

Where is our community going?

Community Visioning and Strategic Planning for Small Communities

Clearly local governments share a challenge to make their communities a better place now and in the future. However, all too frequently that challenge is eclipsed by the immediate needs as well as lack of time and resources needed to devote to visioning, goal setting and strategic planning. And those communities that do embark on visioning, goal setting and strategic planning efforts are often frustrated by the overwhelming scope of the efforts needed to develop and implement an effective plan. This frustration is often magnified for smaller communities with limited staff and resources. Nevertheless there is a lot to be learned from communities that have achieved success in these areas. Following is a summary of ten steps for community visioning, goal setting and strategic planning based on best practices of smaller communities.

| STEP | DESCRIPTION | TASKS |
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| <p>ONE: Develop a community vision</p> | <p>An effective vision statement should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reflect the future (at least ten years forward) ideal state for your community - that is “what” you want your community to be in the future - distinguish your community from others from a competitive perspective. As an example one Minnesota community’s vision is to be “a family-friendly small town community that is walkable with urban conveniences...” - reflect a future state that requires “reach” at the same time is doable <p>Best vision statements are one sentence and easy to remember.</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify a visioning task force. Visions statements are best developed by input from a diverse group of residents, including but not limited to elected officials, board and commission members and staff. 2. Select an experienced facilitator (usually someone not directly involved with your local government - a non- stake holder) to coordinate the efforts of your community. 3. Brainstorm (and record) words or phrases that describe how your community is distinguished from other communities as well as those words or phrases that describe the “idealized future state” of your community. Form sub-groups of three to five diverse task force members to draft, record and share, visioning sentences. 4. Ask each group to take the best elements of each statement and refine, record and share. 5. Assign an individual or group the task of preparing two or three refined statements for final review and approval by elected body. |
| <p>TWO: Prepare a community assessment</p> | <p>Prior to initiating strategic planning and goal setting it is important to gather information about community perceptions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feedback should include short-term and long-term issues. - Gathering feedback from multiple sources (surveys, interviews, focus groups, open houses) is better than relying on one source. - Gather measurable data relating to feedback. This will help measure progress on goals. - Avoid “analysis - paralysis” by focusing on key data related to identified community issues. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conduct a community open house, conduct community survey or assign task force members to gather opinions regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what the community is doing well; • not doing well; • future challenges; • concerns; and, • needs. 2. Gather feedback from other government officials (schools, county, federal and state officials regarding same questions. 3. Review your past successes. 4. Review and record data. 5. Identify and collect measurable data relating to community concerns (i.e. if concern is residential disinvestment - collect changes in property values). |

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| THREE: Conduct strategic planning session | <p>Some suggested issues to consider while planning your session include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strategic planning sessions are most effective when facilitated by an experienced professional. These individuals are often available through state municipal organizations, colleges and universities, and consulting groups. Occasionally, community volunteers are available. - Develop and distribute an agenda prior to your session. - Elected officials should determine who should be included in the session. It is typical to include elected officials and key staff. Some communities also include a limited number of board and commission members. - Planning sessions work best when the total number of participants is 20 or less. - Respect your open meeting laws and rules. Public observation of goal setting and strategic planning may seem awkward at first but typically does not cause a problem. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish session ground rules. 2. Review community vision. 3. Stay on agenda. Use “in-basket” to store issues and ideas not on agenda and target for disposition at end of meeting. 4. Review and process feedback. 5. Conduct and record a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that may impact your community ability to achieve your vision). 6. Brainstorm potential goals directed at achieving vision. 7. Refine/combine and discuss goal statements. 8. Prepare refined goal statements for voting by task force. 9. Tabulate results. 10. Establish priorities based on voting (elected officials may be guided by vote tabulations but should exercise their consensus judgment when determining final priorities). |
| FOUR: Assign a “status” to goals | <p>Breaking complex goals to “bite-size” pieces will help guide implementation. This is especially true since some goals that seem a good idea initially may not be practical or effective. Assigning a status permits a disciplined analysis of goals prior to implementation.</p> | <p>Agree upon goal “status.” Status options include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assess - Review process to determine if the proposed goal will provide the desired benefit required to help achieve community vision. 2. Plan - Prepare information required for policy discussion and decision including cost, logistics (location), timing, financing, etc. 3. Implement - Implement plan as decided. |
| FIVE: Assign goals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elected officials, as well as staff and other officials can become overwhelmed with the tasks required to achieve goals. Assigning goals to appropriate teams is key to avoiding this problem. - Care should be taken to evaluate the capacity of each team to accomplish the goal tasks. - Assignment also helps avoid asking staff to achieve a goal that requires policy direction prior to implementation. | <p>Goal assignment options include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Elected officials - Goals that require policy direction including assignment of significant community resources. 2. Staff - Work program goals that reflect implementation of elected official direction or traditional staff responsibility (i.e. quality control program for building inspection). The progress and results of these initiatives are reviewed with elected officials. 3. Boards, commissions, task force, volunteers - Goals that can be reasonably delegated to other groups (i.e. update of comprehensive land use plan). |

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| SIX: Prepare a strategic plan for goal implementation | Achieving goals requires planning and resources. This step supports the need to prepare the plan and outline the required resources including time required for policy discussion and direction. Typically this plan is drafted by staff for review and approval by elected officials within 30 days of the goal setting session. | Elements of the Implementation Plan should include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clear, measurable goal achievement statement. 2. Plans need to reflect “bite-sized” steps to goal achievement. 3. Specific assignment made to oversee each step and time frame. 4. Identification of resource requirements (including time, personnel and money). 5. Agreement regarding progress reporting. |
| SEVEN: Review, refine and adopt plan | Once a plan is prepared it should be reviewed, approved and adopted by elected officials. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plan should be reviewed, refined as needed and approved by elected body. 2. Time schedule and calendar for plan review and update. 3. Calendar for elected body policy discussion should be created and agreed upon. |
| EIGHT: Communicate vision and plan to staff and community | Communicating the community vision and plans to achieve that vision will improve the quality of feedback and helps “market” the value of local government. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Vision should be prominent on all community communications (newsletter, website). – Budget should reflect vision. – Measurement of goals and links to vision should be clear. – Report setbacks as well as successes. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify key messages related to community vision and goals. 2. Use newsletters, cable television, community media to communicate key messages with emphasis on need for feedback. 3. Consider open houses and town meetings as part of communication plan. 4. Develop speaking points with elected officials for neighborhood and civic group meetings. 5. Include staff as target audience. |
| NINE: Develop a financial plan reflecting your community vision and goals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A financial plan looks out five to ten years and forecasts needs and resources. – Since most community goals require multi-year implementation, this plan provides a framework to assist in decisions required to achieve goals. – Balancing annual budget necessary but not sufficient part of financial management. – Many communities are living “paycheck-to-paycheck” by balancing budgets with no real long-term financial plan. – Establishing a community vision and goals without a strategic and financial plan is like building a house without blueprints or a budget. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prepare baseline forecasts for current services and revenues projected for a five to ten year future time frame. 2. Factor in expenses (and revenues) related to future growth and add to forecast. 3. Factor in “financial foundations” including items such as pavement management systems, facility maintenance and replacement, information technology, economic (tax base) development, equipment replacement, etc.) and add to forecast. 4. Identify potential new or expanded revenue sources and amounts. 5. Factor in resources required to achieve community goals 6. Identify options to reduce, eliminate or transfer services. 7. Elected officials review projections and adjust as needed to reflect available recourses. 8. Plan should be used by elected officials when making financial decisions. 9. Plan should be updated annually prior or as part of goal setting/strategic planning. |
| TEN: Track plan implementation | Attending to the plan and making adjustments as needed. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish monthly or quarterly milestones and assignments. 2. Submit each goal to “checklist” review. 3. Review goal progress with elected body |

For more information, please contact Ehlers & Associates, Inc.