



Using Visioning in a Comprehensive Planning Process

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Communities are increasingly using visioning as a public participation technique. Its purpose is to build consensus regarding a community's common future. Visioning is a useful and accepted part of the comprehensive planning process.

"A vision is like a lighthouse, which illuminates rather than limits, giving direction rather than destination."

—James J. Mapes, *Foresight First*

What is visioning?

Visioning is a process by which a community defines the future it wants. Through public involvement, communities identify their purpose, core values and vision of the future.

Visioning:

- Emphasizes community assets rather than needs.
- Assesses community options and opportunities on the basis of shared purposes and values.
- Stresses early and continuous public involvement in the process.
- Acts as a stand-alone process or part of a comprehensive planning process.

TYPES OF PARTICIPANTS

- Economic sectors: agriculture, manufacturing, services, tourism, others.
- Organizations: art and culture, unions, churches, environmental, youth, others.
- Local government: elected officials, police, transportation, housing, others.
- Personal characteristics: age, ethnicity/race, sex, income level, homeowners/renters, others.
- Political views: conservative/liberal/moderate and pro- and anti-growth

Figure 1. Steps in a visioning process

Step 1 ➔	Step 2 ➔	Step 3 ➔	Step 4 ➔	Step 5
Get started	Community visioning workshop	Establish task forces	Thematic visioning workshops	Community feedback workshop

A visioning exercise can bring a community together as people recognize their shared values and purposes, and articulate a shared vision of their community. The vision serves to lay out what the community should look like physically, socially and environmentally in 5, 10 or 20 years. A visioning exercise creates a sense of ownership in community residents to the extent that they want to see their vision come to fruition over a period of years.

A consensus-building technique

Within a comprehensive planning process, visioning can be used as a consensus-building technique. Visioning facilitates the development of an effective comprehensive plan by focusing attention, "on how to organize collective thought and action within an inter-organizational network in which no one person, group, organization or institution is fully in charge."

Multi-jurisdictional initiatives, for example, may benefit by using visioning to build consensus on core values and to help people realize that despite differences they share many of the same long-term goals.

INGREDIENTS OF A VISION STATEMENT

- Positive, present-tense language
- Qualities that provide the reader with a feeling for the region's uniqueness
- Inclusiveness of the region's diverse population
- A depiction of the highest standards of excellence and achievement
- A focus on people and quality of life
- A stated a time period

Source: The National Civic League Press

Many communities suffer from divisive perspectives involving past issues and policies. It is difficult for a local government to spearhead a comprehensive planning process when a community is divided into factions. Visioning can be a way to establish consensus on general beliefs and values. However, if there is too much distrust (for example, to the point where community leaders and others avoid talking to each other), a different technique, such as community mediation, will be needed to bring people together.

What are the results of visioning?

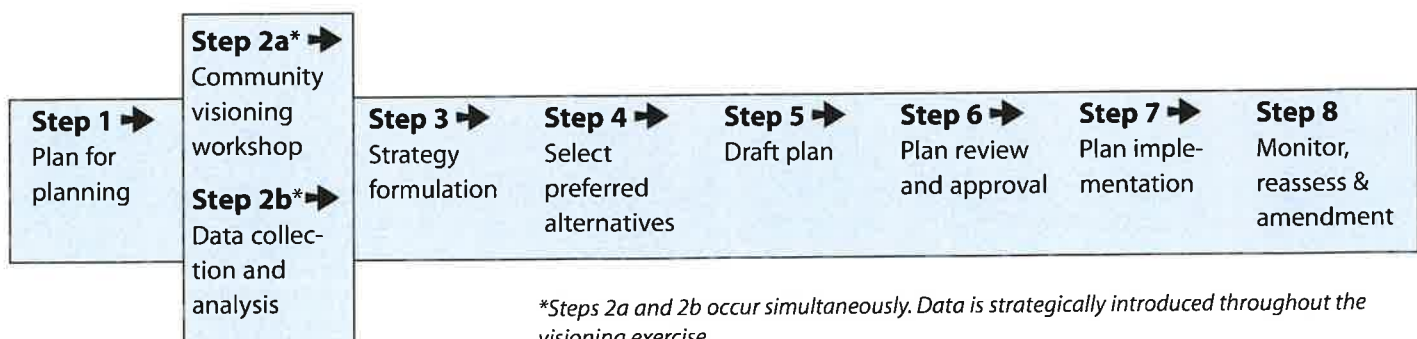
The results of visioning can include:

- An overall community vision statement
- Thematic vision statements that can address all the elements of the comprehensive planning law ("Smart Growth"), such as housing, transportation and natural resources. (A visioning process must remain focused on visioning and not drift towards too much detail or specific solutions.)
- Better communication lines developed within the community.
- Context for consideration and adoption of long-range functional goals and related policies.
- A "sounding board" during inventory and analysis of data. Asking how trends and other data fit into your community's vision can spur a more useful discussion about it.
- Grounded discussions and decisions when devising land use criteria and resulting policies.
- "Human glue" when naysayers challenge the adoption of your community's comprehensive plan.

How can visioning be incorporated into a comprehensive planning process?

There are at least two approaches that can be used to bring visioning into the planning process. Many communities develop a vision at the beginning of the planning process that acts as a guide for the rest. Conducting visioning at the beginning of the process builds a foundation upon which to build and evaluate the rest of the process. Citizens feel they are in control and that their input is meaningful when visioning is conducted early on. This implies, however, that planners, politicians and others must give up control of the results and trust that citizens will develop a vision (and goals and objectives) that are both useful and appropriate for that community.

Figure 2. Visioning parallels comprehensive planning process



**Steps 2a and 2b occur simultaneously. Data is strategically introduced throughout the visioning exercise.*

Adapted from Mark Hilliker, Citizen Participation In-Service, March 2000

In contrast, some places develop a vision after the issues step in the planning process. This type of vision acts more like a mission statement, but nevertheless can guide the rest of the process. In this model the planners and politicians are maintaining some control over the process. The risk is that citizens will not trust the results of the plan and more effort will be needed by planners to ensure trust and ownership of the resulting plan.

Visioning efforts try to maximize the number of people participating in them by establishing effective participation strategies such as press releases, advertisements and invitations to a broad set of community stakeholders. No one is excluded from visioning sessions and everyone has an equal voice. Representation from all parts of a community is necessary. In essence, visioning acts as the "human glue" to the planning process by getting a broad spectrum of people from a community involved and excited about their community's future.



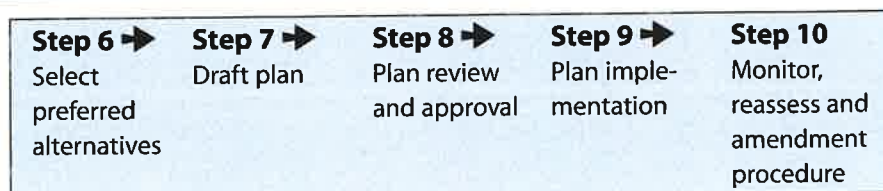
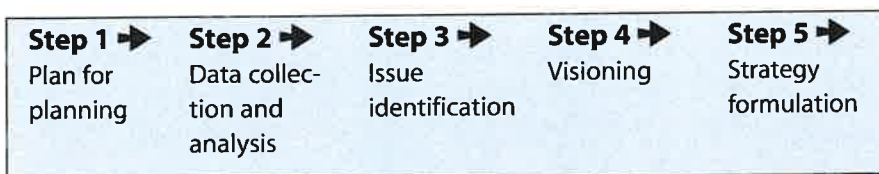
Preparing for the visioning process

Before adopting visioning, your community should ask a few questions:

- **Why should our community use visioning?** If your community already has a good sense of where it is going, you don't need to go through a visioning process. However, if you hear lots of grumbling and disagreements about growth and change, perhaps a vision can help look at these issues carefully.

- **Do we need visioning for all aspects of our community?** If your community feels it has a good sense of where it is headed except for one area, a visioning exercise is possible for only that one area. For example, many communities continue to experience problems with declining downtowns. After trying different methods for revitalization, people aren't satisfied with the results. Visioning can be used to define a focused plan for downtown.
- **Should we always use visioning in a comprehensive planning process?** There are situations when visioning is not a useful tool. Visioning does not make sense if a community is absorbed in a narrowly defined crisis, or if stakeholders have no faith in the value of public dialogue. In addition, if your community has a well-developed sense of itself, and land use issues are not overly contentious, a visioning process may not be useful.

Figure 3. Visioning as a step with comprehensive planning process



Adapted from Mark Hilliker, Citizen Participation In-Service, March 2000

Advantages and disadvantages of visioning

There are several **advantages** to using visioning in your comprehensive planning process.

Visioning:

- Serves as a catalyst. It can bring community residents together to talk about their community in new ways. After visioning, community residents often are motivated to get more involved in their community.
- Creates excitement in community residents about the planning process. People like to know that they can be a part of their community in meaningful ways.
- Keeps the process on track. Because a vision statement(s) have been created, community residents can make sure that the rest of the planning process addresses the issues raised from the visioning exercise and addresses how to achieve the vision.
- Keeps implementation moving forward. Again, because of the excitement created around the visioning process and the outcomes of visioning, community residents are motivated to keep track of the actions proposed to achieve the vision they helped to create.

There are also a few **disadvantages** to visioning.

Visioning can:

- Add to the cost of the planning process. Because visioning is an intensive public participation process, it can involve much organization. However, many planning or land use committees are willing to work on organizing visioning workshops because they recognize their importance in the overall planning process.
- Create expectations. While the advantage of visioning is that it generates excitement and serves as a catalyst for the rest of the process, it can also create expectations that the local government cannot fulfill. It is important to create short-term goals and objectives so that people can begin to see results fairly quickly.
- Depend on a facilitator. It is difficult to conduct visioning without a group of facilitators to make the process a successful one. However, many communities have trained a local planning or land use committee to facilitate visioning workshops. This has proved not only to be successful, but the committee walks away feeling its members have learned a new skill and have accomplished something meaningful.

Summary

Visioning is a useful tool in comprehensive planning. It can easily be included in the comprehensive planning process and can occur parallel to data collection and analysis. Vision statements provide a framework or hook upon which to hang ideas and information. Without an overall vision, gathering data and creating goals and objectives are often unconnected to anything meaningful. Thus, visioning provides a rationale and the framework for more meaningful questions. Finally, visioning can assist a community in identifying important and current issues, whether the debate centers on cell towers, gravel pits, or urban sprawl and farmland preservation.



References

For more detailed information on visioning, you can get copies of **Building Our Future: A Guide to Community Visioning** (G3708) by Gary Green, Anna Haines and Stephen Halebsky from Cooperative Extension Publications at the address on the back page. If you would like assistance on community visioning, please contact either Gary Green at 608-262-9532 or Anna Haines at 715-346-2386.

Green, Gary Paul, Timothy O. Borich, Robert D. Cole, David L. Darling, Connie Hancock, Stuart H. Huntington, Mary Simon Leuci, Bill McMaster, David B. Patton, Frederick Schmidt, Anne Heinz Silvis, Roger Steinberg, Dewey Teel, Jerry Wade, Norman Walzer, and Julie Stewart. 2001. *Vision to Action: Take Charge Two*. Ames, IA: North Central Regional Center for Rural Development (Report No. RRD 182). This manual provides materials for conducting a community visioning project and developing action plans. The project synthesized the "best practices" from several Midwestern states. The manual is available from the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development.

Moore, Carl M., Gianni Longo and Patsy Palmer. 1999. Visioning. pp. 557–589 in *The Consensus Building Handbook*, edited by Lawrence Susskind.

Oregon Visions Project. 1998. *A Guide to Community Visioning: Hands-On Information for Local Communities*. This guide provides a comprehensive approach to visioning; suggestions for designing and implementing an effective visioning process; ideas and examples for using graphics in visioning; and contacts and resources for finding additional information. Information on the manual can be obtained from Steven Ames, Chair APA Oregon Visions Project, 325 SE 14th Avenue, Portland, Oregon 97214 (503-235-3000) (scames@aol.com).

Okubo, Derek. National Civic League. 1997. *The Community Visioning and Strategic Planning Handbook*. Denver Colorado. This publication is used widely in helping communities design, develop and facilitate community-wide planning projects. It is especially useful on drawing a broad group of participants into the process. The publication is available from the National Civic League, 1445 Market Street, Suite 300, Denver, Colorado. (303-571-4343) www.ncl.org/ncl ncl@ncl.org.

Peterson, Mark. *Harnessing the Power of Vision: Ten Steps to Creating a Strategic Vision and Action Plan for Your Community*. Little Rock, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service. This widely used manual outlines a ten-step process to developing a strategic vision and action plan in a community. It also provides wonderful overheads and references. It is available from the Economic and Community Development Section, University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service, PO Box 391, Little Rock, AR 72203 (501-671-2072).

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania. *Planning for the Future: A Handbook on Community Visioning*. Harrisburg, PA. This manual provides a process for community visioning, detailed instructions for each session, workshop agenda, resources, references and other information that communities can use to design a visioning process. Available from The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 212 Locust Street, Suite 604, Harrisburg, PA 17101 (717-787-9555) www.ruralpa.org info@ruralpa.org.

Example vision statement from City of Lodi

Vision for Our Community: Lodi 2025

In 2025, Lodi is a community that links the future with the past by recognizing the importance of history in growth and development. The center of our small town is a pedestrian-friendly main street that celebrates historical architecture, while our waterways and surrounding vistas nourish the health and beauty of the valley.

Land Use and Growth Management

Our community is committed to planning and community involvement in directing its future growth to meet the needs of our residents. Our community encompasses a mix of distinct neighborhoods and districts, and by encouraging compatible land uses within those districts, we are maintaining our unique small-town character, protecting natural resources, and promoting sustainable development and growth.

Downtown Revitalization

Our revitalized downtown promotes a pedestrian-friendly retail and government center that maintains and enhances our city's historic and architectural integrity.

Business Retention and Expansion

Our community fosters business development and recognizes the importance of a balanced business district with retail shops, services, facilities, and light industries.

Housing and Historic Preservation

Our exemplary community is committed to historic preservation, conservation of neighborhood character, beautification of residential settings, and provision of housing that meets the needs of diversified social and economic groups. Our historic homes provide a bridge from the past to the future and enhance the beauty and warmth of the community. There is widespread public awareness of historic preservation programs and ongoing restoration of Lodi's historic homes, businesses, parks and transportation systems. Every home in the historic districts has been restored to its original condition.

New residential development is carefully designed with the preservation of natural settings and resources — woods, creeks and wetlands. Neighborhoods are picturesque with period lighting, fencing and walkways. Our long-range planning has thwarted sprawl by providing development that is sympathetic to, and respectful of, the topography, the environment and changing societal demographics. Ample housing is available to meet the needs of different economic groups and the desires and requirements of residents across the life span.

Community Services and Public Works

Our community services and facilities maintain their functionality, address the needs of our diverse population, and adapt and change as the community grows. Services include programs that promote a neighborly atmosphere that reflects the concerns of individuals and families in our community.

Natural Resources

Our community is situated in scenic Lodi valley surrounded by tree-covered bluffs and bisected by the pristine, trout-filled Spring Creek, which travels through Lodi Marsh, known across the state as home to abundant wildlife. An enlightened community advocates for watershed and shoreline preservation, maintenance and improvement of its existing vistas, parks, trees and green spaces, and managed growth in areas suitable for development. Much of the above can be attributed to fact that the Lodi school system is a national model for environmental education in the tradition of Aldo Leopold's concept of community and John Muir's principles of living in harmony with the environment.

Parks and Recreation

Our citizens and government are committed to Lodi's natural heritage. We cooperate to enhance and maintain our beautiful parks and other natural green spaces while providing quality recreational activities and equipment for the benefit of the entire community. A green corridor connects Lodi, both bonding the community together and linking it with the surrounding natural environment.



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