

Strategies for Making Places: Shellsburg 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 Shellsburg.

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 Shellsburg.

Shellsburg

Population: 964

Community Visioning Year: 2013

Projects Completed: 4

Trees Forever Facilitator: Dustin Hinrichs

Landscape Architects: Craig Ritland and

Samantha Price

Intern: Jake Wilson

Shellsburg is a case-study community that clearly demonstrates the impact of organizational structure, community values and sentiment, communication and social learning, and compatible design proposals on project implementation.

The Shellsburg Area Community Group (SACG), a local nonprofit organization with approximately 50 members, was the driving force behind the visioning process in Shellsburg and continues to support the visioning committee as projects are being built. In SACG, the visioning committee has a valuable resource to assist with fund-raising, grant writing, and planning, as well as a mechanism in place for recruiting volunteers.

During the planning process, the visioning committee was essentially a subcommittee of SACG. When Shellsburg entered the implementation stage, the individual project committees became part of SACG, including committees on way-finding signage, the prairie trail, park redevelopment, the downtown streetscape, and streambank stabilization.

The size and diversity of the SACG membership and its accomplishments demonstrate the community sentiment felt

by a large number of residents. Both SACG and the Shellsburg visioning committee consist of members from the city administration, local service clubs, and the school district. Business owners, retirees, short- and longtime residents, and youth are actively involved, giving Shellsburg the social capital needed to make plans and achieve results (*Sigma*, p. 11).

In terms of communication, the Shellsburg visioning committee employed a variety of effective public engagement strategies. In addition to sending the local media press releases about its activities, the visioning committee collaborated with city to keep the public informed. The Shellsburg visioning committee has a regular spot on the council agenda and puts announcements in the city's monthly newsletter, *Shellsburg Pride*.

Social media also played a major role in the visioning committee's efforts to inform the public. Upon completing the visioning process, the committee decided to create the Shellsburg Visioning Committee Facebook page, where members post meeting announcements, concept plan



The Shellsburg visioning committee has successfully used its Facebook page as a digital message board.

image edits, and countless photos of residents building projects followed by photos of completed projects.

During the follow-up interview with Trees Forever, committee members commented on the value of the participatory assessments, because engaging the wider community galvanized residents' support of the design proposals resulting from Community Visioning and created the local buy in necessary to actually build the projects.

After finishing the visioning process and identifying subcommittees for each project, the committee instituted "Family Fun Nights" as a way to encourage residents to get out and enjoy the park. These events sometimes feature live music and food, with the overarching purpose of helping residents get to know each other. Residents also participate in service projects such as park clean-up day or trail clean-up day.

Project Implementation

The value and community sentiment that residents feel for Shellsburg was clearly evident in the process of building the projects.

The implementation of the Prairie Forest Trail and trailhead project in particular demonstrates cooperation among local groups, including the city, the school board, and SACG. In "History of the Shellsburg Prairie Forest Trail Entrance," published in the *Shellsburg Pride* newsletter, visioning committee chair Nancy Thorkildson



The Shellsburg steering committee used social media to provide information about the visioning process.

Sources

Field Notes by Madison Dierks and Katherine Gould, July 2016

Follow-up Interview by Dustin Hinrichs with the Shellsburg Visioning Committee in August 2016

Press Clippings from the Vinton Eagle, and the Vinton Cedar Valley Times

Shellsburg Pride Newsletter

Shellsburg Visioning Application

Shellsburg Visioning Committee Facebook Page

describes the contributions of numerous volunteers over the two-year period in which the project was built. In addition to volunteers helping install the trailhead sign, building a split-rail fence, and cleaning up debris, a farmer owning land adjacent to the trail entrance donated time and equipment to drill post holes, haul materials to construct a bridge, and clear and grade the site.

The ability of Shellsburg residents to complete four projects in three years can also be attributed in part to how landscape architect Craig Ritland developed a concept plan that could be implemented in several phases. For instance, the phasing of the city park project gave the community the opportunity to make a visible impact in the short term that would produce the momentum the community needed to keep residents engaged and invested in making the remaining projects happen and in identifying new improvements to implement.



The Prairie Forest Trail trailhead project was completed in June 2016. As with most of the visioning projects in Shellsburg, volunteers and donated equipment and materials were an integral part of project implementation.



*Top: Volunteers complete the streambank restoration project in City Park.
Middle: The trail in Memorial Park was built with volunteer labor and donated equipment.
Right: The streetscape project completed on one side of Pearl Street addressed accessibility identified during the Community Visioning program assessment process.*



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

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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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