

Suffield, Connecticut: Planning for Preservation

Name of Tool: Community Visioning Workshop

Implementing Agency: Hartford (Connecticut) MPO and Town of Suffield

Scale of Application: Local comprehensive planning

Description: The Hartford MPO and the Town of Suffield worked together to conduct a community visioning process, including a workshop and a Visual Preference Survey, for this rural town on the outskirts of the Hartford metropolitan areas. The result of the collaboration was a plan for the town that would preserve its rural character while allowing development in the town center and in village locations. The project has resulted in changes to zoning, streetscaping improvements, and agricultural land preservation initiatives to implement the plan.

Purpose and Need

Community visioning workshops have been used throughout the country to help communities determine how they want to grow and to make policy choices consistent with this vision. The workshops, which are usually part of a larger public process, provide citizens with an interactive and hands-on experience in which they can evaluate and discuss land use and transportation issues and needs, and collectively identify desired future patterns and projects. Visioning workshops have been appropriately and successfully used not only in community planning, but also in transportation studies including corridor planning and subarea planning for a downtown or neighborhood. They have been used in conjunction with other tools such as technical analysis methods and visualization techniques to better help people understand the impacts of policy choices on transportation and development patterns.

The benefits of community visioning workshops, especially compared to traditional public hearings, include:

- Workshops can be done early in the planning process to identify issues and needs from the community's perspective, thus helping planners and engineers formulate solutions appropriate to those needs.
- Citizens are actively engaged through the use of interactive techniques such as drawing on maps and small-group discussions, to help offer creative solutions of their own.
- Workshops provide an opportunity for two-way learning. In addition to expressing their viewpoints, citizens can listen to and learn from planners and engineers.
- The dialogue undertaken at a workshop, and the relationships formed, can help bring people to consensus around potentially controversial issues.

This case study highlights one example in which a community visioning workshop was successfully undertaken to help a growing rural community identify and implement zoning changes, transportation improvements, and other policies to preserve its rural character while accommodating growth in compact, mixed-use developments.

Description

Community visioning workshops can range from half-day events to intensive, multi-day processes known as "charrettes." Typically, the workshop begins with sharing of information. Agency staff will discuss the context, goals, and objectives of the workshop, and provide any findings or recommendations from previous workshops and other public outreach efforts. Staff, consultants, or other experts may provide background information, such as how different land use choices might affect transportation or environmental conditions in the community. In the second part of the workshop, participants are broken into small groups of about eight to ten people, each with a facilitator, and asked to identify problems and/or propose solutions. This part of a community visioning workshop often involves drawing on base maps showing different types of data about the community. In the third and final part of the workshop, each group presents its issues and proposed solutions to the others. Staff and consultants then take the workshop findings and solidify them into more specific recommendations. In a multi-day effort, workshop participants may be part of an iterative process to progressively refine recommendations.

The community visioning workshop always occurs in the broader context of other project activities. For example, a steering committee composed of key stakeholders sets the direction for the project and provides continued oversight. Public input may be solicited through other mechanisms, such as surveys that reach a broader audience than those who can participate in the workshop. Publicity helps inform the community about the goals and objectives of the project and communicate workshop findings and recommendations to those unable to participate. The extensiveness of the process and the level of iteration depend upon the resources available and the complexity of the problems being addressed.

Application Examples

The Town of Suffield, population 12,000, is located about 25 miles north of Hartford and adjacent to Bradley International Airport. In 1999, the opportunity for a unique partnership arose when the Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG) approached the town and asked it to participate as a pilot community in a study on regional growth patterns. The town, concerned about the effects of unplanned development, eagerly accepted the offer. Assisted by a grant from FHWA, CRCOG provided the town with the technical and financial resources to conduct a public planning process, including a regional opinion survey, Visual Preference Survey, and visioning workshop.

Town officials report that two tools in particular were instrumental in helping the town determine its vision and agree upon changes to plans, zoning, and implementation tools to achieve that vision. These were:

- A Visual Preference Survey, which helped people to evaluate what they liked and didn't like about various forms of development and to understand the impacts of zoning regulations on development outcomes.
- A community visioning workshop, at which participants reviewed the Visual Preference Survey Results; reviewed existing land use, zoning, and transportation patterns; mapped desired land uses, and identified transportation concerns and potential improvements.

A Visual Preference Survey is a tool that uses a combination of images and words to convey development principles and to discern differences in public opinion on development. In summer 2000, CRCOG and its consultants administered a Visual Preference Survey in-person by visiting a cross-section of groups in Suffield, including:

- Town Hall staff;
- The Chamber of Commerce;
- The Democratic and Republican Town Committees;
- The Planning and Zoning Commission;
- Various citizens groups and civic organizations; and
- City-wide at a weekend "Suffield on the Green festival, which was attended by thousands of people.

Participants were shown images of various types of development and asked to rate them. Participants were also asked to answer questions such as, "What would make a community and a region a place in which you would like to live?"

The findings from the Visual Preference Survey were used at a three-hour workshop held in summer 2001, attended by 40 people. Attendees included elected officials, town staff, and citizens. At the workshop, participants were first given an overview of the CRCOG regional visioning project and were presented with the results of the survey as well as the regional opinion survey on growth issues. Participants were then divided into small groups to undertake a series of visioning exercises. In these groups, participants were given base maps of the Suffield region and the town center, along with tracing paper and markers, and asked to draw on the maps and make recommendations.

For the town as a whole, participants were asked to identify:

- Current conditions - environmentally sensitive areas, scenic vistas, and areas of historical significance;
- Zoning - what types of zoning should apply to which areas;
- Land use - Desired locations of villages and amount of homes and commercial activity in the villages;
- Transportation - Traffic problems, locations for traffic calming, and appropriate locations and land uses for a proposed bypass;
- Parking - Patterns of commercial development and parking;

Participants were then asked to focus on the Town Center and address:

- Locations, frontages, and phasing of commercial activity; and
- Appropriate locations of trees, lights, crosswalks, and benches.

After hearing final comments from participants, the project consultants synthesized the results of the workshops into a set of recommendations for the town, which were provided to town staff, elected officials, and workshop participants.

Successes and Lessons Learned

The workshop and associated activities have led the town to undertake specific implementation steps including zoning changes, land preservation, and streetscape improvements. The town rewrote its zoning code in-house over a two-year period following the workshop, and adopted these changes in early 2004. Zoning changes adopted by the town include:

- A Village District overlay that applies to the town center, allowing zero-setback buildings and residential uses above stores, and focusing commercial development within a walkable distance;
- An architectural design review process;
- Exclusive agricultural zoning to protect existing farms in designated preservation areas; and
- Shared parking in village centers.

Also following the summer 2001 workshops, the town successfully applied for a Small Town Economic Assistance Program (STEAP) grant of \$500,000 from the State of Connecticut to implement streetscape improvements including benches, lighting, and on-street parking. Final design for more significant reconstruction of Main Street is underway, but construction will await the availability of Transportation Enhancement funds, anticipated in 2006. After completion of the design, it was determined that additional funding was necessary in order to move forward with the streetscape project. The town applied for and was awarded another STEAP grant in the amount of \$400,000, and actual construction of the streetscape improvements is slated to commence in spring 2006. The town also solicited sponsorships for the decorative benches, lighting, and a street clock from families, businesses, and civic organizations and was able to stretch the budget by over \$20,000. In addition, the town, with the support of other funders including a local foundation and the Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Preservation Program, has provided \$2 million for agricultural preservation through the purchase of development rights.

Phil Chester, Suffield's Town Planner, notes that the community visioning process "helped bring the community together to combat sprawl." He notes that the results of the Visual Preference Survey were especially instrumental in helping to build a consensus around zoning changes and other implementation steps. By providing quantitative data on peoples' preferences, the survey lent credibility to the project's goals. In part because of the survey and workshop process, and in part because of existing support for preservation goals within the community, there was little opposition to the zoning changes proposed and ultimately adopted by the town.

"Whenever someone questions what we're doing, I point to the results of the public survey and note that we're doing the work the citizens want." - Phil Chester, Suffield Town Planner

A pre-existing "Heritage Committee," made up of town officials and citizen representatives, helped ensure wide involvement from the beginning of the project. The committee provided oversight to the project and served as a forum for articulating solutions. The committee had been formed as a response to concerns about preserving Suffield's heritage as a rural community since colonial times.

The funding and technical expertise provided by CRCOG catalyzed and facilitated the visioning process, and without them the process probably would not have taken place. The expertise of a town planner hired by Suffield in 2000, shortly after the project began, also was instrumental in allowing the town to rewrite its zoning code. Town officials indicated that the momentum created by the MPO-led project may have helped solidify support for the town planner position, which did not previously exist.

For Further Information

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