COMMUNITY SELF ASSESSMENT

WHAT IS IT?

A community self assessment (strategic plan) is basically an inventory and analysis of existing conditions that generates a list of community improvement projects. It helps the general public, local government, leaders, agencies, businesses, civic organizations, and educational institutions to identify common needs upon which to build a shared community vision. The process builds consensus to focus limited resources on projects designed to achieve the shared vision.

The content of the self assessment can be as sophisticated or as simple as the community deems necessary. It is vital to involve ordinary citizens and a broad range of leaders as the self assessment can help with local and regional decisions to:

1. Determine budget areas where funds should be increased, decreased or kept the same.
2. Determine which local, private, municipal, state or federal loans, grants, technical assistance programs the community should pursue.
3. Identify community needs that can be noted in state or federally mandated documents that increase the likelihood of receiving grant and loan funds. The Economic Development Administration’s regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) plans, Federal Block Grant applications, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) Facilities Plans, and Federal Empowerment Zone applications are examples.
4. Evaluate the need to update or establish land use plans, zoning ordinances, capital improvement plans, nuisance ordinances, subdivision ordinances, building codes, etc.
5. Identify and solicit cooperation among appropriate community groups, residents or individuals to undertake projects.
6. Identify projects that can be initiated through the use of intergovernmental, interagency, inter-business or public-private sector agreements.
7. Identify and obtain support for unique types of local projects.
8. Respond in a timely fashion to problems, opportunities and change.

The assessment is a very useful tool for a community to use in addressing its future in terms of physical, economic, and social development. As these descriptions indicate, the community self assessment is never completed. It is part of a process designed to address the changing needs and conditions of the community. The Steering Committee plays a crucial role in the cycle of planning through implementation.
WHAT ARE THE STEPS IN COMPLETING A SUCCESSFUL SELF ASSESSMENT?

A series of consecutive components are used to complete a self assessment and written action plan. Key components in the design of a self assessment method will include:

1. **Involving Citizens**: Selecting methods to involve the general public, leaders, and elected officials;
2. **Community Inventory and Analysis**: Gathering an inventory of existing conditions in the community and region;
3. **Identifying Issues**: Analyzing strengths to build upon and weaknesses to eliminate;
4. **Setting Priorities**: Developed a prioritized list of issues based upon the community inventory and input from the public;
5. **Defining Goals and Objectives**: Developed a prioritized list of goals, projects and activities based upon the community inventory and input from the public;
6. **Inventory Existing Resources**;
7. **Deciding Project Feasibility**: Deciding on work plans, establishing costs, resources, timing and responsibility for strategy implementation;
9. **Evaluation**: Evaluating progress in fulfilling each strategy and the overall plan; and
10. **Reporting**: Ongoing reporting to the public.

The Steering Committee is responsible for the oversight of the entire process from creating the committee structures, tracking committee work, to producing the written action plan and fostering partnerships for implementation. With the sponsor, the steering committee creates assessment teams and with the teams proposes specific implementation responsibilities. It is common for assessment teams and implementation committees to share some membership. This is why the self assessment phase identifies key players to be involved in implementation, with team members assisting as needed.

Planning for the sake of planning is a waste of time and energy. If the Steering Committee, sponsors, and the local unit of government do not follow through with Action Plan implementation, the work and community contributions to the self assessment process is lost for many years. The process requires that the Steering Committee remain in place to take responsibility for overseeing the implementation, evaluation, and priority changes for at least the first years. At minimum, the committee takes oversight responsibility for monitoring projects and activities and gaining publicity for successes and issues.
1. INVOLVING CITIZENS ... WHAT METHOD IS BEST?

Successful communities understand that the success of a community self assessment is determined by the commitment of those participating in the process, not by the process itself. The six most widely used methods for gathering inputs are:

- Public hearings
- Study or subcommittees
- Surveys or questionnaires
- Facilitated meetings
- Citizen participation programs
- Focus groups

Each method offers distinct advantages and disadvantages. Most communities find that a combination of the various methods works best to obtain the highest level of citizen input and quality information:

**Public Hearings** - do a good job of informing the public and drawing media attention. The communication tends to be one-way and it is difficult to obtain input.

**Surveys** - can be useful in particular cases and are very good at determining general areas of public concern. It is difficult to obtain detailed information and in all cases it is critical to obtain professional help in the drafting and interpretation of questions.

**Study Groups** - are a good method of focusing on details and making recommendations on goals, objectives and strategies. They are not good at building consensus.

**Facilitated Meetings** - are an excellent way to build consensus, draw media attention, create buy-in from constituents, establish general goals and objectives, and motivate the community towards action. They are a poor method to use when focusing on details.

**Citizen Participation Programs** - are a good method of gathering ideas, gaining support and developing ownership, and can be timed to coincide with community events including fairs, school functions, festivals, civic events, and special promotions.

**Focus Groups** - are good for determining details for implementation of specific projects. They are not as valuable in setting general goals, objectives or use with large numbers of people.

2. THE COMMUNITY INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS

The inventory is simply a systematic gathering of appropriate information and data about the community. For a community to determine its assets and needs, it is necessary to have an accurate picture of what the community has, what is missing and what is needed. It is also useful to organize categories for the inventory such as land use, transportation, housing, public facilities, recreation and culture, basic and advanced infrastructure, education and workforce development, community services, industrial development, business development, and local government.
Data from the categories should be briefly analyzed at the beginning of the self assessment and further by teams developing objectives and strategies. At minimum, trends in population, housing, property values, taxes, crime rates, health care, school enrollments and quality, business, basic infrastructure, and technology should be evaluated.

Types of information available are population demographics; housing types and starts; levels of disposable income; number and types of civic organizations; infrastructure conditions including water, sewers, roads, sidewalks, advanced communications, utilities, industrial parks, school facilities, curriculum and technologies; business growth or contraction; labor force quantity and quality; crime rates; and sales and property taxes. Most of the information can be gained at little or no cost.

It is also recommended that existing conditions be documented in some manner, such as surveys, studies and reports; narratives, photographs; maps; charts; and news clipping. The results of interviews with key people effected by a trend are also good sources to inventory.

A community may hire a consultant to assemble and analyze the conditions or may have local talent donating their skills. Common sense, citizen knowledge and science should be combined in the analysis.

**ISSUES FOR COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT**

Self assessments generate a list of improvements, projects and activities on a broad range of topics with the majority of projects falling under the responsibilities of local government. The list should be developed with citizens, organizations, and local government as typical areas of concern emerge around:

- Land use planning
- Education and workforce development
- Transportation and traffic
- Housing
- Community buildings
- Infrastructure
- Advanced Communications
- Business and Industry
- Natural and historic resources preservation
- Business climate improvements
- Beautification
- Economic Development
- Community Services
- Environment and Recycling
- Industrial practices and modernization
- Utilities
- Safety and crime
- Children, youth and families
- Modern governmental practices and taxes
- Health care
- Parks, recreation and sports
- Entertainment and culture

**SETTING PRIORITIES**

In most communities the list of needed community improvements is long and mind boggling. Initial priorities can be determined by using brainstorming and consensus building methods, reference materials, surveys and current reports. Citizens can propose and vote in meetings on each item, resulting in a prioritization of the improvements.
In order to know the urgency of items on the list, citizens and local governmental officials should then rank the items by the E.N.D. method categories of

- Emergency
- Necessity
- Desirability

While goals in a community vision (the best a community can be) need to always be a little out of reach, the Action Plan, the product of the self assessment effort, must be practical and within the resources of the community. The E.N.D. method is a quick shorthand to help keep both the Vision (the best a community can be) and that which is attainable in balance.

Participants involved in the community self assessment and written action plan process should keep in mind that priorities can shift. Conditions can rapidly change and opportunities for financing, volunteers, business investments, legislation, governmental and agency staffs, and grants can develop.

5. GOALS, OBJECTIVES & STRATEGIES

Goals, objectives and strategies are developed to establish a common language upon which participants can discuss and implement projects and from which the general public can measure success. **Goals** are where you want to be! **Objectives** are singular results you need to accomplish as part of a goal. **Strategies** are the plans, projects, and activities you choose to implement objectives.

Consultants, teams, committees, staff, or combinations of committed people can develop the goals, objectives, and strategies. The most important aspect is gaining and keeping the interest of the participant citizens and the general public. The most critical part of forming objectives and strategies is involving people and institutions that will be affected.

**Goals are where you want the community to be in the future.** Goals are created by distributing items on the list under shared areas and crafting statements to capture the needs. Groupings are an arbitrary organization of similar items. When categorizing items into goal areas you will always find some which defy your best efforts or which can be part of more than one goal. It does not matter how you categorize a goal as long as it makes sense, is brief, and has participant agreement.

**An objective is one result the community wants completed by a certain date to fulfill one or more goals.** It does not indicate how the objective will be accomplished or who is responsible for implementation. When objectives are limited to one result and developed with input from those who will be affected, it is easier to develop meaningful strategies.

**Strategies are projects, studies, surveys, events, undertakings, etc. which need to be done to accomplish an objective.** A strategy has a due date. It too should be developed with those who will be affected.

The following chart demonstrates a consistently organized goals, objectives and strategies statement:
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOAL</th>
<th>OBJECTIVE</th>
<th>STRATEGY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#I</td>
<td>Increase availability and aesthetics of housing types.</td>
<td>A. Increase number of aesthetically attractive affordable housing units for young adults by 2005.</td>
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<tr>
<td>#II</td>
<td>By 2003 establish affordable housing units for fragile senior citizens.</td>
<td>B. By 2005 provide housing for fragile senior citizens.</td>
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**INVENTORY EXISTING RESOURCES**

If you want to develop strategies that will be implemented, you must identify which actions are already being addressed in the community. Duplication of efforts and fights for glory are detrimental to the process and the financial and human capital of the community. Contact with other organizations is called the resource inventory and has a few steps:

1. Contact public and private organizations that may be involved in a particular project or activity. Determine their interests and potential partnerships. Establish if the strategy is your committee’s responsibility to implement or another organization’s and determine how you can work together.
2. If an improvement should be the responsibility of another organization, contact the key official to discuss the improvement.
   - Secure their commitment to participate in the Action Plan and take responsibility.
   - Assume whatever role is appropriate.
   - Give them full credit and make them part of the team.
DETERMINE PROJECT FEASIBILITY

The committee will want to devise, research and prioritize strategies (projects, studies, surveys, events, undertakings) to fulfill the objectives that have the best chance of success related to community resources and vision. The basic questions are:

- Is this project (strategy) reasonable and attainable?
- Is implementation responsibility assigned?
- What is my committee willing to do?
- Where will funds come from?
- Is fund raising required and if so, who is responsible?

7. DETERMINING IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITIES

Assessment teams or committees not only establish what needs to be done, but make informed decisions related to who is responsible for implementation, and the size, scope, and timing of the project.

- Establish estimated costs to implement strategies.
- Establish timelines to begin implementation.
- Establish primary organization or champion to carry out the implementation.

Some implementation strategies such as surveys, research, and fund raising events may in fact, be a part of an assessment teams’ action plans rather than completed as part of the assessment. Some low cost projects with seasonal timelines -- town cleanup campaigns, flower plantings, community events or seasonal activities -- maybe be completed before the self assessment is completed.

A critical factor to successful implementation is to clearly identify who is taking responsibility for each strategy. A steering committee member should be assigned to each strategy that is to be implemented in the first few years. This needs to be done even when actual implementation responsibilities have been accepted by local government or another organizational partner. Oftentimes assisting with promotional efforts, visualizing steps needed to implement plans, and supporting and recognizing a project are what is needed in order to implement another organization's strategy.

Teams need to be in the business of building allies for implementation. As teams develop partnerships, estimations of project costs and timelines can re-prioritize objectives and strategies can be dropped or changed.

In summary, change happens regardless of actions, progress does not. The only way to insure successful implementation of the self assessment and action plan is to organize and follow through with defined actions assigned to specific people. The Steering Committee is the driving force in this effort and insures that the community achieves its goals over time.
10. EVALUATION

The final step in the community self assessment requires periodic evaluation of the progress made in completing the projects and activities. The work of the Steering Committee is not over when the self assessment is completed and integrated into the written Action Plan. Implementation of the strategies and projects is the most important result of this process.

An evaluation should be completed within the first six months of completion of the Action Plan and annually thereafter. The evaluation process does not require an in-depth review of detail, however it should at least answer the following questions:

- What projects have been started?
- Have any projects been completed?
- Who in the community benefited from the project and how?
- Do strategies need to be changed?
- Have priorities changed?
- Do new strategies or projects need to be added?
- How do we know when an objective has been met?
- Should any project or activity be deleted?

A new community assessment should be completed every five to ten years. Rapidly changing technology, growth, down turns in the economy, and other issues may dictate change more often. Evaluation dates, who is responsible for evaluations, and when a totally new self assessment and action plan should be addressed need to be in the Action Plan.

11. ACCOUNTABILITY: REPORTING TO THE PUBLIC

It does not matter how successful the self assessment and implementation of priorities are if no one knows about them. Keeping the citizenry and partners informed of successes and problems is extremely important. When the public is kept informed they will bring new ideas and strategies to the table, may help select better options, and will be more likely to support the efforts.

The following reporting procedures are recommended:

- Regular news articles and interviews with participants and project leaders to keep the general public informed of progress and projects/activities that are underway.
- A news release reporting progress toward goals as determined by the annual review.
- Sponsoring a well advertised public hearing and inviting the media and key organizations.
- Verbal and written reports to cooperating agencies and organizations on a regular basis.
- Written reports, followed by presentations, to governmental bodies, financial sources and other sponsors.