

# Strategies for Making Places: Parkersburg 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 Parkersburg.

## 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 Parkersburg.

# Parkersburg

*Population: 1,425*

*Community Visioning Years: 1999 and 2009*

*Projects Completed: 10*

*Trees Forever Facilitator: Patty (Petersen)  
Reisinger*

*Landscape Architect: Meg Flenker*

*Interns (2009): Emily Swihart and Lily Love-  
Toppar*

Parkersburg has participated in the Community Visioning program twice, completing the process for the first time in 1999 and again in 2009. As a result of going through the program in 1999, trees had been planted along the then US Highway 20 corridor, enhancements to Depot Prairie Park were partially complete, and the downtown streetscape project was well under way.

Two major changes impacted Parkersburg between 1999 and 2009. In 2003, US Highway 20 was relocated five miles south of town, reducing daily traffic volumes on State Highway 14/17 (the old US 20 corridor) from 6,300 to 3,800.

Five years later, on May 25, 2008, an EF5 tornado ripped through the southern half of the town, destroying numerous houses and businesses, two banks, and the high school. The storm essentially obliterated the earlier tree plantings along the Highway 14/57 corridor.

Following the initial clean up, the city council formed the Long-term Tornado Recovery Committee. This committee worked with the city and Parkersburg Economic Development to develop a

strategic recovery plan, of which the 2009 Parkersburg visioning committee was a component. As part of the disaster-recovery plan, the visioning committee had a framework within which to set goals and prioritize projects.

The Parkersburg visioning committee understood the importance of community buy in and the need to build relationships and trust with residents (*Sigma*, p. 10). The committee made an effort to engage the public by holding open houses and serving food, having presentations at the farmers market, and holding the public presentation of the concept plan in conjunction with the Veterans Breakfast and the Classic Car Show. Fifty residents attended the public presentation. Once the concept plan was finished, the committee posted the presentation boards at city hall. However, the local press did not cover key meetings in the process such as the design workshop and the public presentation.

This lack of coverage may have contributed to some complaints by residents. During the follow-up interview with Trees Forever, committee members said that some residents weren't aware of the visioning process in Parkersburg

***"You've got to have a core group of people who really form relationships and move the projects and aspirations forward."***

—Chris Luhring, Parkersburg  
City Administrator



and questioned some of the decisions made after projects were completed. The interview participants noted the importance of having meeting minutes and the feasibility study.

Despite this issue, the community was able to complete 10 projects and has identified three additional projects—a ball field complex, a swimming pool, and improvements to Schwartz Park. Because so many trees were lost, the community also participated in a Recover, Replant and Restore program conducted by Trees Forever.



*Residents identify priority areas on a map of Parkersburg for landscape architect Meg Flenker.*

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

City administrator Chris Luhring attributes the group's continued success to the planning process. "You never get money without having a goal," said Luhring. "You have to be able to articulate your goals to get money, so you can't get money unless you do visioning."

Participants in the follow-up interview voiced a similar opinion: "Things fell together because we went about it the right way and took the time to plan."

Luhring also mentioned the passion of committee members and many residents. "People recognize those with a passion to get things done and passion is contagious."

## Sources

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

*Follow-up Interview by Meredith Borchardt with the Parkersburg Visioning Committee in February 2014*

*Interview with Chris Luhring, Parkersburg City Administrator*

*Parkersburg 2009 Visioning Application*

*Press Clippings from the Parkersburg Eclipse-News Review, the South Hardin Signal Review, the Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier, and the Muscatine Journal*

*Site visit by Sandra Oberbroeckling in summer 2006*



The landscape design for the Highway 14/57 corridor through Parkersburg includes curb ramps, crosswalks, pedestrian-scale lighting, and vegetation.

## Project Implementation

Parkersburg was unique among visioning communities in that it had access to federal disaster funds because of the tornado. As a result, the design proposals were much more aggressive than what would be typically proposed for a small, rural community.

At the same time, committee members valued landscape architect Meg Flenker's sense of the types of projects that would be feasible for the community. The proposed designs, even those as complex as the Highway 14/57 corridor landscaping design, were well within the realm of possibility.

The community received funding from FEMA and the Iowa Department of Transportation to upgrade the highway

corridor and fix streets, sewers, and water lines damaged during the tornado. In the end, according to Luhning, the city only paid 7% of the total cost of the highway project, which took approximately two years to complete.

The impact of the new highway corridor is significant, according to visioning committee members. They believe that having a trail along the Highway 14/57 corridor has improved the quality of life in Parkersburg by providing residents a safe place to walk and cycle, as well as connecting different parts of the community for all travelers. These added amenities contribute to residents' attachment to their community and how much they value the place in which they live (*Sigma*, p. 15).



*Amenities such as seating, vegetation, and lighting along the recreation trail have a positive impact on residents' community attachment.*



*The downtown streetscape was a visioning proposal from 1999 and was not damaged by the 2008 tornado.*

# 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.

# References

Besser, Terry, Sela Harcey, and Crystal Peoples. *Sigma: A Profile of Iowa Small Towns 1994-2014*. Iowa State University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. April 2015.

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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