

Community Planning

- Do you feel your community lacks direction or vision?
- Is there a lack of community participation?
- Do you feel your community is not going anywhere?

If so, community planning may help you overcome these obstacles.

What Is Planning?

According to Webster's Dictionary, planning is the formulation of a detailed scheme, program, or method worked out beforehand to accomplish or attain an object (community development, in this case).

Why Plan?

A community plans:

- to improve economic development;
- to focus its efforts for change;
- to establish long-term goals;
- to unite and incorporate the community.

The community planning process can be used by anyone who has an interest in improving his/her community. This includes concerned citizens, developers, students, commissioners, public officials, church and school boards, and others. All those who are willing to organize, participate and make a change in their communities can be involved in the community planning process.

Preparatory Steps

Do a Community Profile

A community profile is an analysis of conditions in the community. By creating a community profile (also called community evaluation and analysis), you will better understand your community's social, economic, and human resource base and its problems and opportunities. The analysis should use current information about economic trends, natural resources, and demographics. This is helpful before entering the planning cycle.

Form a Planning/Steering Committee

The planning/steering committee will manage all aspects of the planning process. It will be in charge of guiding the research, setting goals, and directing the work of various project subcommittees. A planning committee is usually composed of various interest groups, local organizations, government officials, local businesses, schools, churches, universities, and other partners.

Hold Organizational Meetings

In organizational meetings, all sectors of the community come together to reach consensus on goals and processes. These meetings allow discussion of all concerns and hopes. Discussing the development of a community plan can unite a community and establish a bond between the community and public officials.

Form Task Forces

Task forces or project subcommittees are assembled to research different subjects, brainstorm, hold community/town hall meetings, and meet with selected experts.

Hire a Consultant

If you feel you lack the knowledge to plan on your own, consider hiring a consultant. The consultant can help guide and develop the community-planning process, organize the steering committee, facilitate town meetings, advise task forces, and conduct volunteer

training. However, some consultants may not be familiar with the unique circumstances in your community. To be successful, communities need to make sure that they remain in charge of their own planning process and employ the consultant in an advisory capacity.

The Planning Cycle

Assess Your Current Situation

Develop a profile of the social, physical, economic, environmental, and human resource assets and conditions of the community. Numerous methods have been developed to achieve this. One approach is called "New Ideas". This is a simple approach that examines problems and develops new ways to improve or correct them. Another method, SWOT Analysis, is a systematic approach that examines a community's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

Select and Analyze Priority Issues (Goals)

Priority-issue selection and analysis helps in narrowing the scope of the plan. A priority issue can be broken down into a vision statement and a mission statement. The vision statement is a community's ultimate goal for themselves, a shared view of community development. A mission statement is the concrete expression of the vision statement. It will explain how to achieve the vision statement.

Plan the Details

Detail planning deals with getting results and seeing who is going to do what, when, and how. It includes identifying key tasks, prioritizing activities, and establishing control mechanisms such as benchmarks, reporting, deadlines, and quality and cost controls.

Get Commitment to the Action Plan

Commitment to the action plan is essential if the plan is to function. One can assume that the plan can work if there is commitment by community leaders to create a long-term strategy statement, set annual objectives and conduct strategic benchmarking. The long-term strategy statement describes all the approaches, methods, and strategies required to fulfill the community's objectives during the implementation process. The annual objectives serve as building blocks toward the final outcome. Strategic benchmarks are standards for measurement used throughout the implementation process to help your community evaluate its progress toward reaching the desired end results.

Implement the Action Plan

The implementation of the action plan is the substance of the planning cycle. If this part of the cycle fails, so does the whole plan. One can implement the plan by establishing an oversight team, establishing community action teams, creating implementation tools and by learning how to manage change. An oversight team should be composed of local officials and community leaders and may include other key advisors such as the State Rural Development Coordinator. Community action teams are the groups of people who actually do the work. They carry out all the strategic goals and work with the oversight team. Execution tools are used to observe and monitor implementation of benchmarks and progress. The tools are a form of accountability. Yearly planning and diaries are good ways to log progress and are often used as execution tools.

Bring Closure to the Plan

Not all plans come to an end. The best plans are constantly being updated and keep growing. Evaluation and feedback are means for achieving closure by acknowledging progress publicly and deciding how the plan needs to be changed. Evaluations and feedback can help the steering committee to learn from its mistakes and improve future plans.

Additional Resources

- *The Small Town Planning Handbook* by Thomas L. Daniels, John W. Keller and Mark B. Lapping, American Planning Association
- *The Quality Community Process Guidebook* by Tennessee Valley Authority
- *The Community Leadership Series* by the Saskatchewan Committee on Rural Area Development

Additional copies of this Technote are available from the Office of Community Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Room 701, 300 7th Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20024 (1-800-645-4712). Copies may also be obtained at

<http://ocd.usda.gov>