

Community Visioning Exercise/Workshop

Community visioning is a vital process that empowers residents to shape the future of their own neighborhoods and towns. Change is unavoidable/inevitable. Rather than leaving the nature of that change to external entities such as consultants or private developers, community visioning ensures that the voices of local residents are heard and considered. A participatory approach is essential for creating a future that reflects the collective aspirations and values of the community. "Residents need to participate in and actively envision the future of their community - or other groups and individuals will determine it for them" (Green et al, 2000).

A successful visioning process therefore requires broad and representative participation. According to Green et al. (2000), a diverse group of participants is crucial for the legitimacy and effectiveness of the visioning effort. Ideally, the process should engage 40-60 participants, ensuring that the vision reflects the perspectives of different neighborhoods/districts, groups, and interests within the community. This inclusiveness helps build consensus and fosters a sense of ownership among residents. "Of course, the best option is to invite and have all residents participate in the visioning exercise." (Green et al, 2000).

The concept of visioning relies on residents sharing a mental picture of what they want their community to look like, feel like, and be like (Maine SPO, 2003). This vision can be captured in various forms, including narratives or stories, renderings or illustrations, and maps. The goal is to create a clear and compelling 'picture' of the community's future that first any resident and eventually any developer can quickly grasp and appreciate. As noted by the Maine State Planning Office (2003), a good vision instills hope and optimism and inspires people to take focused action together. "A vision that works helps a community to reach for goals above and beyond what normally might be expected, to discover possibilities that were not apparent before." (Maine SPO, 2003).

Ingredients of a vision statement [narrative] (Haines, 2001):

- 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 time period

Source: The National Civic League Press.

Visioning is about imagining possibilities and setting ambitious yet achievable goals. The process helps communities reach consensus on their purpose and core values. Facilitators should encourage residents to dream big and think creatively about what their community could become and emphasize community assets (see Capital Asset Inventory) rather than needs (Haines 2001). "At its heart, the [visioning] process is simple – neighbors talking with neighbors about the future of their town. This process hinges on one or more large visioning sessions, where citizens gather and talk, argue, dream, and laugh in small groups" (Maine SPO, 2003).

One of the key elements of a successful visioning workshop is the use of vision questions. These questions help participants articulate their aspirations for the community's future. For example, residents might be asked what they want their community to be known for in 10 years, what

experiences they hope to offer, and how they envision the community changing over time. These questions guide the discussion and help create a shared vision that is both inspiring and actionable.

Vision Questions: answers can include elements of the present you also want in Y (insert year)

1. For what do you want X (insert place) to be known in Y, what will make it unique?
X is now known for...
X is now unique for its...
 2. What sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures, do you want to be common in Y, what do you hope to experience?
It is now common to...
You are now able to experience...
 3. How do you want X to make you feel in Y?
A visit to X now leaves people feeling...
When people think about X, they now feel...
 4. What activities do you most hope to enjoy X in Y, what products/services?
When visiting X people can now...
X now offers...
 5. In Y, how do you want X be different (or change) from day to day, week to week, season to season, from person to person?
While one Z (insert time period) X is..., the next it is...
While for person A X is..., for person B it is...
-

"A visioning process is not the same as a survey – even if the questions are identical. A survey asks people to answer questions individually, in the privacy of their homes, without the input of neighbors. A visioning process engages the individual in a group decision-making process. In many cases, the individual ends up supporting a proposal or idea that no one may have thought of before. Visioning creates new answers" (Maine SPO, 2003). Visioning is not just about creating a static picture of the future. The process is more important than the product and vision narratives and renderings should be revised over time (Green et al, 2000).

An example of a well-crafted vision narrative is the Monroe (WI) Downtown Vision Narrative. This narrative paints a vivid picture of a vibrant and energetic downtown area that balances modern amenities with historic preservation. It describes a safe and welcoming atmosphere for residents and visitors, with businesses flourishing around the town square. The vision narrative emphasizes the importance of community values, family, and economic stability, making Monroe's downtown a source of pride for the entire community.

Example: Monroe (WI) Downtown Vision Narrative

The Monroe Square of [10 years in the future] reflects a vital and energetic quality of life that provides a place of energy and vitality for residents and visitors alike. The Square is the city's heart, anchored by its historical centerpiece, the Green County Courthouse, and flanked by businesses and residences, cafes, shops and offices. It serves as a four-seasons destination for its residents, visitors, and businesspeople.

The Square is both unique and memorable, offering modern amenities while preserving the rich heritage of the city's history. It provides a safe haven for adults, teens and children as they gather for formal and informal socializing, shopping and transacting business in a welcoming atmosphere where people stroll or relax as they take in the color, tradition and quaintness of a downtown area that features Victorian architecture.

Lit by the sun during the day and by charming streetlamps at night, the Square's townspeople and visitors revel in the quiet, friendly yet vibrant fresh air - a scent occasionally enhanced by blooming flowers, fresh

popcorn, baked gingerbread and homemade chocolate. A walk by one of the downtown's outdoor cafes or into one of its brewpubs, teases the senses as well.

Businesses, both old and new, led by long-time residents or new-to-town entrepreneurs, flourish around the Square's perimeter. Patrons find an eclectic mix of shops, offering everything from clothing, unique gifts, basic office supplies and groceries, to one-of-a-kind artwork, rare antiques and valued collectibles.

Bankers, attorneys and other service professionals house their firms around the Square as well. These business leaders support the downtown with more than their individual presence. They partner with local merchants to spur commerce, support community values and help recruit and retain downtown stakeholders.

Monroe's downtown is the greatest source of the community's pride: It includes traditional Swiss festivals, open air markets, events such as a chili cook-off, cheese and wine tastings and concerts that dot the calendar year-round; ensuring that everyone who comes to downtown Monroe has things to do, places to go and an opportunity to experience modern life in a rural community where values and family are equally as important as progress and economic stability.

As the Square prospers, so does the entire community as residents return their attentions to the heart and center of Monroe, making it a primary part of their day-to-day lives while maintaining it as the core of commerce and activity.

As you can see, a vision narrative is a narrative that describes what you want your community, downtown, neighborhood, business district, place, etc. to be in the future. It establishes the ultimate target toward which Informed Development efforts are directed. It represents a community consensus on environmental, physical, social, and economic values and development goals.

Successful private, for-profit developers are good at communicating their development vision and selling their development proposals to potential reviewers, funders, and tenants by using verbal descriptions and design renderings. That is how and why they can get approval, attract investors, and lease space even before they break ground. Public/community developers need to use similar tools to attain similar results.

As a reminder, a thorough understanding of their capital assets (Informed Development Step 2, Capital Asset Inventory) can help a community focus and clarify their vision for the future (Step 3). Further, that vision can then be checked against market potential by asking and answering specific market questions (Step 4, Market Q&A). "Visioning provides a rationale and the framework for more meaningful questions" (Haines, 2001). Development action (Step 5) arising out of the Informed Development process could eventually reach the detail of a hypothetical addition and rearrangement of businesses to create or strengthen niches and clusters and to visually map out or model the ideal business district (a Dream Marketplace).

Community visioning is a powerful tool for shaping the future of a community or neighborhood. It involves broad participation, creative thinking, and a focus on shared values, assets, and goals. By engaging residents in the visioning process, communities can create a future that reflects their collective aspirations and fosters a sense of ownership and pride.

Resources

Maine State Planning Office. 2003. *Community Visioning Handbook*.

Anna Haines. 2001. *Using Visioning in a Comprehensive Planning Process*.

Gary Green, Anna Haines, Stephen Halebsky. 2000. *Building our Future: A guide to community visioning*.

Norman Walzer. 1996. *Community Strategic Visioning Programs*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Vision Workshop Facilitator's Guide

- ☐ Suggested time: 2 hours
- ☐ Invite Informed Development Team, Community Capital Teams, and others with a stake in the development effort, which could include an open invitation to the community
- ☐ Set how far into the future the vision is representing and customize this Guide and the Vision Questions as desired.
- ☐ Include Vision Questions with Vision Workshop invitation and/or administer a community survey to collect answers to Vision Questions.
- ☐ Hold Vision Workshop in an accessible, neutral, and comfortable location with:
 - ☐ Tables and chairs
 - ☐ A laptop, LCD projector, screen or white wall
 - ☐ Internet access if using AI
 - ☐ Vision Question handout (one per attendee), worksheets (one set per table), and Capital Asset Inventory (one per table)
 - ☐ Pens or pencils and extra paper
 - ☐ Optional e-tablets/laptops (one per table), copier, or sticky note flip chart pads and markers for in-room documenting/reporting
 - ☐ Refreshments

Vision Workshop Agenda

- 1) Introduction & Overview of Agenda [5 minutes]
- 2) Vision Narrative definition and an example(s) [10 minutes]
- 3) **Vision Question answer wordsmithing/consensus building.** *Workshop engagement is focused on achieving consensus answers to the Vision Questions which would later be used to craft a vision narrative(s) with AI or a volunteer wordsmith.*
 - a) In advance of the workshop, as part of the workshop invitation, provide attendees with a copy of the Vision Questions. *A variation could include administering a community vision survey using the Vision Questions. The primary purpose of the survey would be to start the thinking process and to generate interest in the workshop. Results of survey could also be factored into wordsmithing/AI generation of vision narrative(s).*
 - b) At the Vision Workshop, identify tables as having a focus on one of four community capitals (e.g., 2 tables for natural capital, 2 tables for cultural capital, 2 tables for social capital, and 2 tables for built capital). Allow participants to self-select their tables by interest/expertise (e.g., up to 8 per table would accommodate an overall attendance of 64). Community Capital Team members could be assigned to tables accordingly.
 - c) Have each attendee answer the Vision Questions. Ask them to try to write answers as sentences and to answer with their table's assigned capital in mind. Also ask them to write so someone else can read their handwriting and inform them that their answers may be collected or exchanged. [10 minutes]
 - d) Have each table create a master list of all their answers for each question (provide one sheet per question to allow space for the many answers) [30 minutes]. *A variation is to have the two*

*tables focusing on the same capital to blindly exchange answers (facilitated), so each person is representing an anonymous person's answers. **Agreements:***

- i) No evaluation, and no criticism of answers. Grand and ambitious ideas are encouraged at this stage in the process.
 - ii) Write answers as sentences. Vision sentences are a step toward a vision narrative so should be positive, set the bar for greatness, and written in the present tense.
 - iii) Combine similar ideas/answers into a single sentence.
 - iv) Make sure the table's assigned capital is represented somewhere in the collected answers and if not, try collectively adding an answer that does.
- e) Reach consensus as a group on the 3 favorite answers for each question (circle them). This can be accomplished with nominations/discussions, a vote, etc. Answers may be revised during this process. [15 minutes]
- f) Combine tables focusing on the same capital. Have each share with the other their favorite 3 answers for each question. Task the capital group with reaching a collective consensus on the top 3 answers for each question (number them). This can be accomplished with nominations/discussions, a vote, etc. Answers may be revised during this process. [15 minutes]
- g) Have each capital group present their top answer for each question to the room – record and display (e.g., e-tablets/laptops, copier, flip charts). Facilitate a room discussion around how the top Vision Question answers differ from capital to capital and how they relate. How do they strengthen/complement or weaken/contradict each other? [15 minutes]
- 4) Wrap-up [10 minutes]
- a) Recruit volunteer wordsmiths to draft a separate Vision Narrative for each capital or announce that you will use AI (e.g., ChatGPT, CoPilot). If Vision Question answers were already captured electronically, AI could be used live during the workshop to unveil the Vision Narratives before folks leave. If not, they can be unveiled at the next workshop. Set the stage for this task with one or more of the following **prompts**:
- i) “It is the year Y, and we have, remarkably enough, created our most desirable X.” or “It is the year Y, and X is as good as it can be.” Now it is your job to describe it - as if you are there and experiencing it with all your senses.
 - ii) Suggest AI or a volunteer wordsmith use the consensus/favorite Vision Question answers for inspiration while considering the strongest capital assets and ways to leverage those strengths identified in the Capital Asset Inventory. If a community vision survey was administered, the results could be factored in or used separately to create a unique Vision Narrative for comparison.
 - iii) Each description, or Vision Narrative, should be a few paragraphs. Each sentence should be positive (set the bar for greatness, the highest standards of excellence and achievement) and written in the present tense. For example, “All downtown buildings have been restored to reflect their original design and craftsmanship.” The narrative should

state a year in the future, provide the reader with a feeling of the place's uniqueness, be inclusive of the community's diverse population, focus on people and quality of life.

- iv) One additional Vision Narrative could be word smithed to combine the four separate capital driven Vision Narratives into a comprehensive one.
- b) Explain how final revisions and formal adoption of the Vision Narrative(s) will be completed by the Informed Development Team with a potential assist from a volunteer wordsmith or AI.
- c) Describe how the evening's activities will be used in the Market Q&A and Development Action Workshops. Invite everyone to attend.
- d) Discuss the potential to recruit or retain a local artist to render the Vision Narrative(s). In some cases, this Vision Workshop will precede a Design Wisconsin charette where pro bono designers will render the community's shared vision.
- e) Thank/recognize volunteer wordsmiths and everyone in attendance.
- f) Answer any final questions.