**ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY-BASED STRATEGIC PLANNING**

**INTRODUCTION**

Planning, strategic planning included, is about setting the direction for some system -- entire communities, organization, business units -- and then working to ensure the system follows that direction. The plan is a set of decisions about what to do, why to do it, and how to do it.

Strategic planning can be easy, for example when the scope of the planning is narrowly focused on the efforts of a single program or it can be complex and time-consuming, for example when a group undertakes the initial strategic planning process for a community or a region. The challenge for the planning analyst is to organize the process in a way that makes it easy to understand, to follow, to complete and to effect change. The sponsoring organization’s role is to guide the planning process so that it uncovers a consensus about goals, objectives and strategies that can be implemented by the sponsoring organization or its allies.

**Establish Scope:** Indicate the breadth or scope of the planning, for example one or more functions such as infrastructure, transportation, utilities/facilities, quality of life, etc.

**Collect Information:** Develop methods of inquiry to help the community (or organization) understand the relative strengths and weaknesses of its assets or programs. Specific questions are need to collect reliable, accurate information on how the community or organization is performing and how the environment is influencing the operation.

**Select Priorities:** Prepare program vision, mission, goals and objectives related to the specific topic or element; such that a community could develop programs and actions to meet these goals.

**Decide on Actions:** Generate a list of strategies, projects, policies or other implementation options. Here, analysis of best practices, current research and comparative analysis of the strategic actions taken by other communities will assist a community in selecting appropriate actions reflective of a strategic fit given their vision and mission.

**Monitor & Evaluate:** Select the types of statistical trend data to be used by a region for comparison and benchmarking in relation to the performance of other similar type programs.
**APPROACHES TO PLANNING**

Even though strategic planning processes are typically described as a series of sequential steps, typically cyclical in nature, with a starting and ending point, there are varied opinions about the starting point. Among the recommendations are futures oriented strategic visioning models, models beginning with needs assessments on needs and models beginning with evaluation of current program operations. Selecting one particular set of steps and techniques over another will direct the way that issues explored, influences the kinds of questions asked and directs the decisions that are eventually reached.

In practice, planning may not always flow smoothly from one step to the next sequential step. Often, planning is iterative in nature; steps are repeatedly at ever-finer levels of detail. At other times, the planning steps are performed consecutively but the results of each major step are considered concurrently.

**Futures Oriented Model** – Futures oriented planning (sometimes referred to as strategic visioning) starts with the overall purpose or the expected or preferred result. For an organization this ‘purpose’ is the mission statement. For a community this is typically a vision statement.

In this approach to strategic planning, the planning starts with consensus on the expected final state of affairs (i.e. outcomes or results) given the vision or mission. The next phases involves selecting priorities, generating options, deciding on a course of action and crafting and implementing an action plan. Information is collected and analyzed at each stage as appropriate. From here a process called backward chaining is used: planners identify the products (goods or services) capable of producing the results expected and the methods (processes) for creating the desired products. Finally, the planning identifies the resources (inputs) needed to carry out the proposals.

**Problem Solving Model** – This problem solving approach to planning has a different starting point than the futures oriented approach. The starting point in the problem solving approach is the analysis: researchers make observations and form ideas (and draw conclusions) from data analysis. Observations usually reflect existing conditions or current state of affairs, drawn from analysis of statistics, a need assessment or other set of facts generated from information collection.

The needs assessment is used to quantify and draw inferences about ‘problems’ that exist in the community or the organization. These inferences and conclusions are used as the basis for constructing missions, goals and objectives. Brainstorming options and courses of action to meet goals is next, followed by development of an action plan. The last phase is monitoring and evaluating the implementation. Problem solving approach borrows from the scientific method of analysis.

**Long Range Planning Model** – Long range planning is oriented toward existing operations; it takes current program or service capacities as a given and assumes that in the future the same levels of assistance should exist. The intent is to understand overall requirements for a good or services that allows for expansion in phases as required by the anticipated growth in the population’s needs.
Long range planning starts with an evaluation of carrying capacity and a projection of anticipated future needs. Generally, the analyst will evaluate and make projections about future growth in population and services needs; take stock of at the past level of expenditures or investments needed to reach the level that is considered minimum and adequate; envisage the investments required to match future expectations—which may require reconciling the desired quantity with amounts possible based on revenue and revenue forecasts; and finally budget resources to provide the necessary and sufficient level of services expected.

**Continuous Improvement Model** – For some, the preferred starting point in strategic planning is the existing set of programs and policies in operation. The analyst looks to assess operations to finding out what things are need to be improved by identifying the attributes or features that customers dislike in goods or services, and coming up with ideas for improving those features, that is solving the customers’ problems. A variation of the continuous improvement model includes asset mapping; identifying assets that can be employed to build organizational capacity.

Continuous improvement starts with an assessment of current programs attentive to discovering new opportunity and the preparation of plans (changes) that take advantage of that opportunity. Next is implementation on a small or experimental scale to see if the problem is averted or the opportunity exploited. Next is analysis to determine if changes are achieving the desired result. Is so, because the change is a better practice, it is adopted as the new ‘norm’ of operation.

**Systems Approach to Strategic Planning** – Another method to consider is the systems approach to strategic planning. Participants (planning team members or focus group members) are called upon, in a structured manner, to describe the vision or preferred end state and to speak about the current state of affairs. The differences between the two serve as the issues deserving of consideration. In subsequent steps, these differences (between the current and goal states) are used as the basis for suggesting courses of action that reduce the differences.

The three major activities—setting goals, discovering issues, and designing actions—are usually solved, in so much as is possible, concurrently. Strategy (the action plan or performance plan) is designed so as to transform the organization from the present position (the current state in the market) to the position described by the objectives (the future state or the model of success) given the potential and constraints of the organization’s capabilities (i.e. internal or external gaps).

**Practical Examples of Strategic Planning Efforts** – To get a better understanding of the variety of approaches to strategic planning, a number of plan processes used in Illinois over the last decade are summarized here. Any of these can be used as the model for a community’s planning process, most likely tools and techniques from each would be used to carry out a community planning process.

- Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)
- Competitive Communities Initiative: Community Self-Assessment
- Strategic Planning for Community and Economic Development
- Creating a Practical Area-Wide Development Strategy
Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy [Problem Solving Model]

A CEDS is a plan that is required of economic development districts as a normally a condition of receipt of funds under most U.S. Economic development Administration programs. The CEDS effort is built on broad-based community participation as a “continuous planning process addressing the economic opportunities and constraints of a region”. The guidelines for developing a CEDS include six sections. It is strongly oriented to problem solving approach to strategic planning.

A. Organizing and Staffing for Economic Development.
   The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Committee
   Working Relationships
   Staff Support
   Committee Work Program

B. Analysis: Where are We?
   (1) Collect Background Information
      Compile Data and Information Profiles
      Compile Data on Socio-Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics
      Compile Data on Industry Sectors And Contributions To Employment, Income, etc.
      Develop a Geographic, Climatic, Environmental, And Natural Resource Profile.
      Develop an Information Profile on Public And Private Infrastructure
      Develop an Information Profile on Quality Of Life Factors
      Review Existing Plans In The Region (If Available):
      Review Transportation, Housing, Downtown Revitalization, and Welfare Reform Plans.
      Review Land Use, Air And Water Quality, and Environmental Protection Plans
      Prepare Key Findings
      Indicate Relation of an Area's Economy to That of the Larger Region or State;
      Indicate Locational Advantages or Disadvantages;
      Indicate Environmental or Other Constraints to Growth/Development.
   (2) Define Issues
      Analyze Strengths and Weaknesses
      State of the Regional Economy: Strengths And Weaknesses, Growth Sectors and Clusters;
      Investigate Opportunities and Threats
      External Trends and Forces: The Region’s Position in the National and Global Economy
      Evaluate Resources
      Identify Partners For Economic Development
      Identify Resources For Economic Development.

C. Vision: Where Do We Want To Be?
   (1) Vision Statement, Goals and Objectives
      Conduct Vision Statement Session(s) or Workshop(s).
      Present an Analysis of the Region
      Encourage Participation by Partners and the General Public.
Create a Draft Vision, Goals and Objectives Statement
Create Statements of Short Term Goals
Create Statements of Longer Term Goals
Circulate the Draft Vision Statement Widely for Review and Comment.
Secure Strategy Committee Review and Final Approve on the Vision Statement and Goals.

(2) Setting Priorities / Ranking Goals
Evaluate Goals (based on timeframe, impact, goal interrelationships and efforts underway)
Set Goal Priorities
Develop Rationale for the Goals Prioritized
Hold Public Meetings to Ensure That Goals are Consistent with Community Aspirations
Secure Formal Ratification by the Strategy Committee
Secure Formal Ratification by Governments Represented on the Strategy Committee

D. Action Plan: How Do We Get There?
(1) Prioritization of Programs and Activities
Prepare Action Plan Based On Long-Term Goals.
Select Goals to Evaluate
   Evaluate to Determine the Time Frame and Resources Required
Assign Responsibility, Resources, and Time Frames
   Guide Resource Use on Available Sources Funds and Project Sponsors
   Guide Resource Use on Significant Segments and Geographies Served

(2) Implementation Schedule
Identify Important Program Activities
Create an Implementation Schedule for Each

E. Evaluation: How Are We Doing?
Outline Evaluation Process
List Performance Measures

F: Documentation
Record all the Steps of the Process Followed

Competitive Communities Initiative: Community Self Assessment [Problem Solving Model]

Competitive Communities Initiative: Community Self-Assessment
Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, Springfield Illinois 1996

The Competitive Communities Initiative (CCI) 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 11 steps to developing a CCI self-assessment are strongly oriented to problem solving approach to strategic planning.
1. **Involve Citizens:** Select 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;

8. **Action Plans:** Producing a Self Assessment - Action Plan;

9. **Evaluation:** Evaluating progress in fulfilling each strategy and the overall plan; and

10. **Reporting:** Ongoing reporting to the public.

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**Strategic Planning for Community and Economic Development**

Strategic Planning for Community and Economic Development  
Phillip D. Phillips, Jerry W Robinson, Jr. Wallace Biermann, and Eric P Canada  
University of Illinois Urbana Illinois 1991

According to its principle investigator, the workbook on *Strategic Planning for Community and Economic Development* “provides educational and skills-oriented learning materials to guide social action at the community level. This process is “designed to stimulate community preparedness for community development and economic development” and “helps citizens [and community leaders] in each county develop the skills and resources they need to guide and manage community and economic development.” It was used in 10 different Illinois counties (on a county wide basis) from 1990 – 1994 as a part of Helping Rural Communities Prepare for Economic Development and was replicated in a Delta Partners Initiative in 1995 – 2001. The 10 phases and 29 activities are listed.

**Creating a Strategic Planning Organization (Structure)**

1: Establishing a Timetable for the Strategic Planning Process  
2: Selecting Members of the County Strategic Planning Committee
Developing a Mission Statement
3: Define and Officially Adopt a Mission Statement for Your Strategic Plan

Investigate (understanding) Internal and External Trends
4: Learning More About Your Major Private Sector Employers
5: Learning More About Your Major Government Employers
6: Profiling Your Local Retail Business Community
7: Understanding Population Change in Your County
8: Understanding Social and Economic Trends in Your County
9: Spotting World and National Trends Important to Your County

Analyzing Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
10: Selecting Competitor and Model Comparison Counties
11: Resource Strength or Weakness Evaluation Using Make or Break Factors

Evaluating Resources
12: Determining Organizational, Money and Human Resources
13: Rating Issues for Development

Setting Priorities
Rating Issues for Development

Understanding Goals, Objectives and Strategies.
14: Create Goal Statements
15: Create Objectives.
16: Develop Strategies.
17: Develop Action Steps

Creating Your Strategic Plan.
18: Review Plan Input.
19: Brainstorming Possible Goals, Objectives and Strategies.
20: First Cut at Setting Priorities.
21: Transform Ideas from Brainstorm to Strategic Plan Format.
22: Generating Goals and Objectives.
23: Generating Objectives and Strategies
24: Estimating Resource Needs
25: Selecting Plan Goals, Objectives and Strategies

Presenting Your Strategic Plan.
26: Preparing to Present the Plan to the Public
27: Developing an Ongoing Public Relations Campaign.

Implementing and Evaluating Your Strategic Plan.
28: Create an Organizational Structure to Implement Your Plan
29 (Optional): Feedback on Group Teamwork

Creating a Practical Area-Wide Development Strategy [Futures Oriented Model]

Creating a Practical Area-Wide Development Strategy
Eric L Rinehart
Center for Governmental Studies, Northern Illinois University. 2003.

The state and regional development strategy was developed over a four year period from 1999 to 2003 for 11 regions of the state of Illinois. The university led, state funded initiative involves a six-
phase strategic planning process designed as a multi-community collaboration. “The process assumes that no comprehensive area-wide planning study has been undertaken. Because the focus of this process is area-wide in nature, serving first to create a series of institutional goals and objectives to drive organizational work, it does differ from typical organizational planning in several respects.” The 27 major activities in the five phase (five year) process are strongly oriented to the alternate futures approach to strategic planning.

**Year I: Set Out The Basic Scope Of The Plan**
- Establish Planning Principles
- Define Stakeholders
- Recognize Coordination Responsibilities
- Map The Regions
- Design & Detail Community Engagement
- Confirm Resources For Implementation
- Prepare A Communications Approach

**Year IIa: Diagnose The Current Situation;**
- The Situation Analysis
- Survey (Field) Questionnaire of Assets and Programs
- Results Analysis [of Assets / Programs]
- Environmental Scan

**Year IIb: Envision An Alternative Future**
- Morning Session Of An Area-Wide Summit
- Preparing The Vision Statement
- Afternoon Session Of A Regional Summit
- Merging Group Expectations
- Interim Report On Institutional Goals/Objectives

**Year III: Select Strategies To Implement;**
- Build Consensus for Institutional Goal & Objectives
- Identify Preliminary Solutions
- Hold Area- Wide Brainstorming Summit
- Strategic [Feasibility] Assessment of Proposed Solutions
- Report Suggestions [Solutions/Strategies Report]

**Year IV: Prepare/Implement Work Plans;**
- Decision-Making
- Performance Planning
- Issue Management

**Year V: Evaluative**
- Monitoring Progress
- Measuring Performance
- Analyzing Program Impact
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