



# Social and Economic Education for Development

## Principles for a Community Planning Process

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### Introduction

A planning process is one of the biggest challenges any community will undertake. There is a strong tendency to focus on the final product without considering how the process of getting to the final product is a factor in the ability to implement the plan. This publication highlights some principles that can guide a community as it begins a planning process.

### What Are We Planning For? Strategic Community Visioning

A successful planning process begins by answering the question: What are we planning for? Is the purpose of our effort to devise an economic development plan to strengthen and diversify our economy? Or, is this a land use plan that will help us design the physical lay-out of our community and the types of land uses that will be located in particular areas? Or, is this a general community plan that focuses on the development of the community as a whole -- all aspects of life within this place we call home?

Whatever the purpose, the first step is to develop a vision of that place we will be working to get to over the next 10 to 20 years. No one would start a trip without having a destination in mind, and no one would start to build a house without having at least a mental picture of what they ultimately want to build. In the same way, all planning processes begin with a **vision**.

A good strategic vision or visioning process must:

- ☛ **Be grounded in the history and values of the people of the community.**
- ☛ **Engage the community and connect community members with each other.**

- ☛ **Stretch citizens beyond their current prospective, forcing them to describe what they want the community to become.**

The power of a strategic vision is that it is a compelling image of a community's desire for the future. A strategic vision vaults us over the barriers of the current situation and the current constraints into a desired future. A strategic vision is about the character of the community and how it functions. And finally, the content of a strategic vision is not nearly as important as what the process of creating the vision does for the community. A community visioning process

- ☛ **Is based on the ideas of all community members**
- ☛ **Maximizes opportunities for community residents to participate in the planning for their future.**
- ☛ **Is community-owned and community-driven.**
- ☛ **Leads to more effective goal setting and action planning by the community as a whole and groups and organizations within the community.**

To succeed in a strategic visioning process a community needs:

1. A committed core group of people from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. A community's ability to come together to work for a common good is the key to determining a community's future.
2. Commitment from key stakeholders in the community. Creating a vision is about a pattern of choices over time, not a single choice.

3. A process that engages the entire community as much as possible. Many people in the community have ideas and information necessary for building a vision, but an environment must be created to allow these to surface, be heard, and become real.
4. A structured process with key markers for progress and those involved must create early successes and take the time to celebrate these successes.

### **Planning for the Vision: An Economic Development Example**

Moving from a vision of a better tomorrow to actually arriving there requires careful planning and a clear focus on strategic actions. Imagine a community has decided that its vision for its economic future is to have a diversified economic base that provides a wide range of employment opportunities at differing wage levels and for people with differing levels of skills and education. Furthermore, citizens believe that the actions that need to be taken to achieve this diversified economy will help them achieve another part of their vision -- a better quality of life. These citizens might begin their planning process with the following questions.

☛ **How do we nurture a diversified community and economy so as to enhance the quality of life?**

Quality of life and standard of living are often used interchangeably. But in fact they are different concepts. Standard of living is typically measured by level of income and consumption. It is primarily an economic concept. Quality of life is about feelings of satisfaction with one's life, one's community, and one's self. It is possible to have a high standard of living and a low quality of life, and vice versa.

Research suggests there is no direct relationship between quality of life and standard of living. What is important to quality of life is having choices in the productive work one does, as well as the respect of family and people who matter to you in your communities of place and interest.

☛ **How do we build on the community's strengths?**

Community planning must begin with an

assessment of the diverse strengths of individuals, families, organizations, institutions, and the community as a whole. Even the poorest of communities have a broad range of assets and talents, often hidden, but always waiting to be tapped for building a stronger community. A variety of methods can be employed to identify and catalogue these assets, and successful communities begin building on what they can do rather than on what they don't have.

☛ **How do we match the skills and abilities of our labor force to the needs of local businesses?**

Both the standard of living and the quality of life entail building choices for community residents. Economic choices go beyond the opportunity to select among different types of employment among diverse types of employers within the community. Economic choices also include fostering an environment within the community that nurtures self-employment and choices for where consumer dollars are spent.

☛ **How do we manage the impacts of growth so as to, at a minimum, maintain the quality of life and even better, enhance the quality of life?**

As a society, we have a firm conviction that growth is good and that growth is inevitable. While the latter may be true, the former is not necessarily true. Growth can occur in ways that diminish the quality of life by disrupting social networks, limiting access to public spaces where people come together informally, altering the cognitive meaning of place, or producing negative environmental outcomes. It is imperative that as we think about encouraging and managing growth, we recognize both its potential positive and negative effects and work to enhance the positives and mitigate the negatives.

☛ **How do we incorporate the interests, concerns, and visions of all segments of the community into the planning process and then communicate the vision, goals, and strategies of the plan to the community?**

Within any community there are diverse interests, contrasting beliefs on the desired and the

undesired, different understandings of the meaning of the community, and alternative perspectives on the experienced history of the community. Planning efforts must engage all of these if they are to be seen as legitimate and representative of all the members of the community. Furthermore, citizens and community organizations must be informed of the outcomes of the planning process and provided opportunities to integrate the vision, goals and strategies of the plan into their own lives and activities.

**Benchmarks for Concern -- When Community Visioning or Planning Processes Might Fail.**

There are many side roads and speed bumps along the road to effective planning. It is easy to get diverted without even realizing that you have lost your direction. What are some signals that the planning process might have gone "off-track?"

1. There is too much emphasis on the final document.
2. The process is taking too long and people lose interest and momentum.
3. There is no building of capacity for team work and consensus-building and consensus decision-making.
4. Those doing the planning are not the ones who will be doing the implementing.
5. There is no responsible entity or owner of the process.
6. There are no clearly established expectations for the process or its outcomes.
7. There is difficulty in distinguishing between the vision (what we want to be) and the goals (how are we going to get there).

**The Five Outcomes of Community Planning that Characterize Vital Rural Communities**

If the strategic planning is successful, both as a product and a process, what are some outcomes that can be expected for the effort? Can careful planning make a difference? Research suggests that successful communities plan for something, and don't simply react to the current situation. Successful communities plan to avoid future problems, rather than spending all their time dealing with the problems that emerged from the failure to plan in the past. Effective planning is a necessary part of the foundation of vital rural communities, but planning alone is not sufficient. The other necessary ingredient is the passion for the vision and the commitment to work for the goals and objectives in the plan. Without both a plan of action built around accomplishing a vision and concerted community action, a plan is just so many words. So what can happen to rural communities who invest in a vision-based plan and concerted action?

- ☛ **Increased use of the skills, knowledge and abilities of local people.**
- ☛ **Improved community initiative, responsibility and adaptability.**
- ☛ **Strengthened relationships and communication, both within the community and between the community and organizations, agencies, and governments outside the community.**
- ☛ **Sustainable, healthy ecosystems with multiple community benefits.**
- ☛ **Appropriately diverse and healthy economies.**

The first three outcomes relate to how development happens. The last two outcomes relate to what happens when development succeeds. These outcomes demonstrate why effective planning is about both the product and the process. Both are needed to begin building for a better tomorrow.