

Envisioning a Town with Character.

The Idea of Vision.

The vision of a character town is an image of the future in your mind; a visual picture, probably in color, possibly a video. It is inspirational; it is motivational. With a consensus vision of the town's future, the community's dreams are more likely to be realized.

The community's vision, when linked by the town's leaders to its civic pride, drives everything. One vision of a character town could be: *Our town is an interesting, pleasant and prosperous place to live.* Pleasant conveys many images of a place to live a good life. Likewise, prosperous presumes people have jobs with wages sufficient to support a good life; not necessarily a wealthy one, but substantial enough to provide a decent and safe home, a reasonable quality of life and an education for their children.

Visioning

Visioning is a community activity intended to produce a common vision, accompanied by goals, for the future. Ideally, it is broadly based and highly inclusive in order to achieve, if not consensus, then at least widespread buy-in among the various stakeholders and subgroups within the community.

Achieving a vision that includes substantial improvements that enhance resilience as a part of the process of long-term recovery (from a traumatic event) requires effective leadership, solid direction of the process, and a well-considered framework for expressing the resulting ideas and relating them to existing comprehensive plan policies, if possible.

- **Key Point #1:** Effective visioning may help expand the window of opportunity to marshal support for change after a disaster.
- **Key Point #2:** Achieving a meaningful vision to enhance resilience typically requires effective direction and a solid framework for transforming ideas into action.
- **Key Point #3:** The vision of the future of the community should somehow relate to policies already in place or added to the existing comprehensive and other plans the community has adopted.
- **Key Point #4:** Building consensus and creating buy-in requires the inclusion of and full consultation with disadvantaged and minority populations.

Source: The American Planning Association

<https://www.planning.org/research/postdisaster/briefingpapers/visioning.htm>

A Word About Language.

Much time is wasted debating terms like aspiration, goals, objectives, strategy, mission, vision, values, tactics, actions and metrics. At the end of the day, what matters is that there are three kinds of words: those that define the desired outcome; those that reflect the means by which the outcome will be achieved; and those that describe the steps necessary to achieve the outcome. Decide early on language and move on. A set of words has been chosen for this discussion: 1) vision, 2) strategies and 3) actions; but, pick your own words and stick to them.

The Visioning Process and Metrics.

Creating and articulating a vision for the small city or town requires a thoughtful analysis of the current state of the community and its aspirations. Professional help is advised. In general, the discussions are open to all; they are interactive and iterative with short periods between sessions. At the end of the day, progress towards achieving the vision must be made and be seen to be made.

Performance management programs assure constituents that the vision-driven strategies are properly directing the action plans. The metric system assures not only that things are being done right, but that the right things are being done. Metric systems are most effective when they are up-front, transparent, learning-oriented and understandable to stakeholders, community leaders and city officials.

Visioning for a Character Town: A Process

1. **Evaluate, or scan, the current situation.** Document the existing situation through a community scan, SWOT analysis or similar technique that evaluates the town's condition, its assets and liabilities. Also, determine the motivation for the visioning effort. Who wants to establish a new or revised vision of the community? What is the dissatisfaction with the status quo?
2. **Convene the stakeholders.** This group can be the entire town, the town leaders, the neighborhoods or the business community. It is best if every aspect of the town is involved from the start.
3. **Discuss the scan and define problems.** Examine, in a public forum, the results of the community scan. Discuss the town's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Keep the discussions going until there is a general consensus of the town's condition and its problems.
4. **Look at models and examples.** What other communities do people like? Why? What features are important? What are the unfavorable features of the model towns?
5. **Workshop all issues and opportunities.** Once the current situation is agreed upon, problems identified and models examined, begin to collectively talk about what would be a great future for the town. Work through inconsistencies like high service levels and low taxes. Leave nothing unsaid. This process may take several sessions with open agendas or sessions focused on specific issues.
6. **Develop alternative visions.** In many communities, there are factions with different views of the future. These can be documented and then discussed. The process is not over until the disparate visions are rectified without resignation. This is not a win-lose game; the purpose is to find common ground that everyone can rally around.
7. **Construct a consensus vision.** If one emerges, congratulations. If the differing views persist, an initial consensus may not be possible. Since the city's go-forward strategy and all of its action plans depend on being vision-driven, a vision must be established. In the worst case, the factions continue to feud and the town's future is held in limbo. In the best case, the factions recognize their differing views and resolve to keep working the conflict until it is resolved. Striving for consensus is a worthy goal even if it takes years to achieve; which sometimes it does.

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The Value of “Branding”.

The brand is character-based. It is what identifies a place, a person or a product. A brand is the manifestation of the town’s vision of its character built on the unique and authentic qualities of the town. The brand of a small city or town tells the world what it is and what it aspires to be. The town’s brand leads to its being known for a certain quality, or character.

The inspirational value of an authentic, consensus-derived brand is immense. Visioning and branding are prerequisites to any meaningful city planning whether strategic, comprehensive or otherwise.

Protecting, enhancing and creating character depends on a supportive consensus vision that drives strategy. Character is built, not born; building the town’s brand helps tell its story.

Conclusions.

1. **Be bold, think big** - recalling Daniel Burnham’s charge:

“Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency. Remember that our sons and grandsons [not to mention our daughters and granddaughters] are going to do things that will stagger us. Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty. Think big.”

Daniel Burnham, Chicago architect. (1846-1912); Burnham (1907) quoted in: Charles Moore (1921) [Daniel H. Burnham, Architect, Planner of Cities. Volume 2](#). Chapter XXV "Closing in 1911-1912;" [p. 147](#)

2. **Be qualitative.** Use visioning to describe the enduring qualities of the town. Adjectives and adverbs are welcome.
3. **Be serious.** Take visioning and branding seriously with a ground-up, character-based approach.
4. **Be patient.** Don’t rush the process. Time taken to delve into the depths of the town’s being is time well spent. It is hard to make strategic or action plans without a consensus vision.
5. **Be intellectually connected.** Construct a visible intellectual thread that connects vision to strategy, strategy to action and therefore vision to action.
6. **Be practical.** Budgets and regulations for vision-based actions are easier to approve than actions with no visible connection to a bigger idea.
7. **Be accountable.** Measure performance in a real-time, visible manner. Nothing builds trust like the vulnerability that comes with openly showing our work and candidly discussing the outcomes.
8. **Be action-oriented.** Character towns are the result of visionary thinkers and doers, in the past and in the present. Character doesn’t just appear; it is envisioned and enacted by people who care about the town, its people and its future.