# COMMUNITY VISIONING

Community visioning offers local communities new ways to think about and plan for the long-term future. The visioning process was inspired in part by the concept of "anticipatory democracy," an approach to governance that blends futures research, grassroots public participation, and long-range strategic planning.

Visioning has caught on quickly around the country in communities undergoing rapid growth and development as well as those experiencing economic decline. As an adjunct to traditional community planning, visioning promotes greater awareness of societal change and deepened citizen involvement. It also gives communities a stronger sense of control over their destinies.
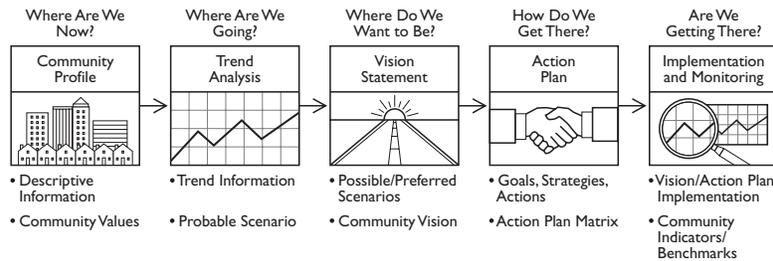
## WHAT IS VISIONING?

In the simplest terms, visioning is a planning process through which a community creates a shared vision for its future and begins to make it a reality. Such a vision provides an overlay for other community plans, policies, and decisions, as well as a guide to actions in the wider community. While a significant number of communities employing a wide range of approaches and techniques have undertaken community visioning, the most successful efforts seem to share these five key characteristics:

- *Understanding the whole community.* The visioning process promotes an understanding of the whole community and the full range of issues shaping its future. It also attempts to engage the participation of the entire community and its key stakeholder groups.
- *Reflecting core community values.* The visioning process seeks to identify the community's core values—those deeply held community beliefs and ideals shared by its members. Such values inform the idealistic nature of the community's vision.
- *Addressing emerging trends and issues.* The visioning process explores the emerging trends driving the community's future and the strategic issues they portend. Addressing such trends promotes greater foresight, adding rigor and realism to the community's vision.
- *Envisioning a preferred future.* The visioning process produces a statement articulating the community's preferred future. The vision statement represents the community's desired "destination"— a shared image of where it would like to be in the long-term future.
- *Promoting local action.* The visioning process also produces a strategic action plan. The action plan serves as the community's "road map": to move it in the direction of its vision in the near-term future.

## BENEFITS OF VISIONING

For communities that successfully engage in visioning, the process offers clear benefits. Visioning:

- brings community members together in a uniquely different context to consider their common future;
- encourages the community to explore new ideas and possibilities;



**Where Are We Now?** Community Profile — • Descriptive Information • Community Values

**Where Are We Going?** Trend Analysis — • Trend Information • Probable Scenario

**Where Do We Want to Be?** Vision Statement — • Possible/Preferred Scenarios • Community Vision

**How Do We Get There?** Action Plan — • Goals, Strategies, Actions • Action Plan Matrix

**Are We Getting There?** Implementation and Monitoring — • Vision/Action Plan Implementation • Community Indicators/ Benchmarks

**THE NEW OREGON MODEL**

*Source: Steven Ames Planning.*

- creates a shared sense of direction and a framework for future community decisions; and
- produces a process that results in concrete goals and strategies for action

Additionally, there can be second-order benefits that may not be immediately apparent in undertaking the process, such as:

- enriching public involvement by expanding the terms and scope of civic engagement;
- fostering new leadership in citizens who have not been previously active in public life;
- promoting active partnerships among government, business, civic, and nonprofit organizations; and
- strengthening community cohesion and "social capital."

In other words, engaging in the *process* of visioning can be as rewarding as its *products.*

Finally, there can be significant visioning benefits for the function of planning itself. For example, strong consensus on community goals can provide an informed and supportive context for the development of other plans and policies. This, in turn, can facilitate and even streamline public involvement.

At the same time, visioning can place new demands on planning. It stretches the traditional role of planners, calling upon new skills and competencies. It demands increased levels of dialogue and trust with the public. Ultimately, to the degree that visioning extends beyond the traditional domain of planning, it requires more effective cross-sector communication and collaboration.

## THE OREGON MODEL

Oregon was one of the first places in the United States to experience the proliferation of community-based visioning. In a state widely recognized for its land-use planning and growth management policies, visioning was seen as an overlay for local land-use plans and a tool to help communities manage change.

Based on Oregon's early community visioning successes and similar state-level efforts, the Oregon Model represents a comprehensive approach to visioning that has since gained widespread acceptance around the country. The model is framed by four simple questions, which collectively form the basis of the visioning process:

1. Where are we now?
2. Where are we going?
3. Where do we want to be?
4. How do we get there?

Answering each question implies a discrete step in the process, with different activities, outcomes, and products. Step one involves profiling the present community's current conditions and core values. Step two involves analyzing emerging trends and their probable impact on the community's future. Step three is geared to the creation of a vision, and step four involves developing an action plan.

Some communities have added a fifth step promoting action plan implementation:

5. Are we getting there?

This addition to the Oregon Model responds to criticism that the visioning process does not always produce real results. The fifth step may also incorporate the development of indicators or benchmarks to monitor and measure the community's success in achieving its vision over time.

Visioning is designed to be iterative and ongoing. Benchmarking provides an important feedback loop for the eventual update of the community's vision and action plan. The action plan, having a much shorter planning horizon than its companion vision, requires more frequent updates.

### Applying the Model

The Oregon Model is a flexible approach that can be adapted to a wide variety of settings and can be scaled up or down depending on the nature of the community, its needs, and its resources. The key to its success is to shape the process to fit the place.

Establishing a vision framework—timeframe, overall focus, and specific focus areas—provides a strategic starting point. Most communities set their vision timeframe at 20 to 25 years into the future. They also adopt a broad overall focus, encompassing the full spectrum of community concerns. Focus areas may range beyond traditional planning to

Steven C. Ames, Steven Ames Planning, Portland, Oregon

encompass such topics as education, arts and culture, health, and public safety. Building on this framework, the design of every visioning process will vary widely.

As a relatively new approach to planning, community visioning can have a steep learning curve; it may employ nontraditional planning techniques such as "environmental scanning" or alternative scenarios. Managing diverse stakeholder groups or alleviating public skepticism regarding the process can prove daunting. Midprocess course corrections are necessary.

Fortunately, none of these challenges are insurmountable. Moreover, the ability of visioning to provide strategic input for such perennial planning concerns as growth management, urban design, transportation, housing, community development, and sustainability justifies the up-front investment. Indeed, planners often use the outcomes of visioning to frame and legitimize other major planning initiatives.

### Involving the Public in Visioning

True to visioning's roots in anticipatory democracy, public involvement is a critical element of the visioning process. Engaging the public is essential in creating a shared community vision and action plan, as well as in promoting their eventual achievement. This implies an inclusive, participatory process capable of forging broad public consensus on key community goals.

To some planners, such a dialogue may seem increasingly difficult in today's society, given the numerous urgent issues on the public agenda, shrinking local government budgets, the busy lives of citizens, and the ever-present distractions of the media and pop culture. For these reasons, public outreach and strong "branding" of the visioning process are absolutely critical to successful public involvement.

Fortunately, for many people, there remains a fundamental appeal in talking about the future of their community. The reason is probably the abiding importance of "place." People relate to and care about where they live; it's one of the fundamental

---

**SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY VISIONING**

Visioning works when:

- The community is concerned about its future and is eager for dialogue.
- The process is well designed, managed, and adequately resourced.
- Key community institutions and opinion leaders are involved in the process.
- Elected officials and city managers are supportive of the process.
- The public is authentically engaged in the process.

Visioning doesn't work when:

- The community is too polarized to engage in a civil dialogue.
- The process is poorly designed or managed or inadequately resourced.
- Key community institutions or opinion leaders are not involved in the process.
- Elected officials or city managers are unsupportive of the process.
- There is no follow-through in implementing the vision and action plan.

---

ways through which we continue to connect as human beings.

There is also an array of tools and techniques to stimulate and facilitate the visioning dialogue. These include participatory techniques, such as public workshops and open houses, as well as more representative techniques, such as citizen task forces, scientific surveys, and focus groups. The former help ensure broad public input, allow for open dialogue, and promote public awareness; the latter help capture diverse viewpoints, promote in-depth discussions, and facilitate the development of specific visioning products.

Additionally, computer-mediated communications are increasingly integral to the visioning process. While "electronic town meetings" have yet to realize their original promise, other tools have stepped in to fill the gap. Visioning today would be inconceivable without the Internet, search engines, and community Web sites, with their respective capacities for disseminating and gathering information. Graphical computer simulations have also increased our ability to actually *see* aspects of preferred—or not-so-preferred—futures.

Undoubtedly, evolving forms of electronic communication will continue to add new dimensions to community visioning, just as the process itself continues to evolve as an integral part of community planning.

***See also:***
Places and Place Making
*Public Meetings*
*Surveys*
Visualization

*Steven C. Ames, Steven Ames Planning, Portland, Oregon*

**PART I   PLANS AND PLAN MAKING**