

The Planning Commissioner and the "Vision Thing"

by Elaine Cogan

A few years ago, the planning profession was convinced that communities could prosper only if they completed a process commonly called *comprehensive planning*. Sometime later, the operative phrase became *strategic planning*. Currently, it is *visioning*. Do not let the phraseology intimidate you! Under any name, the successful planning process is one that helps your community realize its unique values and goals.

The following is a guide to current "plannerese" — planning jargon used to describe key steps in the planning process — and suggestions about how you can make a difference each step along the way.

Environmental scan. The development of this document often is the first step in a planning process. Despite its title, it has little to do with migrating fish and fowl, biology, or ecosystems. An environmental scan can be thought of as a community status report. It considers the environment, but only as part of an overview of your community at the present time. It is generally produced by staff and/or professional consultants and covers factors such as the economy, demography, land use, history and historic features, and growth patterns.

While you certainly should leave it to the professionals to produce the first draft, the final document should not be released before it has been read carefully by the planning commissioners. Ask questions about anything you do not understand. Consider what may have been left out or given an improper emphasis. The environmental scan is an important document. Make sure it provides your community with sufficient information on which to base future policies and decisions.

Stakeholders. In the planning or visioning process, this is a term for anyone who has a "stake" or personal interest in a process that results in a particular public policy or activity. Stakeholders are usually inter-

viewed personally or in small groups and their opinions given special consideration. Your contacts and knowledge of the community can be a help in identifying and in-

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volving all significant stakeholders. It is better to be more inclusive than not inclusive enough.

Values. The environmental scan should provide a snapshot of your community at this point in time. The stakeholders tell you what is important to them. From that, you can begin to delineate the special qualities you want to preserve and enhance and those that should be improved. This part of the process should be driven by the public. Encouraging full participation is a pivotal role for leaders such as yourself and the other planning commissioners.

Short and long-range plan or vision. This is the next-to-final product of a process that should take at least several months, or may stretch a year or longer. It is best when developed as a partnership between professionals and the public. Read it carefully. Is it written in language that is clear and crisp and easy for anyone to understand? Does it make sense to your community?

Goals and priorities. This is another step where the professionals and laypeople can be partners. First, you should work together to set goals that will lead you to the plan or vision — for six months, next year, and longer. After you decide what you want

to accomplish, you have the difficult task of deciding the order in which you will take them on. But if you base your priorities on all you have decided earlier in the process, they should be acceptable and achievable.

Benchmarks. This common word is often used in the visioning or planning process to define measurements of success. Benchmarks must be realistic, but they also should stretch your capabilities — inspire your community to reach out beyond the here and now. A benchmark for recreation may state: "Every year for the next five years we will increase our parkland by ten acres."

Evaluation. How do you know when you have reached your goals? Your professional staff or consultants should have developed quantitative ways to measure the plan's or vision's effectiveness. In the above example, it will be clear if the community acquires ten acres or more of parkland a year. But qualitative measurements also are important and this is where planning commissioners play an integral role. Returning to the example, what if the community two years from now wants to consider acquiring a building for a community center instead of parkland? Deciding whether this is appropriate should be part of the qualitative analysis. Are all your benchmarks adequate? What changes should be considered? And most importantly, is your community a better place to live because of the process and its results?

In summary, there may be nothing new under the sun, but there always will be new ways of expressing old ideas. As a planning commissioner, you can make a distinct contribution to any process that examines your community and develops constructive avenues for change. ♦

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