

Strategies for Making Places: Clarksville Community Visioning

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments2

Introduction.....3

Findings4

Clarksville.....6

Discussion..... 10

Next Steps 12

References..... 13

Acknowledgments

Research Design

Julia Badenhope

Director, Iowa's Living Roadways Community Visioning Program
Professor of Landscape Architecture

Sandra Oberbroeckling

Project Manager, Iowa's Living Roadways Community Visioning Program
Extension Program Specialist, Extension and Community and Economic Development

Field Documentation

Mathew Gordy

Studio Director, Iowa's Living Roadways Community Visioning Program

Madison Dierks

Landscape Architecture Intern

Katherine Gould

Landscape Architecture Intern

Henry Herman

Landscape Architecture Intern

Analysis, Editing, and Layout

Sandra Oberbroeckling

Project Manager, Iowa's Living Roadways Community Visioning Program
Extension Program Specialist, Extension and Community and Economic Development

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 Clarksville.

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 revealed a 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 Clarksville.

Clarksville

Population: 1,425

Community Visioning Year: 2010

Projects Completed: 10

*Trees Forever Facilitator: Patty (Petersen)
Reisinger*

*Landscape Architects: David Yocca, Jason
Navota, Lybra Lindke*

Intern: Chris Riggert

The Clarksville case study demonstrates how the local steering committee convinced an initially reluctant community to embrace the visioning process. Although Clarksville collaborated with the Butler County Conservation Board to develop the Rolling Prairie Recreation Trail and had an established Trees Forever group and a recently-formed committee to promote healthy lifestyles, residents had what visioning committee member Jeff Kolb described as "the mentality that this is just Clarksville."

Despite this obstacle, the community has gone on to complete three projects and participate with Butler County in the Trees Forever Trails Visioning program.

The visioning committee successfully engaged the skeptical public with communication methods that incorporated techniques described in social learning theory. Along with making sure that the process received regular coverage in area newspapers, the committee arranged for Trees Forever field coordinator Patty Reisinger to talk to the local PEO group about Community Visioning before the process started to send a cue to residents that "something big was going to happen."

Throughout the process, committee members personally invited residents and other local groups to attend meetings and workshops to pull in opinions from a variety of people. In addition to obtaining more input, this strategy increased the likelihood that residents would buy in to the concept plan and would be willing to donate their time and/or financial resources (*Sigma*, p. 18).

According to *Sigma*, "One way that people come to know and trust each other and learn to work together is through socializing at gathering places in town" (p. 12). The Clarksville visioning committee chose to hold the final presentation of the concept plan during the first annual Fun Day, a communitywide event held in a public park. The committee has also held fund-raisers in conjunction with community events, such as having a baked potato bar at local high school basketball games.

During the follow-up interview with Trees Forever, the Clarksville visioning committee noted that because of visioning, the




Personal invitations to residents to attend Community Visioning focus groups ensured that residents came to the workshop.

community is more aware of funding opportunities, which is evidenced by its success in acquiring the funds needed to build projects. Through local fund-raising efforts and a REAP grant from the Iowa DNR, Clarksville raised approximately \$150,000 to implement a park plan and install lights at the softball fields. Another volunteer group has raised \$42,000 of a \$70,000 project for a splash pad in another park.

Committee members attributed the group's sustainability to the fact that the visioning committee is a "doing" group that has accomplished some of its goals. "Success breeds success," one committee member said at the follow-up interview.

In addition, residents have become more invested in the community. For example, during a site visit, while documenting the recently opened Reading Park, student interns encountered Cindy Wedeking, one of the Clarksville librarians, who came to the park to water the annual planters. She explained that she and the other librarian take turns watering the planters.

The conversation with the Wedeking revealed that Reading Park has become a popular community gathering place. The community holds concerts in a recreated band shell located in the park, drawing as many as 1,200 attendees on one occasion. An amenity such as Reading Park has a significant influence on "[p]eople's affection for and commitment to their community..." (Sigma, p. 15).



BAKED POTATO BAR
January 30th, 5:30 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.
School East Gym Lobby
Come eat then stay for the H.S. basketball games!
Build Your Own Baked Potatoes \$5.00
toppings including chili, ham, cheese, and more!
Fresh Baked Cookies, Vegetable Tray and Drinks
(Carry outs welcome)
Sponsored by the Clarksville Community Visioning Committee
All Proceeds benefit future community beautification projects

The Clarksville visioning committee scheduled a fund-raiser in conjunction with local high school basketball games. Source: Clarksville Star, January 26, 2011.

The Clarksville entrance sign is another new "point of pride" in the community. The project was funded by a Butler County Foundation grant and constructed by volunteers, one of whom expressed the opinion that Clarksville "didn't need such a

Sources

Clarksville Visioning Application

*Conversation with Cindy Wedeking,
Clarksville Librarian, July 2016*

*Field notes by Meredith Borchardt, June
2016*

*Field Notes by Madison Dierks, Katherine
Gould, and Henry Herman, July 2016*

*Follow-up Interview by Meredith Borchardt
with the Clarksville Visioning Committee
in August 2016*

*Press Clippings from the Clarksville Star, the
Allison Butler County Tribune-Journal,
and the Waverly Democrat*



Above: Clarksville librarian Cindy Wedeking waters the planters in Reading Park.

Top right: Volunteers construct the Clarksville entrance sign at Highways 3 and 188.

Left: In 2014, seniors requested that their class picture be taken at the entrance sign.



fancy sign." However, upon hearing positive feedback about the project, that individual "changed his thinking," according to steering committee members. Community pride was also demonstrated by students in the 2014 senior class, who opted to have their class photo taken at the sign.

Project Implementation

The Clarksville visioning committee began the implementation process with a sign at the south entrance to the community at the intersection of Highways 3 and 188. Although small in scope relative to the other

project proposals, this entrance sign had an immediate impact on the community by making it visible to travelers when it had once been hidden. The entrance sign project was followed by a cleanup day at the south entrance, in which a number of local youth participated.

Subsequent projects that Clarksville has completed are Reading Park and a crosswalk between Reading Park and the Clarksville Public Library. As noted in the aforementioned conversation with a Clarksville librarian, the Reading Park project was a popular improvement to Clarksville.



Top: A new ADA-accessible crosswalk connects the Clarksville Library to Reading Park.

Bottom: The Reading Park band shell is a popular venue for community concerts.

Two projects not proposed in the visioning process but that the committee believes are direct results of Clarksville's participation in Community Visioning include "Light Up the Field," in which lights were installed at the softball fields, and the ongoing effort to raise funds to add a splash pad to Volunteer Park.

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 to 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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Pew Research Center, April 2015, "The Smartphone Difference." Available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/01/us-smartphone-use-in-2015/>

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