



Improving Public Participation For The Comprehensive Planning Process

Public opinion surveys are one way of obtaining citizens views, but they can be limited. Surveys reflect a private opinion without input or discussion. The community “visioning” process is another way of collecting public opinion that includes public discussion, public give and take and consensus. The following pages describe the “visioning process” that can be used to obtain public opinion prior to developing a comprehensive plan.

The following information has been excerpted from the Maine State Planning Office Publication “Community Visioning Handbook: How to Imagine – and Create – a Better Future.” (Maine State Planning Office, 2003) <http://www.state.me.us/spo/landuse/docs/visioning/visioning.pdf>

“Imagine for a moment what your community could be at its very best.”

Planning for a community is like building a house. It first starts with an idea or a dream. This is a process that the entire community must be part of. Next comes the blueprint, or in the case of a town, the comprehensive plan. The community creates the vision through a public process and the comprehensive planning committee takes the vision and translates it into the blueprint or comprehensive plan.

*“The vision describes what the people want and
the comprehensive plan describes how to get there.”*

The following is a step by step guide for creating a community vision.

What is a community vision?

The community vision is picture of what the town should look like in 20 years. The community vision comes from a fair and representative process that everyone can be involved in. It comes from many groups of people from all parts of town. It is not one person’s view or one group’s view. The process used to create the vision should be community wide, easy to understand, and should motivate people to take action together. It is not too bold or too bland. It is achievable although it might be a stretch. It should make people feel hopeful and optimistic.

Visioning is way to cope with change. Change happens whether it is from people moving in to town or moving out, people getting older, buildings falling down or buildings going up.

Visioning works with change; it does not turn back the clock. The visioning process is a method of obtaining the opinion of the community in an organized public process.

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How a Vision relates to a comprehensive plan:

The vision is the dream.
The vision describes.
The vision is poetry.
The vision is about possibilities.
The vision describes what.
The vision is an aspiration.
The vision appeals to imagination.
The vision is striven for.

The plan is the blueprint.
The plan analyzes.
The plan is prose.
The plan is about politics.
The plan shows how.
The plan is a legal document.
The plan appeals to reason.
The plan is implemented.

The vision and the rest of the comprehensive planning process should feed off of one another. Visioning without planning can be uninspired. Planning without visioning may be irrelevant. Visioning and good planning should strengthen each other.

Practical Uses of a Vision Statement

Use a vision as the introduction to the comprehensive plan.
Use a vision as a yardstick to determine which goals and policies will get the community moving in the way it wishes to go.
Use a vision to build a case for grants. It shows how a grant fits into the big picture.
Use a vision as a guide for reviewing other town plans and documents.
Use a vision as an annual check-in.
Use a vision as a stimulus for new initiatives.
Use the vision for the annual town meeting, to reassess the goals and progress each year.

Visioning is a special kind of listening.

It is not the same as a survey, although the questions may be identical. A survey asks questions privately without outside input or discussion. Visioning is a group decision making process.

All key parties must be part of the discussion and decision-making.

Key people are those people who show up at town meetings. They are those who serve on boards and committees. They are those who start community projects. They are from all age groups, all parts of town, all churches and civic groups. Diversity matters more than numbers...better to have 40 people representing many interests than 150 representing one interest.

As a general rule, all decisions in the visioning process should be by consensus. It does not mean everyone must agree wholeheartedly, but it does mean that every single person must feel that the full range of viewpoints was heard and the decision was legitimate and one the residents can live with.

The people's voice determines the vision, even if the vision doesn't follow text book planning theory. Most citizens have a common sense that is consistent with the basic values of

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professional planning. People want to protect the environment, have affordable housing, support farmers, and preserve open space, even if they haven't heard of smart growth. But when some visions go against the grain of professional planning theory, the facilitator must make sure people understand the implication of their choices and the result must be recorded.

The bulk of the visioning session is devoted to listening, not educating.
Education will take place through participatory exercises, not lectures.

Sessions are structured to maximize the opportunity for general discussion and not let one or two people monopolize the discussion.

The approach that follows uses small group exercises combined with a few highly structured large group discussions. This ensures everyone gets to participate and no one dominates the discussion.

Considerations when designing a visioning process:

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| The context: | Why is the community interested in visioning? |
| The Pace: | How divided are people? How trusting? |
| Place and Time: | Who is coming? Make sure you have adequate meeting space, parking, tables, comfort, walls to tape large flip chart sheets, good acoustics. |
| End Date: | When is it needed? At least 3 months is needed to complete the process. |
| The resources: | What people and community resources are committed to this process? |
| Visualization tools: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Population changesAerial photosNew and old land use mapsSpecific topic maps, i.e. wild life habitat.Blank maps to record views: special places, favorite streets, recreation proposals etc.SketchesPhotographsBuild out analysis |



STEP ONE: First Planning Meeting

Hold this several weeks before the visioning session.

Introduce the idea of visioning.

Promote the benefits of visioning to the community.

Identify issues that should be addressed.

Set a date, time, place for the visioning session.

Brainstorm a list of issues that could be addressed.

Commonly addressed issues include:

- Commercial and residential growth
- Education and schools
- The environment
- Economic development and diversification
- Housing affordability
- Elderly issues and services
- Changing demographics
- Recreation opportunities
- Community image
- Traffic, congestion, speed
- Tourism
- Farmland protection
- Open space
- Regional concerns

Sample exercises

- Community character exercise
- Our town mapping exercise
- Future forces exercise
- Village/neighborhood exercise
- Pressing issue exercise
- Residential Development
- Favorite Street

The visioning process invites participants to discuss their opinions on different features of town by “voting” on each issue. Votes might be taken with stickers, markers, cards etc. Where are the special areas of town? What are you most proud of? A dozen or more marked up maps, comment cards, flip chart sheets, etc., come out of the first session. The visioning meeting can take several hours and may take more than one meeting.



STEP TWO: DRAFT VISION STATEMENT

The second step is more complex. From this information, a draft vision statement is prepared. This is based on the consensus reached at the first session. It could include comments, phrases and ideas from the visioning session. It should be specific and concrete but not overstate the consensus by assuming agreement when none actually existed.

The visioning report should include several sections:

- An opening narrative to capture the identity of the town;
- A map of the special areas to display the physical identity of the town. The comprehensive plan then will identify strategies to maintain these places through purchase, easement or regulation;
- The village or section of town descriptions to show what people would like to see in these areas in the future. This will lead to changes in regulations or other actions such as capital investments in the final comprehensive plan document.
- A growth narrative with a concrete picture of desired housing and business development. The comprehensive plan will then follow with recommendations for updated regulations and capital improvements.

FINAL PLANNING MEETING

The final meeting is to review the results and look ahead.

Review the town wide summary.

Review/revise the vision statement.

Evaluate the workshop.

Discussion

The comprehensive planning committee should review the vision and makes sure it is realistic and desirable. The test of a good vision is that it promotes the best possible local plan, not that it makes the committee immune from public criticism. If changes are made, the committee must be clear in presenting in presenting the plan to the public and where it has diverged from the resident consensus.

GOING FORWARD

The vision folds back into the comprehensive planning process. The vision can be consulted during the goal setting, policy development, strategy selection, land use plan definition, and others.

The visioning process is a vital step in obtaining the citizens goals and priorities. It identifies what people value in town. Then the comprehensive plan can recommend steps to protect those valued assets. This process helps the comprehensive planning committee develop a plan that fits into the values and priorities of the townspeople. Best of all, it is participatory. By participating



in the process, people tend to support the outcomes because they are fair, inclusive and are the result of consensus. These are important steps to developing the plan building support for it.

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