

COMMUNITY VISIONING EVENTS

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When your planning commission writes or revises your municipal plan, you should be striving to produce a “document of consequence” (Source: Chandler, 1996) that addresses the issues of the present and illustrates a vision of your community for the next 20 or even 50 years. That term, vision, has become very popular in community planning over the past two decades. (Source: Helling, 1998.) Also increasing in popularity and frequency have been visioning events, sometimes referred to as community profiles, which bring large numbers of community members together to involve the public, facilitate collaboration, and provide you, the citizen planner, with a clear understanding of what should be in your municipal plan. If your commission feels that your town’s municipal planning process is in need of a community assessment and a sense of collaboration and representativeness, and you would like to ensure the public’s acceptance of your work, then you should consider organizing a community visioning event. (For examples of visioning events in Vermont communities, see boxes on pages 4, 5, and 6.)

A. Anticipated Outcomes

You will find that you can set both lofty and down-to-earth goals for a community visioning event. In fact, the collaborative process, itself, is as important an outcome as anything else. At the grandest level, visioning allows a community to bring people together to address otherwise insurmountable problems, to discuss an “ideal future state,” (Source: Helling, 1998.) and to prevent disenfranchisement and reactivity. (Sources: Chandler, 1996; Cudnohufsky, 1993.) More specifically, a visioning or profiling event may produce community initiatives, committees (see factsheet #6 on *Citizen Advisory Groups*), and even maps and other useful graphics. A complete and diverse list of visioning products identified both in literature and in example cases follows:

A Quick Look

- A. Anticipated Outcomes:** *Community values*—below
- B. Flow of Information:** *Two-way (simultaneous exchange)*—page 2
- C. Scope of Work:** *Extensive*—page 2
- D. Degree of Participant Interaction:** *Extensive*—page 3
- E. Degree of Citizen Empowerment:** *Intermediate: inclusion*—page 4

Intangibles

- broad-based community involvement
- community consensus
- improved communication and connections

Tangibles

- municipal plans
- visuals of town’s future—maps, buildouts, and designs
- reports, presentations, publicity

Assessment

- accounting of town’s background, strengths, and weaknesses
- lists of important community issues

Future work and momentum

- commitment and direction
- citizen committees and working groups
- community initiatives

Visioning is more effective at assessing community values than any other citizen participation strategy in this factsheet series. The higher amount of interaction and empowerment will allow your planning commission to uncover precisely what citizens base their preferences upon.

B. Flow of Information

Out of all of the citizen participation techniques covered by this series, the community visioning process allows for the most free and simultaneous exchange of information between planners and the public at large. Often these events will find planners and citizens working together in groups, conversing in an unstructured manner about important community issues. To start, every visioning or profiling event has at least four stages of information exchange activity:

1. Planners and facilitators set the stage, state the problem, present background information, etc.
2. Participants convene, together or broken into specific groups, and address the event's objectives.
3. Participants report back to the entire assembly and create a desired future/vision.
4. Participants devise a plan of action for bringing that future/vision to fruition.

Often the distinctions between these stages blur. A visioning process offers the face-to-face exchange that normally cannot be found in a survey and does not call for the strict rules of a public hearing. Event protocols are only needed insofar as what fairness and the management of a large group of people require. Total anarchy is certainly not recommended, but your planning commission should not anticipate having a large amount of control over the proceedings either.

Avoid these mistakes

After studying the failings of a visioning process in Atlanta, Amy Helling suggests three things for you to consider when preparing your own event in Vermont:

1. Avoid putting too much emphasis on the process of the event at the expense of setting good goals or you will limit the possibilities for planning and action.
2. Avoid "... requiring consensus (full agreement) without a means of stimulating compromise and change" necessary to bring different viewpoints together.
2. Find an effective equilibrium between the opinions of citizen participants and the expertise of planners.

(Source: Helling, 1998.)

The use of visuals

Visual information, such as maps and charts, is often used during visioning events and is highly recommended. Maps and hands-on models can facilitate the identification of special places in the community. (Source: Cudnohufsky, 1998.) This involves the planning commission or facilitator(s) making the maps and then having participants comment and even draw their ideas directly on them. The use of charts and maps in any reports or briefs that are handed out at the beginning of the event is also encouraged

C. Scope of Work

The community-wide benefits of a visioning activity are high, as is the level work required to make the event a reality. Your commission must consider the fact that this may not be an endeavor you should facilitate and coordinate alone. Cases of visioning or profiling events that have occurred without the help of a private or nonprofit consultant are hard to find. Logically the use of outside groups will drive the costs of the event up. A community visioning or profiling event can cost your town anywhere from \$500 to \$13,000. The costs can be affected by any number of factors:

- length of the event (anywhere from 1 day to 1½ days, to a series of gatherings over a period of several months)
- size of the audience and the inclusion of outside experts and stakeholders, in addition to the local community
- cost of printing, maps, markers, and other creative materials
- meals included (recommended)
- entertainment provided
- raffles and contests offered
- facility fees
- consultant fees

What to do, what to do

Below is a list of the possible steps and tasks that come with a visioning or profiling event. They are not all necessary for every visioning event, and a consultant can perform many of them for you:

Three months or more before the event

- Explore and bring on a consultant.
- Form a leadership or steering committee to guide the process.
- Conduct a pre-survey (if desired) for background and topic information.

- Reserve facilities.
- Book entertainment.
- Apply for any necessary permits (rare).
- Identify and contact experts and other stakeholders to include.
- Design and begin publicity.
- Acquire any prizes or raffle items.
- Create and print materials—maps, reports, presentations.
- Address the preparation of food and refreshments.

During the event

- Make introductions.
- During the opening presentation, hand out materials and cover the agenda.
- Define the problems and objectives to be addressed.
- Lay out the “ground rules” of the event.
- Organize into groups.
- Share any results and ideas.
- Set plan(s) of action and schedule meetings for any new committees.
- Enjoy meals, entertainment, and/or contests.

After the event

- Publicize the results of the event.
- Create reports.
- Convene any working groups or committees (see factsheet #6 on Citizen Advisory Groups).
- Conduct post-surveys and other supplementary activities.
- Begin implementation surrounding plan(s) of action envisioned during the event.

(See box, right, for a list of questions to ask when planning a community visioning event.)

D. Degree of Participant Interaction

By now it should be obvious that the degree to which citizens (and planners) are expected to interact with each other during a community visioning event is very high. Participants are asked to share their feelings on what makes their community special—and not so special—with others, often complete strangers. This is not always something that may come easily to members of the general public. The interactive and collaborative aspects of the event demand great attention. (See box on page 2: *Avoid these mistakes.*) Entertainment, contests, and food can bring an aspect of fun and enjoyment to the event, which will help participants “open up.” Providing many different ways for citizens to express their preferences and values (e.g., group reporting, maps, drawing) will increase the chances that everyone will happily take part. Even

the length of the event will help shy participants slowly become more comfortable over time. This is why the food aspect is so important; offering dinner as well as lunch helps keep people in a good mood and encourages them to stay until the very end of the event. Nevertheless, do not forget that participant interaction is an area where consultants and professional facilitators are needed to apply their experience to getting people involved and paying attention to group comfort levels.

One big, happy family?

Putting comfort level issues aside, there is still the potential for disagreement during a visioning event. The final vision produced at the end of the event must be formed from the many, often diverging, visions brought in by all of the participants at the beginning. When some personal priorities are dropped in order to focus on more community-wide issues, disappointment is possible. Here are some suggestions for dealing with disagreement and disappointment:

- **Kick the event off with agreement:** Before setting goals for the future, help the group reach a consensus about “the events of the past,” and then agree on community’s present situation. (*Source: White, 1996.*) This can be accomplished by sharing data, images, and anecdotes gathered by the planning commission at the beginning of the visioning event.
- **Do not expect consensus:** The weakness of some visioning events is that they place too much emphasis on consensual results, which only leads to frus-

Questions to ask

Helling suggests that your planning commission ask these seven questions when planning a visioning or profiling event:

1. Can we agree on the purpose of the effort?
2. When should the purpose be achieved?
3. What can we legitimately take credit for?
4. How can we reconcile conflicting facts (during the process)?
5. Will attendance be representative?
6. What is the cost of doing this?
7. What will the process add to planning?

(*Source: Helling, 1998.*)

Community Visioning Event Example: Randolph, VT

Vital Communities' Community Profile process was used in Randolph, VT, in January 2001. Approximately 150 people attended the visioning weekend entitled, "Our Town, Your Town." Planning for the event was guided by a local steering committee of as many as 40 community members.

The professional facilitators from Vital Communities were obtained with the help of a \$4,500 grant from the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Affairs.

During the event participants enjoyed the following:

- free lasagna and other food
- some local color provided by well-known speakers
- a town data presentation by the town's regional planning commission
- a barbershop quartet
- various door prizes

After ten hours of discussion, the following concerns emerged:

1. improving the downtown
2. getting more tourist dollars
3. keeping young people involved
4. more community information
5. development options around exit 4 on Interstate 89

By the end of the event, dates for committee meetings on each of these topics had been decided.

Comments from Community Profile participants:

"The quality of the discussion and enthusiasm was more than I could have hoped for. It was positive-oriented and respectful." —Julie Iffland, Randolph Planning Commission Chair

"Everybody felt like something could be accomplished, that they could get involved with a project, see a beginning and an end, and do something good for the town." —Rebecca Jennings, Randolph resident

(Source: Herald, 2001.)

tration when people do not agree in the time available. (Source: Helling, 1998.) Let participants know right from the start that some compromise may be expected of them.

- Explore the issue with your consultant: Professionals in this field should have good expertise in dealing with participant disagreement. In fact, one of first questions you ask prospective consultants should be how they deal with conflict during a visioning event.

Even while taking steps to limit disagreements, do not attempt to avoid conflicts without regard for their potential usefulness. Identifying where visions diverge is a good method for determining areas of future work and exploration. (Source: Cudnohufsky, 1993.)

E. Degree of Citizen Empowerment

A community visioning event gives a measure of planning power to the participants involved. The emphasis on accessibility to experts and shared group decisions lets citizens drive the process just as much as planners and facilitators. Even the agenda should be changeable to suit the needs of the audience and any new directions that may be suggested. Be cautious not to give participants full control over the proceedings, however. The preceding section on *Flow of Information* discusses the importance of good rules for the sake of fairness and large group management.

The exclusion of planning expertise will harm any action based on participant ideas. (Source: Helling, 1998.) Those brought in for their expertise must be given their due respect during the visioning process, but they should be prepared to defer from time to time to the preferences of the citizens. Architects and artists may find themselves sharing their pens and markers with many other participants. (Source: Cudnohufsky, 1993.)

Reflecting back on the commission

Your planning commission will also enjoy some reciprocal empowerment during a visioning event. Giving the community their chance to join together and develop alternative and desired futures will lend your commission the legitimacy needed to do your job well and with public acceptance. (Source: White, 1996.)

Resources for Citizen Planners

Organizations/Consultants*:

Your community's Regional Planning Commission (find it at www.vpic.info/rpcs).

The Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources, University of Vermont
Website: www.uvm.edu/envnr
Phone: (802) 656-4280

University of Vermont Extension
Offices throughout Vermont
Website: www.uvm.edu/extension
Phone: (802) 334-7325 or 1-866-260-5561 (toll-free)
Programs: Take Charge, ReCharge, and Vision to Action

Antioch New England Institute
Keene, NH
Website: www.anei.org
Phone: (603) 357-3122
Programs: Vision to Action and others

Cole Consulting, LC
Burlington, VT
Website: www.coleconsultinglc.com
Phone: (802) 660-3100

Vermont Council on Rural Development
Montpelier, VT
Website: www.vernet/~vcrd
Phone: (802) 828-6024
Program: Community Visit

Vital Communities
White River Jct, VT
Website: www.vitalcommunities.org
Phone: (802) 291-9100
Programs: Community Profile and others

Yellow Wood Associates, Inc.
St. Albans, VT
Website: www.yellowwood.org
Phone: (802) 524-6141

Also check out the Vermont Planning Information Center at www.vpic.info

* By no means is this a comprehensive list of consultants for community visioning events in Vermont. Please contact your regional planning commission for more information on consultants.

Community Visioning Event Example: South Burlington, VT

In 1999 the city of South Burlington began the Town Meeting Series with three primary objectives:

1. Engage the public.
2. Focus on Act 60 ramifications, residential/commercial development, and community identity issues.
3. Develop community-based strategic planning initiatives that can serve as a framework for the city's comprehensive plan update.

Approximately 200 community members took part, in one form or another, in a three-phase process led by Cole Consulting, LC:

Phase 1: Two community meetings, informational then action-oriented, dividing interested participants into three sub-groups; publication and distribution of two newsletters to inform and engage the public.

Phase 2: Nine weeks of action team meetings, using a variation of the Future Search method where groups move from their personal visions and aspirations toward a collective view of what is best for the entire community, ending with specific strategic objectives.

Phase 3: A final town meeting where results were presented, dialogue between action teams clarified positions and intent, and then prioritization of goals by town meeting participants took place in an affinity exercise.

Some of the prioritized recommendations were the following:

1. Increase density in the core areas (of the city).
2. Prepare and distribute a report on the impact of Act 60 on the community.
3. Adopt a 1-cent property tax earmarked for development and/or open space.
4. Stabilize the city tax rate to ensure affordable living.
5. Provide vehicles for greater citizen participation.

(Source: Cole Consulting, LC, 2000.)

Publications:

Vision to Action: Take Charge Too, a process designed by an interstate team of Extension agents. 2001. North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, Iowa State University, Ames, IA.

Series on dealing with consultants by Gregory C. Dale. 1998. *Planning Commissioners Journal*. Vols. 29, p. 18; 32, p. 8; and 33, p. 15.

Also, consult the primary information sources for this factsheet listed under *Reference Information*.

Community Visioning Event Example: Hardwick, VT

In March of 2003, the Hardwick Area Community Development Committee asked University of Vermont Extension to hold a “Take Charge” visioning event for Hardwick and surrounding towns. Over 45 people from area towns attended the day-long process.

The event began with remarks from Hardwick’s Town Manager and an area demographics presentation. Then Extension staff and volunteers from the area and all over Vermont facilitated the “Take Charge” process:

1. Event participants were asked to join one discussion group of their choice from a list including housing, youth issues, community cooperation, agriculture, recreation, downtown issues, and others. The number of volunteers for the youth issues topic was so high that two groups were created.
2. Each group met to produce three project ideas relating to their topic and to rate the priority, viability, and risk of each idea using a combined scale of 1 to 5 and a to d.
3. All participants were reassembled, and each group shared their three project ideas. Similar project ideas from different groups were consolidated.
4. The participants broke for lunch and reconvened.
5. All participants voted on the project ideas that had been identified, rated, and consolidated.
6. The voting lead to primary committees formed on recreation, youth issues, and economic development. Participants with strong feelings about agriculture were able to form their own committee, regardless of the voting.
7. Each of the four committees then met to elect a chairperson, clarify the group’s purpose, set goals and a plan of action, and decide on the next meeting date.
8. All participants then reconvened to report each committee’s progress.

A pattern of seeking alliance with pre-existing community groups emerged. Some of the first decisions made were the following:

- The event’s recreation committee decided to seek coordination with the existing Hardwick Recreation Committee.
- The youth committee decided on an alliance with the Hazen Union Student Council and/or the Hardwick Youth Council.
- The agriculture committee’s plan of action was to recruit more members.
- The economic development committee decided to ally itself with the Hardwick Chamber of Commerce and seek an update of the Hardwick municipal website.

(Source: *Gilder, 2003.*)

Reference Information

Primary information sources for this factsheet:

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Cole Consulting, LC. 2000. *South Burlington Town Meeting Forum Project Final Report*. Department of Planning and Zoning: South Burlington, VT, www.sburl.com/Planning.

Cudnohufsky, Walter. 1993. Dreaming the future: community vision planning. *Planning Commissioners Journal*: 11, pp. 4-7.

Gilder, Jo. 2003. Residents brainstorm on community goals. *The Hardwick Gazette*: March 20, 2003, pp. 1+.

Helling, Amy. 1998. Collaborative visioning: proceed with caution! *Journal of the American Planning Association*: 64 (3), pp. 335-349.

The Herald of Randolph Vermont (Herald). 2001. Randolph talks about its past and future. January 18, 2001, www.rherald.com.

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- Vermont Association of of Planning and Development Agencies, www.vpic.info/rpcs

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