

# Strategies for Making Places: Tripoli Community Visioning

September 30, 2016





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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 Tripoli.

## 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 Tripoli.

# Tripoli

Population: 1,313

Community Visioning Year: 2012

Projects Completed: 6

Trees Forever Facilitator: Meredith Borchardt

Landscape Architects: Craig Ritland and

Samantha Price

Intern: Shu Liu

The Tripoli visioning process substantiates the impact of effective communication on the successful implementation of transportation enhancement projects. Tripoli participated in Community Visioning in 2012 and in only four years has completed six projects focused primarily on developing a trail to the Sweet Water Marsh.

The Tripoli visioning committee engaged residents in a variety of ways, both traditional and virtual. The committee announced meetings and workshops on Sweet Water Trail Project Facebook page and later, during project implementation, members posted photos of projects before, during, and after completion. The concept designs are posted on the City of Tripoli's economic development website. During a follow-up interview with Trees Forever, the committee members mentioned that using social media helped connect youth and former residents with the project.

More traditional methods for engaging the public included press releases to the local media, fliers, presentations to community organizations, and word of mouth. The mayor wrote about the visioning process a number of times in his monthly column appearing in the local newspaper.

**Economic Development**

**Concept for proposed Bike Trail:**

Strong leadership and community support are launching Tripoli into a renaissance of sorts to improve its vitality and relevance in the new century. A major trail undertaking along with several pedestrian access improvements highlight their efforts.

Sweet Water Trail, a two-mile long connection between Tripoli and Sweet Marsh, is the top priority for the residents of Tripoli. Supporting projects for this trail include a welcome center and trailhead, picnic areas and a new park. The old Guppy's building will be renovated into a welcome center at the trailhead.

A lack of sidewalks along Highway 93 on the north side is frustrating for residents who want to walk or bike to the bowling alley, Guppy's Market or Tripoli Community Schools, which are located on the south side of the highway.

Follow our progress updates here and on our Facebook link:

[Find us on Facebook](#)

Click on any of the documents below to view more information for each part of the proposed project.

- [Trailhead and Pocket Park Concept](#)
- [Downtown Corridor](#)
- [Sweet Water Trail Overview](#)
- [Sweet Water Trail Park](#)
- [Sweet Water Trail Ag Field](#)
- [Sweet Water Trail Picnic Area](#)
- [Highway 93 Corridor](#)

**Tripoli's Sweet Water Trail Project**

May 30, 2012 · 🌐

Our next meeting with Visioning Iowa is June 12th from noon to 6:00 at the Extension office. We will be working on design concepts for the trailhead and trail.

Like Comment Share

**Tripoli's Sweet Water Trail Project added an event.**

May 6, 2012 · 🌐

**JUN 11 Design Session**

Mon 10 PM in PDT · Bremer County Extension

Interested

Like Comment Share

Through the city's website and social media, the Tripoli visioning committee was able to reach a wider audience and engage more residents.



***"About 90 people have donated time, services, labor, etc., to develop the new welcome center."***

–Jay Ranard  
Tripoli Mayor

Near the end of the planning process, the visioning committee began taking the projects to the people. The group created a float for the Tripoli Days parade and displayed the presentation boards during the Sportsman Club's fish fry. After implementation had started, the community hosted a breakfast at City Hall at which the presentation boards were on display. By communicating via social networks, the group gained the trust of residents, making them more likely to buy in to the concept plan and to donate their time and/or financial resources (*Sigma*, p. 18).

The Tripoli case study also demonstrates the impact of compatible design proposals on project implementation. Jay Ranard, Tripoli mayor, described the concept sketches as "powerful." Throughout the project and into implementation, the visioning committee has relied heavily on the presentation boards; the completed projects strongly resemble the proposed designs.

## **Project Implementation**

Most of the work on projects in Tripoli was done with volunteer labor and donated equipment, indicating that residents feel strongly attached to the place in which they live. According Raynard, approximately 90 people volunteered their time and



*Volunteers helped with planting at the welcome center.*

## **Sources**

*City of Tripoli Economic Development  
Website*

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

*Follow-up Interview by Meredith Borchardt  
and Patty (Petersen) Reisinger with  
Tripoli Mayor Jay Raynard in February  
2014*

*Press Clippings from the Tripoli Leader*

*Tripoli Sweet Water Trail Project Facebook  
Page*

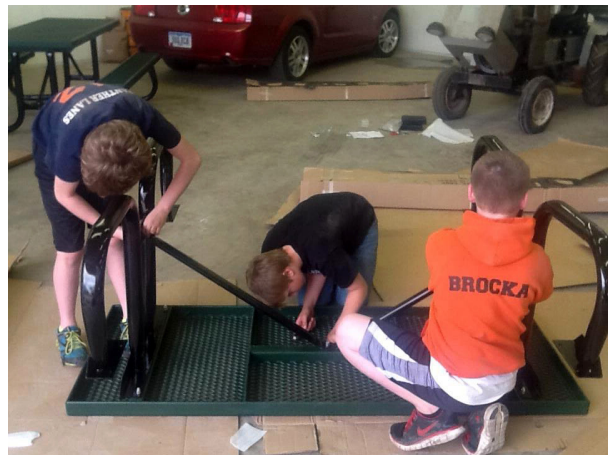
*Tripoli Visioning Application*



*The Sweet Water Trail trailhead and welcome center was built completely by volunteers of all ages.*

services to complete the welcome center located at the Sweet Water Trail trailhead. Raynard noted the increased optimism and enhanced social connections among residents since completing the projects. This observation is reinforced by the results of the Sigma study, which illustrate the significance of social ties (p. 11), as well as amenities (p. 15), to community attachment.

In addition to the welcome center, Tripoli has gone on to develop a pocket park on Main Street, restore and plant native vegetation along the Sweet Water Creek streambank, install a bridge over the creek, and add more sidewalks in town. The ribbon-cutting ceremony for Sweet Water Trail was held on August 6, 2016.



*Local youth assemble picnic tables for the gazebo park adjacent to the welcome center.*



*Top: The gazebo park is located adjacent to the welcome center and along the Sweet Water Trail.*

*Bottom: Now partially paved, the Sweet Water Trail will eventually connect to the Sweet Marsh Wildlife Management Area, making it more accessible to cyclists and pedestrians.*

# 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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