

Chapter 4

Planning Your City's Future

One of the key qualities of a leader is the ability to see the big picture and plan for the long term. What should a city look like for future generations? What trends – both positive and negative – does the city need to address? These questions can get lost in the day-to-day challenges of keeping city services afloat and balancing the budget – but it's the city councils' job to see that they don't.

Long-term planning is essential not just because the economy and society are changing; it is also essential because it's the way communities define themselves and commit to working towards a common goal. That's why it's so important to involve citizens – including people from all walks of life – in creating a clear vision for the future and a plan to achieve it.

Strategic planning

A strategic plan is a big-picture document that lays out a city's future, and specifies the actions needed to achieve that vision. A good strategic plan also includes benchmarks or mileposts along the way that mark the city's progress towards achieving its vision. Having such a plan brings focus and accountability to the work of city government. It creates a way to measure progress, and to quickly identify obstacles and overcome them. Most important, the process of creating a strategic plan involves everyone – councilmembers, staff, and citizens – in shaping a shared vision that can energize and unify the community.

Many small cities recognize the value of strategic planning. It can help the city develop a vision, identify long-term goals and annual objectives, and provides detailed strategies that address community needs and organizational performance.

The development and implementation of a strategic plan is time consuming, and requires the sustained attention and work of city staff, elected officials and community members. Objectives defined by a strategic plan often require a long-term commitment of staff resources and commitment of funding to make effective change.

Areas often addressed as part of this process include economic development, improving municipal services, diversifying the tax base and improving the infrastructure within a community.

Key to Symbols

 – Legal citing

 – Internet resource

 – Print publication

 – Training/conference

 – Who to call

“Elected officials need to understand that when they come in and vote on something, that it can affect the next three generations.”

Small City Roundups

While there are many ways to approach strategic planning, here are a few key elements to keep in mind:

1. Agree on a clear vision of the future
2. Put together a mission statement – why are we here?
3. Involve people – electeds, city hall staff, the community
4. Create a strategy that defines what you need to do to be successful
5. Establish clear priorities
6. Create action plans that carry out your strategy – the what, how, who, when, and how to measure
7. Get buy-in for the action plans
8. Integrate your action plans into all aspects of city hall operations
9. Decide how you will monitor and measure your action plans
10. Monitor and measure
11. Stay focused and keep communicating

Strategic planning retreats

Many cities schedule annual planning retreats for councilmembers and city staff. A retreat is an opportunity to get away from the daily routine and focus on long-term, big-picture issues. Retreats also provide useful opportunities to address and solve problems in working relationships, and strengthen the ability to forge a productive, collegial team. Retreats don't have to be expensive resort getaways but should be in a relaxed environment. A library, a community center, or even someone's home can work well. A city retreat is subject to the Open Public Meetings law.

The most important part of a retreat is that it provides the opportunity for the council and key staff to take a moment out of busy schedules and look at the city's direction from a holistic perspective. Encouraging the group to gather in a new location is important. This gives the group an opportunity to truly “retreat” from daily business and explore new ideas about the city's vision and strategic direction.

Having a facilitator who is not a member of the city council or staff is also important. This allows everyone to participate more freely. If your city can't afford a professional facilitator, consider asking another city's manager to act as the facilitator.

Citizen involvement

It's difficult to determine the collective community's vision without involving citizens first. Ways to involve citizens in long-term visioning include:

- Focus groups
- Citizen surveys
- Analysis of political and demographic moods (e.g. anti-growth feelings versus low-income housing concerns).

For more ideas about how to gather citizen input see the last section of this chapter, page 31.

Other long-range planning tools: Cities must make long-range decisions based on good, current information. Economic and population forecasts can help cities plan for changes down the road. See the long-range financing planning section in chapter 6, page 57 and the comprehensive planning section of chapter 10, page 95 for more information.



Bucoda City Hall

Resources

Why Strategic Planning?, MRSC Finance Advisor, May 2007

AWC's facilitators database

Free Management Library

A Guide to Strategic Planning for Rural Communities, USDA (pdf, 49kb)

Strategic Planning: Making it Work, Leadership Strategies, The Facilitation Company, 2006

Strategic Planning for Local Government, ICMA, 2005

Strategic Management Planning, Governance webpage, MRSC

City strategic planning examples

City of Snohomish strategic plan (pdf, 2.01 mb)

City of Chelan strategic plan

Know the law

Article VIII, WA State Constitution
– State, County & Municipal
Indebtedness


Article XXXII, Section 1, WA State
Constitution – Special Revenue
Financing



RCW 35.21.703 – Authority to
engage in economic development
activities

Resources for economic development

Economic development, MRSC
webpage 

- Marketing the community for economic development
- Funding sources for economic development
- Developing local government tourism industry

*Strong Cities, Strong State: Economic
Development in Washington's Cities
and Towns*, AWC, 2007 

International Trade and Economic
Development Division, COM, (360)
725-4100  

Economic Development
Administration, U.S. Dept. of
Commerce, (206) 220-7660  

Community Development
Programs, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture
Rural Development, Washington
office, (360) 704-7740  

Economic development


Many of Washington's small cities are skilled and successful in promoting economic development. Whether its tourism promotion in Leavenworth, high-speed telecommunications investments in Forks, or historic building preservation in Rosalia, small city governments undertake a variety of activities that bring economic vitality to their communities. But these things don't just happen over night. They take specific, deliberative steps on behalf of citizens and the city council.

Small city economic development can involve:



- Working with the business community to attract, retain and expand businesses;
- Revitalizing downtowns;
- Revising land use policies to invite particular investments (housing, industrial, commercial);
- Building infrastructure to support various enterprises; and
- Partnering with other governments and organizations to support job creation and training programs.



Washington's economic development toolbox is more limited than other states. The Constitution contains provisions that strictly limit the lending of state credit and gifting of public funds. Therefore, a city does not have authority to construct and operate industrial and commercial facilities, or to use city funds to attract private industrial development. The most important economic development tool a city can offer is a well-developed infrastructure system.

Resources for downtown development

Central Business District – Downtown Development,
Economic Development webpage, MRSC 

Downtown Revitalization, COM, (360) 725-4056  

National Main Street Center – Main Street Center
Program, National Trust for Historic Preservation,
(202) 588-6050  

Small Communities Initiative – COM, (360) 725-3016 or
(509) 777-1503  

Legislative advocacy

Many small cities don't realize just how much influence they can have on making changes at the state level. The state legislature and state agencies do listen to the concerns of cities. That's why it's important for elected leaders to educate their citizens and representatives about city challenges and to be aware of AWC's legislative work and priorities.

Although the state legislature meets for several months of the year, involvement with the legislative process is a year-round activity. There's no substitute for having a close relationship with state representatives and senators. Staying in touch with them throughout the year helps city officials gain access to busy legislators when they're in session.

City councils can vote to take official positions on state issues that affect the city. When a city council adopts an official position and lets legislators know about it, it can make a difference in how they craft a piece of legislation, and how they vote.

Staying in Touch Legislative Calendar, *Hearing from Home*, AWC

Winter – Act now

- Call, leave messages for legislators
- Write personal letters
- Email
- Attend AWC's legislative action conference

Spring – Thank you, follow up

- Personal thank you notes after session is over
- Publicly acknowledge legislators at events
- Letters to the editor


Summer – Get to know


- Build future relationships with your legislators
- Invite your legislator to meet in city hall
- Meet informally to share common concerns
- Understand each other's priorities
- Find out how you can help each other
- Explore ideas on handling pressing issues
- Engage community leaders on priorities



Fall – Identify priorities


- Identify local priorities with your citizens
- Attend AWC regional meetings
- Help AWC identify legislative priorities
- Prepare for next session – call, write, meet with legislators before session begins

Resources

City Legislative Action Conference, AWC, 

Hearing from Home: Connecting Washington's Cities with Olympia, AWC 

Legislative Bulletin, provided weekly throughout the legislative session and monthly the rest of the year  

Small City Round-Ups, interactive meetings hosted by AWC in the spring to collect ideas and information from small city officials 


Know the law



RCW 4.24.670 – Liability of volunteers of nonprofit or governmental entities

RCW 51.12.035 Volunteers – (Industrial Insurance)

RCW 43.101.200 (Law Enforcement Personnel Training) exempts "volunteers" and "reserve officers" from the requirement that law enforcement personnel must complete basic law enforcement training

Resources

Creating volunteer opportunities, Governance webpage, MRSC 

Federal Volunteer Protection Act of 1997 (pdf, 123kb)  

Volunteer strategies for involving your community

Every small city official knows that citizens are a city's greatest asset. Having enough staff for city hall to function on a day-to-day basis, much less complete a large project, can be a major challenge.

That's one reason many cities recognize the advantage of utilizing the skills of their community members in volunteer programs. Such programs can increase the quality and quantity of public services at a minimal cost and provide an opportunity for citizens to contribute to the betterment of their community. An even bigger dividend is that volunteering creates a sense of ownership and civic pride, and sets a good example for the next generation. Volunteers also gain a first-hand knowledge of the challenges facing the city and may induce them to seek to serve in elective office.

For every \$1 invested by a local

government in volunteers, it can

realize as much as \$10 in benefits.

ICMS's IQ Service Report on Volunteer Programs, August 1999

Connecting with citizens

Cities need to communicate with citizens about the value of their government and the mutual responsibility of all citizens to make it work. Many opinion polls and a growing number of ballot initiatives, indicate that many citizens feel disconnected from government and feel they have little influence on community decisions. If this trend isn't reversed, it will erode our ability to sustain our democracy. That's why it's important to consider using new ways to reach out to citizens, to understand what they need and want, and to find ways for them to connect with their local government.



As Washington's demographics change and Washington State becomes more diverse, it becomes more and more important to find new ways to bring people together. And it takes empathy and skill to understand and fully include those of differing perspectives while keeping the city's focus on the common good. To do this, cities need to provide opportunities for citizen feedback that go beyond public hearings.

Some approaches that can help improve public input are:



- **Host community meetings** on a specific issue or topic where stakeholders have the opportunity for discussion.
- **Change the physical setting.** More informal settings can reduce feelings of separation and power differences between public officials and citizens.
- **Involve interested parties** in the process of developing alternative solutions and approaches. Do this early in the process so that promising new alternatives can be fairly addressed.
- **Use small groups and committee work** to involve citizens.
- **Schedule meetings** at times and places that are convenient to those who want to be involved.
- **Consider using a trained facilitator** to conduct meetings if issues are especially controversial. Someone who has no stake in the issue can be fair and impartial, and skilled facilitators can help maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect even when people have passionate opinions. One way to gain confidence and trust is to choose a facilitator who has some local standing, such as a school superintendent, a chamber of commerce director, or a service club president. The most important qualities in a facilitator are impartiality, fairness, and respect for all those who wish to be heard.


Feedback collected from citizens should be a focal point in creating a city's strategic plan and vision for the future.


Resources

Local Government Policy-Making Process, MRSC, February 1999 (pdf, 511kb)  

Effective communication and citizen involvement, Governance webpage, MRSC  

Governments are from Saturn... Citizens are from Jupiter: Strategies for Reconnecting Citizens and Government, MRSC, June 1998  

"Strategies for Reconnecting Citizens and Government," *MRSC Focus*, June 2001 

Creating a Sense of Value: Building Citizen Commitment, AWC workshop PowerPoint presentation by John Daly, March, 2001 

Public Participation Toolbox, International Association for Public Participation (pdf, 178kb) 