Visioning is a community activity intended to produce a common vision, accompanied by goals, for the future. Ideally, it is broadly based and highly inclusive in order to achieve, if not consensus, then at least widespread buy-in among the various stakeholders and subgroups within the community. Achieving such a vision, however, is seldom easy and more often involves some hard work and dedication on the part of community leaders and citizens alike. In a post-disaster situation, it is particularly difficult because research has long shown that most residents already have an important vision of the rebuilt community, one that closely resembles the community with which they have long been familiar. Achieving a vision that includes substantial improvements that enhance resilience as part of the process of long-term recovery requires effective leadership, solid direction of the process, and a well-considered framework for expressing the resulting ideas and relating them to existing comprehensive plan policies, if possible.

**KEY POINT #1**

*Effective visioning may help expand the window of opportunity to marshal support for change after a disaster.*

**KEY POINT #2**

*Achieving a meaningful vision to enhance resilience typically requires effective direction and a solid framework for transforming ideas into action.*

**KEY POINT #3**

*The vision of the future of the community should somehow relate to policies already in place or added to the existing comprehensive and other plans the community has adopted.*

**KEY POINT #4**

*Building consensus and creating buy-in requires the inclusion of and full consultation with disadvantaged and minority populations.*
After a significant disaster, the survivors face numerous needs that must often be met within relatively short time lines (Olshansky, Hopkins, and Johnson 2012). Electric power, water, and communications must be restored. Schools and businesses must be reopened in order to restore some semblance of normal economic and social life. And many need temporary housing and eventually restoration or repair of permanent housing. And this is almost always not all. Developing a vibrant vision for a more resilient community must compete with these priorities.

Research has long shown that, in the absence of some larger vision for the future, residents of disaster-stricken communities already have an operative vision of the rebuilt community in their own minds, and it almost invariably closely resembles the community they already knew (Schwab et al., 1998; Geipel 1982). It is only a matter of time before residents and businesses begin to rebuild, and the only way to gain their patience is to present and win acceptance for an alternative that they will perceive as improving their lives and capable of achievement within a reasonable time frame. If that new vision has somehow come from within the community and from respected leadership, the task of reorienting people’s aspirations becomes somewhat easier, although there is always likely to be some dissent.

For example, after the 1993 Midwest floods, the city of Arnold, Missouri, found itself in an advantageous position because it had already developed the idea for a greenway along the Mississippi and Meramec rivers. The city sits at the confluence of these two rivers in an area south of St. Louis. When a citizen commission prepared the greenway plan in 1991, it had no idea, of course, that major flooding just two years later would accelerate the implementation of its ambitious goals. The group had envisioned a long process of acquiring flood-prone properties in the floodplains, perhaps over 20 years, as money became available. The plan made it possible, however, for Arnold to acquire Hazard Mitigation Grant Program funds to implement the vision and move the plan forward by decades, turning flood-prone residential areas into green space, improving riverine habitat for wildlife, creating new recreational opportunities for hikers, bicyclists, and others, and drastically reducing the flood risks in Arnold (Schwab 1998, Ch. 8). The vision for the greenway, adopted before the disaster, displaced what otherwise might well have been a desire to rebuild what was lost and thus recreate the vulnerabilities that already existed. Instead, Arnold became more resilient in the face of future disasters.

Not every community will be so fortunate, or so visionary, prior to a disaster, but it is also possible for trusted leaders to move quickly to offer alternative visions or to support those that bubble up from community discussions. Within weeks after their town was devastated by a May 4, 2007, tornado, citizens of Greensburg, Kansas, were seizing upon the idea of putting “the green back in Greensburg” by rebuilding a community that would rely primarily upon renewable energy and rebuild to LEED standards (Schwab 2014, 162). Likewise, within five days of the June 13, 2008, flood that devastated downtown Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the city council had adopted a set of visionary goals for the recovery that set the tone for the discussions that followed to determine what kind of future residents wanted for their city (Prosser 2013).

Visioning does not simply happen by accident. It requires ideas, and it requires broad-based public discussion of those ideas. The larger the community, the greater is the need for a well-considered, well-organized structure for the process to ensure positive results. It is very easy for matters to go awry, particularly because many people will still be grieving personal or material losses as well as suffering the strains of temporary or permanent displacement, loss of livelihoods, and disruptions in the life of the community. The idea that the disaster may contain a silver lining...
The vision of the future of the community should somehow relate to policies already in place or added to the existing comprehensive and other plans the community has adopted.
Building consensus and creating buy-in requires the inclusion of and full consultation with disadvantaged and minority populations.

It should be small surprise to anyone that economically, socially, and physically disadvantaged members of the community are more likely to suffer adverse consequences in a disaster than others. The Florida guidance lists several such categories of concern, including low-income people, the homeless, children, the elderly, and racial and ethnic minorities. It also notes gender differences that may disadvantage women disproportionately (Florida DCA/Florida DEM 2010, 84–85).

All of these groups require some attention devoted to special needs, and the best way to ensure those needs are addressed is to conduct a planning process that ensures their inclusion and that their insights are valued. Without the involvement of special needs populations, planners and public officials may well miss a number of recovery-related issues of significance, including access to insurance, special physical challenges for the elderly and handicapped, and other factors. For example, Greenberg (2014) makes the case that senior citizens merit special attention in disasters, citing experiences from Sandy and other events, and that their numbers are growing as our nation’s demographics change. The Florida guidance also takes note of the likely increased need for mental health assistance after disasters, and that most mental health services are not geared to the kinds of stress associated with disaster experiences (Florida DCA/Florida DEM 2010, 90). Finally, minorities and low-income persons are more likely to be exposed to health-related pollution after disasters, leading to significant gaps in environmental justice (Florida DCA/Florida DEM 2010, 92).

The lack of inclusion of and full consultation with disadvantaged and minority populations can hinder the trust in government needed for recovery planning to succeed and cripple recovery management efforts, a problem all too much in evidence following Hurricane Katrina (Olshansky and Johnson 2010; Bates and Swan 2010). The problem, however, is hardly isolated to that one disaster, but is an ongoing challenge for almost
all communities to one degree or another. The willingness to engage those who are most likely to suffer the adverse impacts of disasters means inherently a willingness to learn what they need and potentially to uncover needs that have often remained hidden from public view. The benefit for the planning process lies in proactively addressing problems that otherwise often fester and undermine public confidence in a positive outcome, let alone one that reflects a positive vision for enhanced community resilience in the face of future disasters. Effective visioning necessarily includes positive outcomes for those who can most benefit from that enhanced resilience.

RESOURCES


