

Stewarding the Future of Our Communities

Case Studies in Sustaining Community Engagement and Planning
in America's Small Cities and Towns



Building the 2050 Plan, Newton County, Georgia.
The Center for Community Preservation and Planning.

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Prepared for the Craig Byrne Fellows Program
Orton Family Foundation



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Case Studies in the Stewardship of Community Engagement and Planning

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Glen and Viola Walters Cultural Arts Center

A creative, adaptive reuse of a former church building, the Center is a beehive of community activity.

HILLSBORO, OREGON

A Booming Small City Blends Values and Vision into Canvas of Rapid Growth and Change

Overview

The Hillsboro 2020 Vision and Action Plan is widely regarded as the most successful visioning effort in a state known for visionary community planning. While rapid growth and continuous change have been part of Hillsboro's landscape for more than a quarter century, its efforts to maintain its small-town character and strengthen its cohesiveness have gotten only stronger over time, providing a valuable example for American cities affected by ongoing growth and urbanization. Hillsboro 2020's rigorous approach to visioning, including the creation of a vision and action plan with 180 specific actions, reflects the city's strong predisposition for tangible outcomes; and the results have been impressive. Twenty-three lead partner organizations work collaboratively with the City of Hillsboro to ensure that the community's plan is realized. Just as important, Hillsboro has used its award-winning vision and action plan to steward and sustain its values, even as it implements actions anticipating a dynamic future. In the process, the community is forging an identity that embraces both the old and new.¹

Background

Hillsboro, Oregon, is a city of 91,000 located in the heart of the fertile Tualatin Valley, at the far western edge of the Portland metropolitan area. The seat of government for Washington County, Hillsboro has long served as the political, cultural, and economic hub of the surrounding farming communities. Its downtown has a classic small-town ambience, characterized by a main street with small businesses, a historic county courthouse with majestic giant sequoias, and surrounding older neighborhoods.

Project:

Hillsboro 2020 Vision and Action Plan

Community:

Hillsboro, Oregon

Population:

Circa 91,000

Organization:

City of Hillsboro, Oregon
Hillsboro 2020 Vision Implementation Committee

Website:

www.hillsboro2020.org

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¹ The author of this study served as a consultant to Hillsboro 2020 during its original visioning and planning phases (1998–2000) and continued to advise its Vision Implementation Committee through 2005.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, Hillsboro entered a period of sustained economic growth, driven by a burgeoning high-tech economy known locally as the Silicon Forest. For two decades running, its population grew 8 percent annually, expanding from 28,000 in 1980 to 70,000 in 2000. The city's land area more than doubled through annexation, while new "fabs" (electronics plants) were constructed and new workers arrived. A light-rail line went into service in 1998, connecting the city to Portland and encouraging further development and urbanization. Hillsboro's ethnic mix also changed, with Latinos increasing from fewer than 5 percent of the local population to more than 20 percent.

Despite the recent recession, Hillsboro's growth continues apace. The city is widely viewed as the economic engine of the entire state. Intel Corporation alone employs more than 15,000 workers in Hillsboro, and newer green-tech companies, such as SolarWorld, are expanding the local economic base. Workers from around the world and new residents of transit-oriented developments continue to diversify Hillsboro's changing profile.

Hillsboro 2020, a comprehensive community visioning process guided by the City of Hillsboro and stewarded by the community-based Vision Implementation Committee (VIC), has evolved as an integral part of the city's growth and change, helping to maintain and even strengthen the community's core values while implementing its vision for a dynamic future.

Engagement and Planning Process

By the mid-1990s, it was clear that Hillsboro was being challenged in integrating the many communities and cultures that were growing and evolving within its borders. Physical and social connectivity were suffering; new residents, especially Latinos, were not well integrated into civic life; and many people felt that the community's historic small-town identity and character were disappearing.

Stirred by the prospect of fraying community cohesion, the City of Hillsboro began discussing a community-based visioning process to augment the regular update of its comprehensive plan. The thought was to look at the broader, longer-term future of the community and determine how it might be encouraged to be more proactive. In 1997, city staff conducted a research project to support such an undertaking; it included a scientific survey, focus groups with community leaders, and development of a community profile compiling key data and trends.

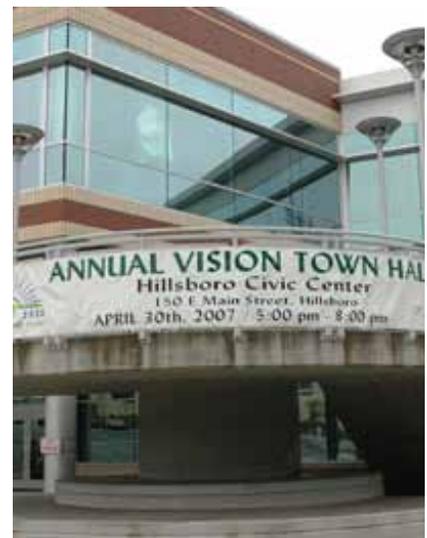
From 1998 to 2000, the city engaged the wider community in Hillsboro 2020, a comprehensive visioning process. The goal was to create a 20-year vision for the city and a near-term, community-based action plan to guide the vision's achievement. A whole-of-community approach addressed seven broad themes that transcended traditional land use planning: community, economy, environment, education, arts and culture, health and safety, and neighborhoods and districts.

Hillsboro 2020 was the largest public engagement process in the city's history, directly involving some 1,500 citizens in meetings, workshops, and community events over nearly two years. Special efforts were made to engage newer residents, especially Latinos; it was the first fully bilingual visioning process in the state. During the initial visioning phase, the community articulated its core values and priority vision ideas. Then, a citizen-based vision task force refined this input into an overarching vision statement subtitled "Hillsboro—Hometown for the Future."

Subsequently, six vision action teams comprised of citizens, local experts, and city staff developed a vision and action plan, to be jointly implemented by the city and 20 lead partner organizations, including governmental agencies, nonprofits, and community groups. The final vision and action plan was unanimously adopted by the city council in the spring of 2000, and the plan was implemented that fall.

Since 2000, the Hillsboro 2020 Vision and Action Plan has been methodically integrated into the life of the community. The ongoing VIC promotes implementation of the plan, supporting lead partner activities, monitoring their progress, and reporting back to the community. The annual 2020 Vision Town Hall has grown in attendance and stature, and a five-year strategy review process periodically reengages citizens in updating the plan. A complete renewal of the community's overarching vision is now proposed for 2015, five years ahead of schedule.

Hillsboro's success in implementing its plan has been impressive, with scores of actions completed over the decade. The physical impact on the community is visible in a major downtown public square; the first city hall in the nation to receive gold LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification; the Glenn and Viola Walters Cultural Arts Center; an adaptive reuse of a former church building, which is heavily used by the community; the Venetian, a renovated movie theater in downtown; a community art gallery; community gardens; bicycle and pedestrian amenities; and dog parks.



Thanks in part to the community's vision, Hillsboro Civic Center is the first city hall in the nation to receive Gold LEED certification.

Building Leadership

Hillsboro recognizes outstanding citizens who have helped to advance its vision—developing new community leadership in the process.



Other less tangible projects add a human dimension to Hillsboro’s visionary successes: after-school programs for youth, the Essential Health Clinic for the medically uninsured, an international reading hour through the local library system targeting the city’s newest overseas arrivals, community emergency response team training, and many similar projects.

By far, Hillsboro 2020’s biggest achievement has been keeping its promise to help create a renewed sense of community identity and cohesion, even as the city continues to grow. Its ongoing presence has had a positive influence on everyday life, reinforcing a community norm for visionary thinking and establishing a reputation that extends far beyond Hillsboro’s boundaries.

Stewardship Description

Twelve years into its vision and action plan, Hillsboro 2020 has established an impressive record in achieving its vision. In fact, the very structure of Hillsboro's vision implementation approach has created a system that helps steward its vision, sustaining the community's capacity to realize its values and visions over time.

Things did not start out quite so smoothly, however. In 2000, Hillsboro 2020 was searching for the right formula to engage the community in implementing its plan.

The VIC had been formed, but its members—many of them the lead partners charged with implementing specific actions—were sometimes unclear about their relationship with the committee or how to report on their progress. City directors, on learning that a good part of the responsibility for implementing the action plan fell on their departments, were unsure how to incorporate the actions into their existing work programs and budgets. The city did not have a clear branding strategy to publicize vision achievements, and the public did not see a lot of immediate results.

Within a year or two, however, the bugs largely had been worked out. This refinement reflected a number of factors, including continued strong support from Hillsboro's city manager, the total commitment of a detail-oriented city project manager, continued efforts to work with the VIC in refining and improving the plan implementation process, and a realization that visibly branding the community's vision-driven achievements would increase Hillsboro 2020's visibility and amplify its success over time.

What resulted were a well-oiled machine, as well as a program of activities and events that have established a regular cycle—or community rhythm—for implementing, reporting on, and refining Hillsboro's vision and action plan. Today, while the VIC's efforts are supported by city funds, staffing, and targeted consulting expertise, the entire effort is clearly community driven; and the collaboration between the city, key stakeholders, and volunteers is impressive.

Every autumn, the VIC convenes and surveys are sent to lead partners to track their implementation successes and challenges for every action in the action plan. The VIC then meets with the lead partners to support or assist their implementation efforts. In the spring of the

Internet and social media are indispensable parts of sustaining citizen engagement.

following year, a progress report is prepared and the annual vision town hall is staged for the public, with lead partners in attendance. By summer, a final report is submitted to the city, and annual vision awards are presented to vision champions in the community. The process begins anew the next fall.

On top of this platform, Hillsboro 2020 has developed a decade's worth of subtle refinements that provide a human face to the project and places for citizens to connect, share their aspirations, and celebrate the community's accomplishments. The VIC has become more ambitious in taking the vision out to the community, and, aptly for its location in the Silicon Forest, it has become more skilled in using electronic communications, the Internet, and social media to spread its message.

Along with its record of achievement, it is Hillsboro 2020's thoroughness that most impresses. In a place once settled by Dutch farmers and today full of engineers, one might not find Hillsboro's rigorous, methodological approach so unusual. As Hillsboro 2020 project manager Christopher Hartye acknowledges, "It takes a lot of time and attention to detail to implement and track the various actions in the plan—but ultimately, it is those actions, and the community collaboration needed to accomplish them, that bring the vision the most meaning."

Stewardship Approaches

Working through the structure of its vision implementation process, Hillsboro 2020 has developed an overall approach and variety of specific tools to steward achievement of the community's vision over time. Its overall approach is essentially driven by ongoing plan implementation—a yearly and five-yearly cycle of repeated activities that are constantly renewed and refined to improve their effectiveness. Hillsboro's stewardship tools are organized below by the five overarching stewardship themes described in the introduction to this report:

1. Honoring local values

Hillsboro 2020 reflects commonly held community values, including notions such as being positive, thinking forward, collaborating, getting things done, and respecting one another in the process. This is how things have always happened in Hillsboro. In essence, the 2020 program has embodied such values, linking the community's historic core values to its future vision.

2. Sustaining citizen engagement

The Hillsboro 2020 Vision Town Hall is held every year, usually in May, to celebrate progress in implementing the community's vision. Town hall attendance has increased steadily over the decade, and each year it attracts hundreds of people. Entertainment and food are provided, the VIC reports on implementation successes from the past year, lead partner organizations have interactive displays, and the public is invited to submit new ideas and volunteer to become more involved. Most recently, the town hall event has been co-branded with other popular community events to build awareness, reach a broader audience, and generate more coverage by local news media.

The Hillsboro 2020 Vision Awards are presented to the individual citizen and organization that have done the most to advance the community's vision over the past year. Recently the awards were coupled with Hillsboro 2020's Annual Progress Report to city council, giving them greater cachet and generating more media recognition.

Community Conversations are now employed regularly to keep the 2020 brand in front of local service clubs and organizations throughout the year. These conversations often happen in public spaces, such as outdoor markets and fairs, and make use of interactive tools. Residents are always asked about their aspirations for the city as a way to touch base with new ideas that may be starting to take hold.

The VIC's Education and Outreach Committee is dedicated to exploring, refining, and delivering better community education and outreach over time. The members design and refine the annual 2020 Vision Town Hall program; mobilize as needed to see that Hillsboro 2020 is represented at community events; communicate with stakeholders; and strategize about public outreach, including the use of the Internet and social media.

The Latino Outreach Advisory Committee (LOAC) is an outgrowth of the original visioning process that continues to articulate the interest and opinions of Hillsboro's growing Latino community for input into the vision and other city activities and projects. The LOAC has also become a significant way for young Latinos to step up to leadership roles.

Internet and Social Media are indispensable parts of sustaining citizen engagement. Hillsboro 2020 regularly posts news, information, updated reports, and downloadable videos to its website



Concrete Results: Children delight in the Magnolia Park fountain—one of many new “third places” where neighbors can gather and connect—called for in the Hillsboro 2020 vision.

(www.hillsboro2020.org); and it uses Facebook to share important news and events and to appeal to a younger, more tech-savvy demographic. Reflecting Hillsboro's large high-tech community, its use of social media is strategic (Facebook is preferred over Twitter, for example), sophisticated, and highly effective.

3. Achieving visions and plans

The Lead Partner Survey is the basic tool used to catalogue and track achievement of the community's vision and action plan. A simple form completed by the lead partners for every action in the Hillsboro 2020 Vision and Action Plan, it provides the foundational information for monitoring and measuring the community's success in achieving its vision.

4. Holding leaders accountable

The VIC is the primary tool for keeping community leadership aware and responsive to the vision. Comprised of lead partner organizations, each with more than one action in the action plan, as well as representatives of general interest groups and the public at large, the 23-member VIC brings together key community organizations in one group charged with ensuring the implementation success of the community's vision. The VIC is chaired by a committee member and supported by city staff; it also receives technical support from the city's consultant.

The VIC's Lead Partner Assistance Subcommittee (LPAS) works directly with lead partners to assist in their implementation of action items in the 2020 vision and action plan. Small teams of lead partner peers discuss their challenges and make suggestions to assist in their success. (The LPAS team has recently been integrated into the VIC's steering committee.)

The Annual Progress Report is the culmination of every year's implementation activities. Based on lead partner feedback and additional ideas suggested by citizens at the annual town hall, the progress report tracks key activities, catalogues community progress in implementing actions, and proposes minor refinements to the plan. In recent years, the report has been shortened and made more graphic to broaden its appeal.

5. Responding to a changing world

The Hillsboro 2020 Strategy Review, conducted every five years, is a major reengagement of the public that involves residents in a high-level review of the vision and action plan. It keeps the plan alive, helps identify emerging community issues, and generates new strategies in response. During the 2010 Strategy Review, at the suggestion of the public, the larger notion of sustainability was worked into Hillsboro's action plan in a much more thorough way.

Stewardship Bottom Line

Hillsboro 2020 is an example of community-based visioning that has been conducted under the guidance of a progressive city government with remarkable success in effecting positive community change. These attributes alone make Hillsboro 2020 noteworthy. Add the fact that the project is focused on an already well-planned city, where the local economy is a regional powerhouse and local politics are impressively collaborative, and the uniqueness of Hillsboro 2020 is apparent.

Looking at such attributes, the standard set by Hillsboro might seem daunting—if not unattainable—to other cities. But that would miss the finer print of this story: Hillsboro is also a city that has faced major challenges in accommodating breakneck growth and incorporating numerous emergent communities and cultures into a traditional small-town setting where a significant percentage of the population is economically disadvantaged or speaks English as a second language. This brings the real success of Hillsboro 2020 into sharper focus.

At the end of the day, what makes Hillsboro 2020 so successful goes beyond the city's considerable advantages. Rather, Hillsboro's success over time has been ensured by a well-honed program of ongoing engagement and stewardship activities, and the community rhythm this program has created. This dedicated, community-based approach has elevated Hillsboro's community values and vision to a place of prominence where they are truly part of the fabric of the community and its civic life. This meets the test of true stewardship.

This approach has elevated Hillsboro's community values and vision to a place of prominence where they are truly part of the fabric of the community and its civic life. This meets the test of true stewardship.



Building a Civic Culture in Hillsboro, Oregon

Hillsboro's Civic Center Plaza, an outcome of its 2020 Vision.



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