Community Mapping Exercises Provide Enhanced Participant Interaction in Visioning Processes

Connie Bodeen
Community, Natural Resource and Economic Development Educator
University of Wisconsin-Extension
Wausau, Wisconsin
Internet address: connie.bodeen@ces.uwex.edu

Mark Hilliker
Community, Natural Resource and Economic Development Educator
University of Wisconsin-Extension
Stevens Point, Wisconsin
Internet address: mark.hilliker@ces.uwex.edu

"The future is not completely beyond our control. It is the work of our own hands."
Robert F. Kennedy

Introduction

For several decades the public sector has experimented with a variety of techniques to look to and plan for the future from forecasting in the 1950s and 1960s, strategic planning processes in the 1970s, futures projects in the 1980s, to visioning in the 1990s (Ames, 1993). As the techniques have evolved, so has the level of public participation. Today public involvement is an essential element of planning for the future. Not only is public participation valuable from a planning perspective, but it also provides individuals with the opportunity to "make a difference" (Theobald, 1987).

Simply put, visioning is a process by which a community envisions the future it wants and then plans how to achieve it (Ames, 1993). Community visioning projects are commonplace throughout the country. They take a variety of forms and are unique to each locality. Many visioning processes ask four fundamental questions: "Where are we now?" "Where are we going?" "Where do we want to be?" and, "How do we get
Visioning processes engage the public in many ways through a variety of tools, including community surveys, focus groups, public meetings, workshops, blue-ribbon committees, community tours, newsletters, and special events. Each technique is designed to garner public input regarding the future of the community. An innovative tool for the visioning "tool box" is community mapping. Community mapping is a technique that takes public participants past more passive, traditional inputs into a more interactive and tactile method of creating a future vision of a community. The process is especially useful with blue-ribbon committees or visioning core committees.

**Approach**

There are three main components of an effective community mapping process. First, participants must become familiar with the community (study area). Inevitably, participants will have varying levels of familiarity and understanding of the community. The first task, then, is to level the playing field, so that all participants can contribute equally. This can be done in a couple of different ways. If the study area is small - a neighborhood or downtown - have participants walk or tour the area. Ask them to identify and document activities and characteristics along the way. Polaroid cameras enhance this activity tremendously by allowing participants to capture images for future reference.

If the study area is larger - a city or county - participants can take a visual tour with the assistance of a video. In the City of Wausau, WI, a video documenting the current situation was created for the visioning process. Video clips and still images of the city were combined to illustrate various land uses and activities throughout the city. Demographic and statistical information were voiced-over the tape to give the audience a more complete picture. This allowed the group to visualize the good and not so good attributes of the community together, fueling an energetic discussion.

Actual mapping by participants is the next component. Participants are grouped into teams of five-to-six members and assigned to a portion of the community shown in a large format map. The large format maps ideally contain elements such as roads, municipal boundaries, bodies of water, existing commercial, industrial and residential land uses, parks, trails and conservancy areas, and public service infrastructure, including fire and police stations, sewer and water treatment facilities, hospitals, schools, and public transit lines. Still pictures of the area are a valuable tool.
During this segment, each group develops a graphical "plan" for the future of the community, limited to the boundaries on their map. The groups are given a variety of colored markers and community element icons to create their vision. Community element icons are used to delineate the need for a specific community service or development need and may include schools, single- and multi-family homes, parks, playgrounds, museums, medical facilities, churches, libraries, community centers, parking lots, retail and commercial operations, theaters, industrial uses, green spaces, pedestrian and bicycle paths, sidewalks, trees/landscaping, and street lights.

The community mapping exercise is consensus-based, so participants are encouraged to discuss and agree upon an idea before it is placed on the map. Groups are asked to consider the location of existing land uses and facilities to determine if these need to be revised, expanded, or improved to better serve future needs. The process of placing group ideas on the map is usually limited to an hour to an hour-and-a-half. At the end of the idea generating session, each group is asked to identify its "Big and Bold Ideas." These ideas are what the group considers to be their best or most influential in defining the future of their portion of the community.

The final component of community mapping follows the completion of the mapping exercise. At this point, the large group reconvenes and each group shares their "Big and Bold Ideas." The facilitator records all ideas on flip charts for the group to view. Time is allowed for discussion regarding individual group ideas and the future graphic vision that has been developed. As ideas are shared, it is interesting to note where groups came up with similar ideas for the community, which helps reinforce the shared vision for the future.

Conclusions

The community mapping process serves several purposes. First, it provides additional public input into the visioning process. Second, it allows participants to have a "hands-on" experience which, in turn, leads to participants having a sense of ownership and commitment to the project. Third, it provides a valuable visual representation of the future of the community to share with other residents which provides a richness and value that may not otherwise be realized. Finally, it provides a platform for implementation of the community's future vision.

References


Visions Project, Oregon Chapter, American Planning Association.


This article is online at http://joe.org/joe/1999december/tt1.html.

Copyright © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the Journal Editorial Office, joe-ed@joe.org.