Community Visioning Process: A Tool for Successful Planning

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Abstract

Community visioning is based upon principles that maximize group participation in a creative problem-solving process. The process itself is structured to solicit and use the full range of interests and expertise within a given community to develop an implementation plan that specifically addresses the needs of the community and that fosters change with real benefits for residents. The plan and its associated strategies for change can be broadly embraced by the community because residents shared in its development. In this case study, the Fanning Institute at the University of Georgia designed and implemented a customized community visioning process for the city of Barnesville, Georgia, that provided a structured mechanism for the community to assess where they are, to determine where they want to go, and to plan for how they are going to get there.

Introduction

*T*he Fanning Institute (Fanning), a unit of the University of Georgia's (UGA) Office of Public Service and Outreach, is committed to providing communities across the state of Georgia and beyond with targeted assistance that focuses on economic inclusion, community solutions, voluntary action, and leadership education. By providing resources and services specifically designed to meet the needs of a particular community, Fanning works to fulfill the land-grant mission of UGA: "a commitment to excellence in public service, economic development, and technical assistance activities designed to address the strategic needs of the state of Georgia. . . ." In this case, the Fanning Institute designed and implemented a community visioning process for the city of Barnesville, Georgia, to help the city focus on its future so that its growth will be positive, the decision making will be inclusive, and the results beneficial across the community.

By taking control of its future through a visioning process, a community can ensure that myriad objectives are met. With careful consideration, growth and development can occur in a manner appropriate for the history, traditions, and architecture of the community. The characteristics of the community that make it a unique place can be purposefully maintained. Visioning allows for

a methodical, well-thought-out approach to service and infrastructure provisions in a manner that is cost effective and meets the current and future needs of the residential and business communities. Finally, communities can plan for a properly balanced tax base so homeowners do not bear the brunt of the tax burden.

While similar to other processes, the key consideration that sets community visioning apart is that the vision and the plan to fulfill it are created by a broad coalition of community members. And, as a result of community involvement, these plans are more likely to have greater community commitment, trust, and support than those plans created by planners from outside the community. Essentially, citizens take on the role of planner. In doing so, they become proactive and begin to anticipate what types of changes are coming to their community, determine what impacts will result from those changes, and develop strategies to address these impacts.

Visioning Case Study: Barnesville, Georgia

The city of Barnesville is known for its small-town feel and charm. Community members and visitors alike often say that walking around Barnesville is like going back in time. Barnesville has much community pride and spirit, and there is much to be proud of. There are many historic features: a beautifully restored and thriving downtown, historic homes and neighborhoods, and annual festivals based on its heritage. History is not the only thing that makes Barnesville unique. A progressive local government, a growing state college, and its strategic location near the cities of Atlanta and Macon and Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport all contribute to its character, its legacy, and the growth that is coming quickly.

The need for the community visioning process was triggered by the planned growth at Gordon College, the local state school. Gordon has been increasing its enrollment and plans to continue its growth. It is an exceptional attribute to the Barnesville community. The current enrollment of 3,400 students is projected to expand to approximately 7,000 over the next five years. With this rapid influx of students and the growth that will result, there are many issues to consider, ranging from housing, transportation, education, and economic development to connecting the community and the college students in more mutually beneficial ways.

The city of Barnesville recognizes that Gordon's growth, as well as the growth within the larger Barnesville community, necessitates

a proactive approach. By partnering with the Fanning Institute at the University of Georgia to develop a community vision, Barnesville put residents in charge of the plan for the future.

Among the questions considered in the community visioning process, the residents of Barnesville had to reflect on the following:

- What type of growth and development is appropriate for the community?

- What will that growth and development look like?

- What types of land use are appropriate for the community, and where are they to be located?

- How will the needs of residents and businesses be met?

- How will service and infrastructure be paid for?

While these questions are not earth-shattering, they are not often asked of community residents. More often they are asked and answered by planners and a few local government officials with a wink and a nod given to public input and participation. But with the visioning process, these few questions form the basis for the community plan, with the answers being given by those most affected: the residents.

The Barnesville Community Vision process is based on a three-part model, beginning first with information collection, followed by visioning, and finally, the development of themes and strategies. These three parts come together to form the community's plan. The Barnesville process began with the creation of a visioning committee made up of thirty-five citizens from the community representing broad interests and diverse backgrounds. Once the committee was formed, an initial meeting was held to outline the tasks ahead and charge the group with their responsibilities. The first step, information gathering, then began. Two methods were used for information gathering: individual interviews and visual preference surveys. Descriptions of both follow.

Interviews

For three days, one-on-one informational interviews were held in order to fully understand Barnesville's unique set of issues. One-on-one interviews provide valuable information because they allow community members to fully express themselves. While their responses are shared with the group at large, the identity of the individual associated with each comment remains confidential. One-on-one interviews can be a time-consuming means to gather

input, but the benefits of face-to-face conversations outweigh the time costs. Having an open and honest conversation with an individual reveals much more information than a large group setting allows for. The questions that were asked of each participant were:

1. What makes Barnesville unique?

2. In 10 years, what do you want your community to look like?

3. Where and how should Barnesville grow?

4. What is working well and why?

5. What is not working and why?

6. Do you have any thoughts or concerns about Gordon College's growth?

    6b. If they are concerned, what can Gordon do to ease the growing pains?

7. What do people that don't live here like about Barnesville?

8. What needs to be protected?

9. What has been done that doesn't need to be done again?

10. What is Barnesville missing? Is that good or bad?

11. Are there any communities that you wish Barnesville could be like?

Visual preference survey

Instead of presenting the group with pictures of Barnesville or of other communities to determine their likes and dislikes, disposable cameras were distributed to the Vision Committee members to further develop the issues. The members took photographs of "things that they like" and "things that they don't like" throughout the Barnesville community. They became responsible for building their own visual preference survey. The identity of the person taking each photograph was kept confidential, to avoid offending other committee members if something they did not like was owned or operated by someone on the committee. Using the cameras was very effective in capturing how each member saw Barnesville. Many of the positive images were of the same places: downtown, historic homes, and other sources of community pride. Images of things members did not like were also similar: run-down service stations, cluttered community gateways, or dilapidated homes.

The photographs were categorized and mapped, and along with the data from the interviews, grouped together by common themes. This information was cross-referenced to help form a comprehensive view of Barnesville. The process is similar to completing a puzzle. Each piece on its own does nothing, but all the pieces as a whole come together to reveal the full picture.

Visioning sessions

Two visioning sessions were held in Barnesville, the first for the city staff and elected officials, and the second for the Visioning Committee. The first session used the Barnesville–Lamar County Comprehensive Land Use Plan as a point of departure to confirm key issues and develop themes for the Visioning Committee's session. It was an opportunity to bring city staff and local elected officials together to review the information gathered through the interviews and visual preference study, to build consensus around key issues, and to discuss and develop themes and issues that would inform the work of the Visioning Committee. The first session resulted in eight themes being identified:

1. Downtown

2. Economic development
   » Jobs through industry growth and retention
   » Shops, stores, and entertainment in Barnesville and Lamar County

3. Gordon College
   » How to work with Barnesville to accomplish mutual goals
   » How to work with Barnesville to ease growing pains

4. Planning and connectivity
   » With increasing growth and development pressure, how and where should Barnesville grow?

5. Education
   » How to make education a major community-wide initiative

6. Historic preservation
   » Protect historic neighborhoods
   » Protect historic buildings
   » Develop a method to encourage Barnesville's historic style/sense of place in new development

7. Small-town feel

8. Community services

It is important to note that when these themes were presented at the Visioning Committee's session, it was made clear that they did not have to accept these as the final list of potential planning topics. However, because the city used the information gathered from Visioning Committee members to develop the themes, the Visioning Committee did accept these eight themes as a starting point for their discussions.

When the Visioning Committee convened, their charge was to confirm key themes and issues, prioritize those themes and issues, and develop strategies and implementation plans for each theme. The committee worked diligently with their collective focus to achieve their goal of planning for Barnesville's future.

During the session, the Visioning Committee reviewed the interview data and the visual preference results, and discussed the eight principal themes. Along with the eight themes from the city, the committee added two of their own: communication and rehabilitation of blighted areas. With a total of ten themes, limited time, and limited resources, the committee decided by majority vote on five priorities: education; rehabilitation of blighted areas; economic development; Gordon College; and downtown.

With the themes selected, the committee turned its focus to developing strategies for addressing each. Members were divided into five groups and given a planning worksheet to complete. They were also reminded that each theme would require more than one strategy, and that more specificity in general would yield a more clear and concise plan for implementation. The committee members self-selected the theme that they most wanted to work on. The following information was required for each strategy and included on the planning worksheet:

- Strategy title
- Strategy write-up = "The Reason"
- Who is the project lead?
- The time frame
- Funding sources
- Potential partners
- Possible challenges
- The next three steps

At day's end, the worksheets were gathered and brought back to the Fanning Institute to be processed and incorporated into a final plan. While creating a plan and the necessary implementation steps in one day might be seen as rushed, it is often first impressions that are most important. The committee had spent time in interviews, in creating a visual preference survey, and in reviewing themes developed by the city. The intense one-day session allowed them to avoid overthinking needed steps; rather, they could absorb the information available and rely on their first impressions to move them forward.

Once all the information is developed by the community, the community consultant—in this case, the Fanning Institute—shapes all the community's findings into a cohesive plan. Due to the thorough and inclusive visioning process, the community consultant has an intimate understanding of all the issues and thus the ability to fully develop the strategies to create a plan that can bring about real change.

> *"The responsibility for implementation of the recommended strategies rests with the entire community."*

As an example, table 1 illustrates the information gathered to address the theme of education and one of several strategies surrounding this theme.

Implementation

The responsibility for implementation of the recommended strategies rests with the entire community. The city staff and elected officials, along with the Visioning Committee, hold partial responsibility for its implementation, but even more, they carry a responsibility to engage others in its implementation. As noted at the outset, commitment from the community as a whole is the top priority in making change for the better happen.

The Fanning Institute did recommend a number of steps that should be taken to ensure the success of the community vision:

1. The city manager and the mayor should present the report to local elected officials, civic clubs, Gordon College, the school board, community organizations, and the general public, and ask for continued support and participation in implementing the *community vision*.

Table 1. Theme 1: Education

Education Strategy I

Title: Your School Needs You

The Reason: The education group developed a strategy to raise the value of education among the people of Lamar County.* The group felt strongly that there is a perception issue with the Lamar County School System—that the community feels that the schools are "sub-standard."

Project Lead: The superintendent and the head of the PTA for the elementary, middle, and high schools

Time Frame: Should begin in the fall of 2007 and should take one year to develop and implement.

Partners	*Funding Sources*
Family engagement specialist	Chamber of Commerce
Chamber of Commerce	School system
Gordon College	PTA
Local media	Student-initiated fund-raising events
PTA/school councils	Donations
Local businesses	Civic clubs
Local churches	
Military	*Challenges*
Teachers	Community apathy
Students	Parental cooperation
	Private school competition

Next Steps:

1. Create a "Teacher Appreciation Dinner" event where the community prepares a meal for the teachers. This event could take place during a teacher in-service day. This could also be a time to honor the teachers that are going above and beyond their traditional roles and duties. It is also imperative to recognize and support the administrative staff and create a feeling of solidarity.

2. Create a parent recognition event where the school honors parents as well as community members that are making a positive impact on education.

3. Work with the local paper to create a year-long weekly column titled "What's Right with Lamar County Schools?" This could also be an opportunity to educate students about the field of journalism by working with the students to develop ideas for the stories.

*The city of Barnesville is part of the Lamar County School System.

2. A visioning implementation team, led and coordinated by city staff, should be established to pursue the tasks outlined.

3. The visioning implementation team should confirm and recognize a leader for each strategy.

4. The city, led by the mayor and assisted by city staff, should host a meeting with the individual strategy leaders. This meeting will ensure ownership for the initial priorities and create a process on how to proceed.

5. The visioning implementation team should meet on a regular basis to review progress. A biannual review of progress toward each group's stated goals should be made. Presentations by elected officials and visioning committee members that garner media coverage of the progress made are encouraged.

6. The five individual strategy leaders, identified to lead the top strategies, need to work to populate the strategy teams and create a plan of action.

7. The recommended strategy and implementation plan should be treated as a living document and therefore periodically reviewed and updated.

Lessons Learned

A final and important step in the community visioning process is an internal review by the consultant of the lessons learned during the process. This reflection, done internally at the Fanning Institute, allows for the continual development and improvement of the visioning process. While each process is individually tailored to the specific community, some lessons are broadly applicable.

First, to benefit the community, assisting in the initial steps of implementation would be helpful. While implementing the plan is their responsibility, determining size and needs of each implementation team, walking each team through an initial meeting so they can fully understand their charge, and assisting them in creating a committee structure and communication mechanisms would smooth the transition from planning to implementation mode.

Second, the city should commit a staff member to serve as the coordinator for the implementation efforts. Working with the city to determine the scope of work for this individual and how it can be most effectively done would ensure that no part of the implementation plan falls through the cracks.

Third, as with many long-term projects, setting all of the dates for all of the meetings before the process begins means fewer last-minute changes to accommodate one or two individuals. These dates can be put on calendars well in advance and should take into consideration local events, including civic meetings, school calendars, and church events.

Fourth, by creating a customized process, a community is able to develop an inclusive plan truly tailored to make real changes. This method takes more creativity but is well worth the effort.

Finally, visioning works only when there is complete buy-in from community members and the community partner, and they must be more vested in the process than the consultant. Barnesville was very committed to this process, and one of the most important issues to the city was to build a community liaison program with Gordon College. That is in place and has been very successful in strengthening communication between the two entities.

Conclusions

Community visioning in Barnesville put residents in charge of their future and provided a road map to guide them. The process used home-grown talent and energy to build a plan responsive to the concerns of the residents and to create momentum for successful implementation. The ease with which this process can be replicated, while tailoring it to the specific needs of any community, makes it an ideal tool for communities to use when planning for their future, determining how they will grow, and protecting what is important to them.

About the Authors

- Leigh Askew Elkins provides expertise and experience in environmental policy, asset-based community development, facilitation, stakeholder engagement, and service-learning. She coordinates several projects with state agencies, including Communities of Opportunity and Quality Growth Resource Teams. Her background in environmental analysis and policy and landscape architecture, as well as experiences in the corporate, nonprofit, and government sectors, serve her well in the public service and outreach arena.

- Danny Bivins provides expertise in a quality growth approach for community development to the Fanning Institute. Currently, he coordinates the Alliance for Quality Growth at the University of Georgia. He also helps to develop the Forum for Medium Metropolitan Regions and serves as staff for the Southeast Regional Directors Institute (SERDI). He has experience in design, historic preservation, preservation planning, quality growth, service-learning, strategic planning, and regionalism.

- Langford Holbrook brings eighteen years of experience and expertise in planning and local government administration to the Fanning Institute. He has previously served local government in Georgia in roles that include planning director and administrator/manager. He has an extensive background in land use planning, service and infrastructure planning, project management, meeting facilitation, personnel planning and management, administration, and community development.