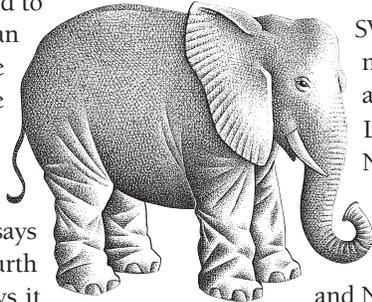


# Community Self-Assessment:

## A WAY OF LOOKING AT THE WHOLE PICTURE

by Jim Segedy, Ph.D., FAICP,  
and Lisa Hollingsworth-Segedy, AICP

There's an old story you may have heard about five blind men and an elephant. Each one is led to the elephant and allowed to touch it. The first blind man touches the elephant's side and thinks it is a wall. The second touches the elephant's leg and guesses that it is a tree trunk. The third touches the tail and says it feels like a rope. The fourth touches the trunk and says it is a large snake. The fifth touches the elephant's ear and guesses it is a piece of carpet. Each man makes a completely valid assessment based on his observations, but none could tell that what they were touching was actually an elephant.



SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats),

LAND (Local Assets, Needs, and Demands),

SWOON (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Obstacles, and Needs),

SWINE (Strengths, Weaknesses, Issues, Needs, and Expectations), and  
COW (Community Opportunity Workshop).

We're not going to spend time on the fine distinctions among these techniques. The key point is that however you choose to spell it, this type of self-assessment exercise will equip you with a framework for gathering input about:

- which features or programs in your city or town people view as most important,
- which need improvement, and
- which are working just fine and should be left alone.

Our community plans are a lot like the elephant, and frequently we're the blind ones. We know some of the parts, but sometimes we're so close to a single part of it that we can't envision what the entire plan will accomplish in the future.

How do you as a planning commissioner make sure that your plan makes sense as a whole, and clearly guides decision-makers to choices that create a healthy, balanced community?

You may have definite opinions about the positives and negatives of your community. Chances are, everyone in your community has an opinion too, and there may be some disparities among them. Undertaking a "community self-assessment exercise" will help you capture the information you need to begin reaching consensus and enable you to develop an effective plan that people will rely on, a plan that is more than a series of discrete, unrelated parts.

Some of you will be familiar with one or more of the following acronyms used to describe methods of community-based self-assessment:

### Two Simple Questions

We have found that there are two simple questions that will do a pretty good job of identifying what needs to be worked on in your community:

When Aunt Mary comes to town – where **DO** you take her?

When Aunt Mary comes to town – where **DON'T** you take her?

The answer to those questions will tell you exactly what needs attention. For those places you would take her to, consider what elements make them attractive. For those places you would avoid, consider why that's the case and if there are lessons you can draw.

So... what does a self-assessment involve? There's no one answer, and it will depend on what you as planning commissioners (if you're taking the lead) think makes most sense for your community. But allow us to briefly discuss some things you might want to consider.

### 1. Use Maps to See Where Things Stand

Mapping is a valuable self-assessment tool, because it can help you see where your community can accommodate additional growth.

If you have a geographic information system, this is the perfect application for it, but if you don't, just get out your markers and some tracing paper and go to work. Superimpose your critical community services (water, sewer, roads, fire stations, schools, etc.) on a map of your community to see where your infrastructure is currently located. Be sure to get the input of your engineer and/or public works director on these maps so you have a realistic picture of service areas. Your targeted growth areas should stand out as those areas that already have immediate access to services. Your secondary growth areas might be where services could be extended in a cost-effective manner.

If you don't have the infrastructure that you need to support expected growth, then your map becomes a very important self-assessment tool to demonstrate that your community is not yet ready to grow, and (if you want growth) that you need to start planning for new infrastructure.

### 2. Make Some Comparisons

Look at the percentage of land in your city or town allocated to various types of land uses. Do a quick inventory of the types of businesses you have in your community. Are you over-supplied in one type of business while under-served in others?

How does your community's land use allocation compare to communities around you? "In comparing your position, make sure to identify both the positive and negative imbalances," notes Brian Stumpf, Director of Community Development for the Indianapolis-based Estridge Companies. "It is a common tendency to focus on what your community does not have while ignoring the assets and advantages the community does have."

A planning commission that Lisa worked with several years ago heard over and over from the public that there wasn't enough commercial land in the community. To assess this, the planning commission used a simple land-use ratio analysis and a business inventory. These techniques revealed that the community was overstocked in convenience stores/gas stations compared to other similar communities. To its surprise, the commission also found that the amount of land zoned for commercial use was already more than double the projected demand for the next 20 years. Based on this analysis, the commission developed a policy of steering commercial development into areas already zoned for it, rather than rezoning more land for commercial use.

### 3. Go for a Walk

This is one of the most fun – and productive – ways of getting the community involved in a self-assessment. It provides an opportunity for people to walk around and observe their community close-up. Some communities schedule "walkabouts" so that participants go as a group with a planning commissioner as a guide, following a specific route. Others use an individual activity, such as a scavenger hunt, as a walkabout tool.

Jim has had great success with downtown scavenger hunts. One couple discovered that for 12 years they had missed shopping in a downtown hardware store that had been in business for several generations. However you choose to do it, a walkabout is a great way to help residents and planning commissioners alike better understand what the community already has and what it is lacking –

whether it's retail opportunities; a needed sidewalk; or the potential of some unused open space.

### 4. Take Some Photos

The simple act of taking photos can provide another fun and useful way for people to show what they like and don't like about their community. Everyone has an opinion about certain buildings, streetscapes, parks, and neighborhoods. Sometimes, however, people have trouble expressing their opinions in ways that lead to constructive input into a community plan. We find that pictures are truly worth a thousand words, and the camera exercise is particularly useful for capturing those special places in a community that make it unique.

Make sure everyone has a camera and ask them to photograph what they like and dislike in their community. Then post the photos in a public meeting and allow people to write their comments and reactions.

### 5. Use Colored Markers.

During community planning workshops we have found that people will often make suggestions like, "Fix up downtown," or "Improve the Oak Avenue commercial corridor." If you ask participants to elaborate on their ideas, they may or may not provide you with sufficient detail to understand the full depth of their comment. But by providing photographs of streetscapes along with colored marker pens, people can draw directly on the photograph, sketching out – even roughly – their concept of what "fixing up downtown" or "improving Oak Avenue" means.

There's an important additional benefit to the colored marker exercise. When people have sketched out their ideas, they've created something useful and

Marking up photos allows people to more easily visualize ideas being mentioned.



tangible. They've provided input they can point to and say, "That was my idea." They feel a sense of ownership and become more invested in the success of the plan.

### SUMMING UP:

Doing a community self-assessment will provide you with a clearer picture of your community's character, its special places, areas that are ready for growth, and those that are not. As a member of the planning commission, you can draw on what you learned from community input in the self-assessment. You will also be cultivating a circle of citizens interested in supporting planning efforts as they move forward.

In the next issue of the *PCJ* we'll look at how communities have taken some of these ideas and "turned their place around." ♦



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