Strategies for Making Places: Belle Plaine Community Visioning

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Iowa's Living Roadways
community
visioning

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Introduction

The purpose of this case-study analysis is to describe how communities develop projects after completing the Community Visioning process. Specifically, the research team examined how communities used resources, partnerships, and knowledge developed in the program to move forward to secure funding, convene teams, get additional help, and use other programs to achieve goals. This document describes the completion of research begun in 2015 and highlights the findings in Belle Plaine.

Methodology

To capture how communities build projects and better understand factors that impact the implementation process, the research team used an expanded case-study approach building on existing data such as exit interviews and impact surveys. The initial case-study list consisted of 109 communities that participated in the Community Visioning process from 2006 through 2013. Based on geographic distribution, diversity of contexts for pursuing visioning, and available existing data, the research team identified 12 communities on which to conduct further research.

Student interns developed project maps for the 12 communities showing the locations of completed projects, as well as images of enhancements proposed during the visioning process and a place for notes. Students visited the study communities and photographed the completed projects, making notes on the quality of construction, planting, and maintenance for each site.

Although interviewing committee members was not part of the site-visit protocol, on several occasions the students encountered residents willing to share their insights regarding the visioning process and subsequent project implementation.

After establishing baseline information for the selected communities, we narrowed down the list of study communities on which to conduct a deeper investigation to six: Belle Plaine, Clarksville, Parkersburg, Shellsburg, Tripoli, and Woodbine.

The research team outlined the implementation stories in the six communities by combining data collected during site visits with elements of previous research and reviewing exit interviews with steering committee members conducted by Trees Forever field coordinators. We fleshed out these stories further by reviewing press clippings and social media posts.

We compared our findings with those in existing literature on decision making in rural communities. The Iowa State University Department of Sociology conducted a longitudinal study of the conditions in 99 Iowa communities in 1994, 2004, and 2014 to develop a profile of Iowa small towns. The results are published in a report titled *Sigma: A Profile of Iowa Small Towns 1994 to 2014*. The foundation of this study is the work of Iowa State University faculty members Vern Ryan and Willis Goudy on how rural Iowa differs from urban areas.

Findings

The follow-up interviews, press clippings, and social media posts provided a rich data set on factors affecting both the planning and implementation processes in rural communities. Although each community has a unique story, these data are valuable in terms of cross-case analyses in that patterns across the communities emerged that will guide future research.

Comparing the study communities' stories revealeda number of characteristics common among most or all of the planning and implementation processes. The factors that contribute to successful community project implementation fall into four categories: communication and social learning, organizational structure, values and community sentiment, and compatible design proposals.

Communication and Social Learning

Communication in the context of Community Visioning is how a local steering committee "gets the word out" about committee meetings, workshops, and events during the planning process and later when trying to get projects built. The success of communication strategies at the local level is often dependent on the social environment in a community. Engaging people is easier when there is a sense of friendliness and credibility among residents. When a proposal comes from a trusted member of their social environment, people are more likely to embrace change and are willing to share with their peers through social networks such as service clubs, church groups, and youth groups (*Sigma*, p. 16).

Organizational Structure

The results of the case-study analysis indicate that communities with one or more organizations devoted to betterment in place at the time they participated in the Community Visioning program tend to complete more visioning projects in a shorter length of time. Possible reasons are that well-organized committees already have mechanisms in place for grant writing, fund-raising, recruiting volunteers, and managing projects. Strong organizational structure also seems to affect the number and scale of projects that a community can complete.

Values and Community Sentiment

The value that people assign to the place where they live relates directly to their willingness to invest in their communities. Residents who are emotionally linked to their surroundings typically take the time and effort to become involved in community building. Those who have strong social ties demonstrate this by serving on local boards, running for elected office, or donating financially or by volunteering. The importance of community sentiment to effective project implementation is born out in the analysis of the six study communities.

Compatible Design Proposals

One of the central tenets of the Community Visioning program is that the steering committee, with input from residents through the assessment process, decides what project designs it wishes to pursue. The role of the consultant is to create a concept design for each project that is feasible, sustainable, and meets the needs of the community. While part of the visioning process gives the committee the opportunity to "think big," the final concept plan should ultimately fit the scale and resources of the community.

The following narrative demonstrates how these four factors influence the outcomes of completing the visioning process in Belle Plaine.
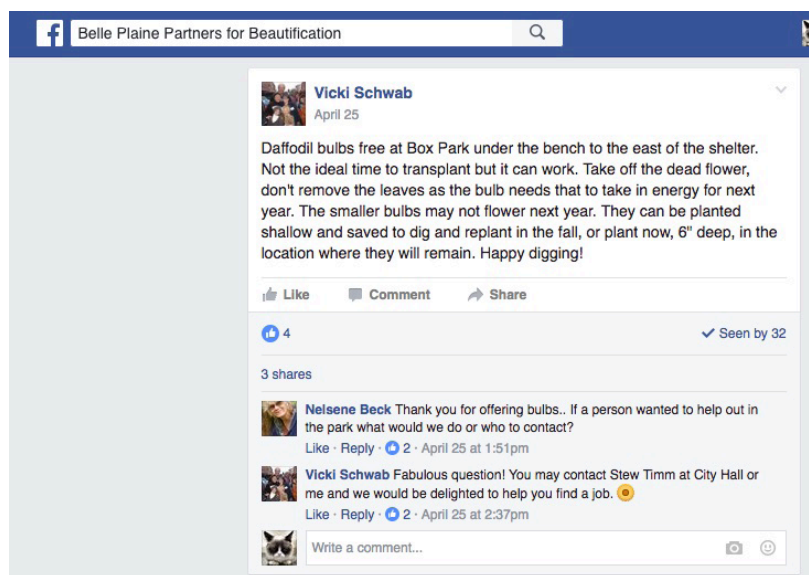
Belle Plaine

A study of Belle Plaine shows that the community began the visioning process with established organizational structures in place, along with a spirit of cooperation among the different groups. This well-organized community was able to obtain $4.4 million in grants from a variety of sources, including Main Street Iowa, the Iowa Economic Development Authority (in the form of a Community Development Block Grant), the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, and Trees Forever, among others, and successfully completed 10 projects.

At the time Belle Plaine applied to the Community Visioning program, it already had established the Belle Plaine Community Development Corporation (BPCDC), which had partnered with the City of Belle Plaine to redo the downtown streetscape. When forming the visioning committee, the cochairs made sure that the mayor and others involved in the downtown project were members. This arrangement allowed the Belle Plaine visioning committee to expand its focus outside downtown while staying connected with the downtown streetscape project, ensuring that the visioning proposals would complement the downtown plan.

The committee also consisted of members of a variety of service organizations in Belle Plaine, including the Lion's Club, the Rotary, the Optimist Club, 4-H, Girl Scouts, and Knights of Columbus. Several master gardeners and the director of the Parks and Recreation Department also served on the committee.

Since completing the visioning process, the Belle Plaine visioning committee has evolved into Belle Plaine Partners for Beautification (BPPB). During a follow-up interview with Trees Forever, committee members noted that they continue to collaborate with BPCDC and the City of Belle Plaine, because partnering with a nonprofit or government entity offers more funding opportunities.

The Belle Plaine Partners for Beautification Facebook page gives residents a forum where they can learn about ongoing projects and how they can contribute.

The Belle Plaine visioning committee (and subsequently the BPPB) has employed several communications strategies from the start of the visioning process in 2008 to the present. Throughout the planning process, the steering committee received regular coverage in the local newspapers. This coverage was most likely facilitated by the fact that one of the committee members wrote for the *Belle Plaine Star Press Union*.

The committee has also made good use of the presentation boards and feasibility study. During the first year of implementation, the committee took the boards to community events and to city council meetings. As recently as June 2015, BPPB cochairs Vicki Schwab and Richard Wells said that they still use the visioning products to share information about ongoing projects.

In April 2015, BPPB set up a Facebook page, where the group has posted hundreds of photos of residents building projects, completed projects, and residents making use of new amenities created through visioning. BPPB also posts fund–raising announcements and calls for volunteers. The site is also an information source for people interested in participating in projects.

These strategies are significant, because according to *Sigma*, 34% of residents not involved in community projects said that no one had asked them, and 16% said that they were unaware of how to become involved. Community leaders in Belle Plaine understand the importance of communication.

Through the visioning assessment process, Belle Plaine residents were able to voice their opinions and ideas.

Sources

Belle Plaine Visioning Application

Belle Plaine Partners for Beautification Facebook Page

Field Notes by Madison Dierks and Katherine Gould, July 2016

Follow-up Interview by Dustin Hinrichs with the Belle Plaine Visioning Committee in February 2014

Interview with Sheila Hlas, Executive Director, Belle Plaine Community Development Corporation

Interview with Vicki Schwab and Richard Wells, Cochairs, Belle Plaine Partners for Beautification

Press Clippings from the Belle Plain Star Union, *the* Tipton Conservative and Advocate, *and the* South Benton Union

During the follow-up interview with Trees Forever, committee members attributed the group's continued success to maintaining regular communication with the city and local organizations. BPPB cochair Vicki Schwab noted that Belle Plaine has been successful because it has a good visioning committee, along with many residents who want to "jump in and help."

In summary, Belle Plaine is a community that is rich in social capital, a characteristic important to making decisions and accomplishing goals more efficiently (*Sigma*, p. 11).

Project Implementation

At the recommendation of Trees Forever field coordinator Mark Pingenot, the Belle Plaine visioning committee started implementation with a project that was simple but would have an immediate impact. With funding from the Alliant Energy and Trees Forever Branching Out program, the committee purchased trees and resident volunteers planted them at the community entrances.

In addition to entryway enhancements, Belle Plaine volunteers completed planting projects in two parks. One of the planting projects was a bioswale to address a wet area in Box Park. The community also created a new park with a mowed

"The bigger part of success is educating everybody and making sure they come [to meetings] and they know what's going on."

—Sheila Hlas, BPCDC Executive Director

Volunteers lay cement for the trail in Box Park (top) before planting a bioswale (bottom).

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Top left: The first visioning project was planting trees at each community entrance.
Above: Belle Plaine added signage at each entrance later in the implementation process.
Left: Beautiful Plaines Prairie Park features interpretive signage throughout the park.

trail along the Iowa Valley Scenic Byway that passes through town. The Beautiful Plaines Prairie Park features native prairie vegetation with interpretive signing and serves as an interactive learning center as well as a community gathering place.

A site visit conducted in July 2016 shows that overall the projects are well built and maintained, primarily by volunteers.

Discussion

The data collected in this case-study research indicate that communities that are successfully completing projects have a number of characteristics in common, despite very different circumstances.

Regardless of geographic location, population, use of social media, or physical conditions (e.g., recovering from a natural disaster, as in Parkersburg), the six study communities were impacted by the four types of factors identified in the findings: communication and social learning, organizational structure, values and community sentiment, and compatible design proposals.

Communication and Social Learning

Communities that successfully completed projects used multiple strategies to engage residents and "get the word out," including sending press releases and announcements to the local media, planning meetings and workshops to coincide with community events, and regularly updating the local government (e.g., attending city council meetings).

Each of the case-study communities also had a social environment in which residents felt a sense of friendliness and trust. Finally, the visioning committees in the study communities worked through social networks such as the Lions Club, schools, and local businesses to share ideas and solicit input. Unique examples of engagement include the Tripoli Community Visioning float and Shellsburg's Family Fun Nights. In recent years, social media—specifically Facebook—have become popular methods of communicating with residents.

Organizational Structure

The visioning committees in nearly all the case-study communities were a product of or part of an existing local group. In Shellsburg, Parkersburg, Woodbine, and Belle Plaine, the visioning committees were products of the Shellsburg Area Community Group, the Long-Term Tornado Recovery Committee, the Horizons committee, and the Belle Plaine Economic Development Corporation, respectively. In Shellsburg and Belle Plaine, these "parent" organizations continue to support and collaborate with their respective visioning committees; in Parkersburg the city has taken over project implementation. As a result, these communities are obtaining funds and implementing projects in a relatively short period of time.

Values and Community Sentiment

Residents in the study communities have a strong sense of community attachment that is demonstrated by their willingness to volunteer to help raise funds and build projects. Local businesses donate equipment, labor, and funding to volunteer efforts. Residents who are emotionally linked to their surroundings typically take the time and effort to become involved in community building. In the case of Parkersburg, social ties and community sentiment were strengthened as residents helped each other recover from a natural disaster.

The steering committees in the study communities gained the trust of the public through techniques described in social learning theory, such as presenting concept plans at a citywide breakfast or displaying them in a parade.

Compatible Design Proposals

Successful completion of visioning projects in the study communities can also be attributed to concept plans that are feasible and sustainable. Committee members in these communities praised their respective consultants for their understanding of how to balance the needs and desires of a client community with potential resources. At the same time, these consultants gave their committees the opportunity to "think big," resulting in communities completing projects that formerly were considered outside the realm of possibility.

Next Steps

The findings of this study provide a framework for future program evaluation. For instance, the impromptu conversations in which student interns engaged with committee members and residents involved in building and maintaining projects offered valuable insight into local values and community sentiment. Additional interviews informed by the data collected for this study would increase our understanding of the social environment in visioning communities and how it contributes to successful project implementation.

Since Facebook launched in 2014, social media have become more and more a part of everyday life. A number of visioning committees have their own Facebook pages or post on their city or chamber pages and websites. For this study, the research team identified visioning communities that have websites, Facebook pages, or post on other websites or pages.

However, social media have expanded to include Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube, to mention a few, and, according the Pew Research Center, nearly two-thirds of Americans own a smartphone, giving them easy access to these platforms. Therefore, it may be useful to study more closely the use of different types of social media in visioning communities and whether or not such communication strategies impact residents' participation during and after visioning.

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