

# Visioning

Visioning is a participatory planning process that seeks to describe an agreed-upon desired future for a community. To do this, citizens and stakeholders are actively engaged in discussions and exercises about alternative futures. Successful visioning processes lead to broad agreement about a preferred future, which in turn leads to implementation strategies involving changes in public policy and actions. Visioning exercises help communities begin to consciously create a future by advancing a shared sense of purpose while encouraging the leadership needed to fulfill that purpose.

## CREATING A COMMUNITY VISIONING PROCESS

Every community visioning process must be crafted to meet the unique needs of a particular community. A process that worked well in one place might not work well in another. A process that worked well 10 years ago in your community might not work well today. Visioning processes can generally be developed and run by any entity with resources and credibility. While many visioning processes are developed and run by planning agencies, there is nothing to prevent a broad-based nonprofit organization from undertaking visioning.

**Plan Your Process.** Visioning is often used as a consensus-building tool where residents have strong and opposing feelings about what needs to be done. Rapid population increases or losses, loss of jobs, inappropriate development, traffic, or any one of a number of other tough issues can evoke a civic identity crisis within a community as diverse interests work to assert themselves. Community visioning can help cities, towns, counties, and regions come to terms with such change through the identification of mutually agreed values and aspirations. In the face of tough, contentious community problems, a visioning process can smooth the way for greater political consensus.

**Set the Framework.** As part of the design of a community visioning process, at least two key questions should be answered:

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1. What is your visioning time frame? Most successful visioning projects attempt to set a time horizon between 20 and 25 years in the future; occasionally a 40 or 50 year time frame is used.
2. What is the overall focus? Most communities conduct broad visioning exercises focusing on the full spectrum of community issues, perhaps as a kick-off to work on a new comprehensive plan. Others may focus on a somewhat narrower range of subjects, such as economic development, urban redevelopment, or placemaking.

**Allow Enough Time.** Adequate time is needed to prepare for community meetings, gather data, conduct research, draft materials, recruit participants, and prepare facilitators. Adequate time is also needed to carry out the visioning process. While a community meeting and a draft of the vision can be done in a single day or workshop-style event, it is not recommended. In reality, most communities require a fuller, more deliberative extended dialogue in order to create their vision. While most processes are designed to run for a few months to a year, do not create such a long process that you wear people out and cause them to lose interest.

**Take It On the Road; Vary Time of Day.** Planners should consider taking the process to different locations at different times of day in order to reach more members of the community. Engaging the public in more socially or ethnically diverse communities may add time or complexity to the process in order to address linguistic or access barriers. While the action planning phase of the process may be somewhat less participatory, identifying parties responsible for implementing and monitoring the vision plan can still require significant time and effort.

**Be Inclusive and Collaborative.** Visioning is a participatory, collaborative, and consensus-driven process. The most successful visioning efforts involve all segments of the community, including those that seldom attend public meetings—such as youth, low-income and minority populations, and the disabled. Others that should be considered for inclusion are developers, the design community, business owners, environmentalists, historic preservation advocates, housing groups, faith-based organizations, utilities, transit providers, and many more.

**Be Prepared to Share Authority.** In most visioning processes community leaders give up some of their authority in favor of a decision-making process that is somewhat outside the traditional power structure. A strong sense of community ownership results when community participants create the vision statement. Visioning processes can be a stepping stone for new political leadership as natural leaders become inspired and gain confidence.

**Celebrate Your Successes.** Periodic successes during the process, even small ones, should be publicized and celebrated in order to maintain momentum.

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Community members work together to draft a vision statement for their city. (left) Visioning exercises such as this can be conducted during a community workshop. (right)

to maintain forward momentum and retain interest.

## TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS

Citizens have traditionally participated in visioning exercises primarily through public meetings. Increasingly, this model of engagement is being augmented to save resources, reach out to more diverse audiences, and take advantage of new technologies. Several possible visioning techniques and tools, including those made possible by technological advances, are described here.

**Charrettes and Community Workshops.** A charrette is a relatively short and intense collaborative process for designing projects, planning communities, and building consensus. Charrettes are particularly suited for visioning because the primary objective involves the public in developing a plan that emerges from community interaction rather than top-down, professional prescription. Charrettes often deal with design-oriented physical problems, such as maintaining the aesthetic character of a neighborhood or planning a transit-oriented development. In that sense, they are appropriate for visioning efforts focused on physical planning or placemaking issues, but can also be useful for community-wide visioning efforts as well. Community workshops can be very similar to charrettes in terms of collaboration and consensus building. However, they often have a broader focus that examines issues beyond physical design, including jobs and housing, health and safety, education, arts, and culture. Workshops can be run as a series over an extended period of time.

**Technology.** Visioning processes often use technology to help the community understand the consequences of alternative courses of action, including the results of taking no action. Geographic information systems (GIS) that produce customized maps, digital imagery, and multimedia systems to allow interactive training, education, and instant polling are all examples of how technology has facilitated visioning exercises. GIS is particularly well suited for running “what-if” scenarios to show the effects of hypothetical public policy decisions involving zoning, transportation, and economic development strategies. Interactive websites have also led to dramatic improvements in communication and exchange between those running visioning processes and the public. They allow local officials to communicate complex issues through interactive visual aids to a large number of people who may not be willing or able to attend a community meeting. Online survey software also allows the internet to be used to gather and analyze public input as part of a wider public outreach effort.

**Vision Poster.** It is often useful to create a vision poster or other tangible representation of the visioning process. This can help ensure the community's vision is accurately represented, achieving buy-in to the vision, and communicating the community's vision to potential developers and other stakeholders. The poster may include a written vision statement, a map showing desired land uses and other features, images or sketches that reflect the community's vision, and other important aspects of the vision, such as key action steps.

## SEEING THE VISION THROUGH

**Implementing the Vision.** A successful community-based visioning process can create the foundation for other efforts such as plan making or public investment. It can help build community ownership of the vision, which can lead to greater likelihood of implementation. Sometimes the community may be skeptical about whether any element of its vision will actually be implemented. If visioning is to be effective, the creative and collaborative aspects of the visioning process should be balanced by realistic goals and objectives, grounded in action plans or benchmarking systems. A visioning process should be accompanied by an accurate assessment of the financial feasibility of reaching the goals articulated in the vision and must be supported by local institutional strength and private sector investment capacity.

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