

It's More Complex than Planning a Wedding!

by Della Rucker, AICP, CECD

We all make plans in our lives – weddings, kitchen remodeling, and so on. We do this routinely – create a plan, implement it, and then do what we need to carry it out.

Given that we can plan major events like these, why do we have so much trouble implementing plans for our communities?

The truth is that planning for even a small community is more challenging than planning for the most elaborate wedding. To create plans that will be implemented, we need more sophisticated decision-making and decision-management tools. Here are a few of our challenges and a brief introduction to the tools we can use to address them.

- **Complexity.** Communities have many interdependent elements, with complex relationships to each other. We need to use tools that help us see these relationships so that we can better understand how a plan recommendation may impact the whole community. *Scenario planning*, for example, examines all the elements of a community and the issues affecting them, and then analyzes how these might change and interact with each other in the future.

Some regional agencies, such as the Puget Sound Regional Council, are using scenario planning, and the Federal Highway Administration promotes its use in environmental assessments. Communities using scenario planning today are often facing urgent environmental issues, where the complexity and the difficulty of predicting what will happen are obvious. But almost all communities face complex challenges.

Consider a community that has a skyrocketing diabetes rate, an aging housing stock, and a lot of commercial vacancies. Instead of simply assuming that the number of residents will increase at the same rate it has for the last 30 years,

wouldn't it be more useful to think through how housing, commercial, health, and demographic trends will interact? Yes, it's more complex. But that approach also yields more useful information for evaluating which recommendations will make the most sense.



- **Purpose.** What's the purpose of a plan? To grow the economy? To improve housing? To increase our tax base? To make the community pretty?

Planners emphasize visioning, but many plans never get clear on their purpose – probably because we don't dig deep enough into what all the participants mean. A term like "economic growth," for example, may well mean something different to the plant manager, the Main Street shopkeeper, the resident, and the city councilor.

Methods like *appreciative inquiry* can delve into what various members of the community really mean when they say things like "I support economic growth" – and then find common ground in bridging differences that emerge.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a process through which participants explore areas of disagreement and their common interests, allowing them to rediscover the often substantial common ground they enjoy and forge a new, collaborative way forward. As one participant in an AI process in Dubuque, Iowa put it: "There is and can be camaraderie between the different factions ... coming together we can all work toward the same goal." Shared clarity and collaboration is necessary for real agreement, and that's critical for effective implementation.

- **Process management.** When I work with comprehensive plan committees, I include a bit of "theater" in our last session. As we review what we've accomplished, I cup my hands in front of me as though I'm holding something fragile, and then I blow through my hands as though ejecting a cloud of dust. Poof. We can develop priorities, assign responsibilities, and lay out time frames, but if we don't also create a mechanism for keeping the plan on people's minds, chances are that those we need to carry it forward will lose their focus in the face of other demands on their time.

Several regional initiatives, including in Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, have created monitoring mechanisms by establishing a handful of regularly-reported data points that indicate whether the community is making progress on implementing its plan. That can be a scary proposition, because monitoring will show not just successes, but also where you're coming up short. However, knowledge is galvanizing: in Cincinnati, publicizing that data put a spur in the side of the governments, businesses, and nonprofits to redouble their efforts.

Successfully planning for our communities is more complex than planning for a wedding. But the tools we need are out there to use. ♦

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Editor's Note: For links to resources about scenario planning, appreciative inquiry, and other related methods, see the Resource page we've posted on our PlannersWeb site: www.plannersweb.com/tools-to-use.html.