they occur. It may be helpful to research other municipalities’ strategic plans or to benchmark your processes. Keep your focus on the strategic plan and strategic directions. Many leaders get off track because they focus most of their time on operational or tactical issues and don’t think strategically. Leaders who spend about 20 percent of their time thinking strategically and working their plan are more likely to be successful achieving the goals and vision of their strategic plan.

Utilizing a professional facilitator can help your municipality navigate the strategic planning process. Collaborative Connections Inc. 303-380-2550 has skilled, professional facilitators, including Penny McDaniel and Anne Neal.

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