

Strategies for Making Places: Woodbine 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 Woodbine.

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 Woodbine.

Woodbine

Population: 1,416

Community Visioning Year: 2008

Projects Completed: 4

Trees Forever Facilitator: Brad Riphagen

Landscape Architect: Josh Shields

Interns: Dylan Jones and Emily Brodersen

The case study of Woodbine demonstrates how participating in one community improvement program can be a catalyst through which the community learns about more opportunities. Woodbine applied to Community Visioning as a result of its involvement in Horizons Community Leadership Program to Reduce Poverty offered by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. During its visioning process, Woodbine applied to be a Main Street community and was accepted after completing visioning. Through the Main Street program, it became a Green Initiative Pilot community. And in 2015, Woodbine was named a Blue Zones certified community.

In addition to the Horizons group, the Woodbine Betterment Association, the Chamber of Commerce and its Economic Development Committee, Kiwanis, Optimists, Woodbine Community School, and several churches were actively working on improving Woodbine's economic and aesthetic vitality, providing the visioning committee with a well-established pool of volunteers. Such strong social ties are an important aspect of community attachment (*Sigma*, p. 5).

Throughout the visioning process, the committee communicated program

activities through the local newspaper, fliers, and at city council meetings. During an interview with ISU staff, Deb Sprecker, executive director of Woodbine Main Street, stressed the importance of maintaining a connection with city government throughout the process. In a follow-up interview with Trees Forever, committee members noted that having a meal in conjunction with the public presentation of the concept plan "was a great way to get people involved and educated many residents."

Although the Woodbine visioning committee did not have its own Facebook page, Woodbine's Main Street program, which has taken over implementation of the visioning concepts, does have a page. And the feasibility report and the presentation boards were used extensively during the process. Sprecker commented on how "beaten up" Woodbine's presentation boards have become from being used so often.

"Presentation boards in bad condition are a sign of a successful visioning community," she said.

Woodbine's use of the concept plan and presentation boards continues to be quite effective. Most recently, Sprecker convinced the Iowa Department of Transportation engineers to model a new bridge under construction along US Highway 30 after a design developed during the visioning process by showing them the presentation board. The DOT has agreed to incorporate brick inlays into the bridge and will add wiring in order to accommodate streetlights.

AN INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE...

... In Designing Your Community

Woodbine is participating in the 2008 Community Visioning Program. Iowa State University is gathering information from community members to learn your opinions on how to improve the community's landscape through transportation enhancements.

The goal of this project is to develop a landscape plan that will graphically illustrate the vision of Woodbine. Your input is an important part of this process and your ideas about community design and enhancement are valuable to the Woodbine visioning committee.

Come to Share Your Ideas...
Representatives from ISU will be hosting a survey workshop.

...When? Thursday, May 22

...What time? 3:30 to 6:30 p.m.

...Where? Unity High School

Snacks and refreshments will be provided and at the end of the workshop preliminary results will be presented. All are welcome!

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Left: The Woodbine steering committee posted fliers announcing events during the visioning process. Above: Residents had several opportunities during the process to offer their insights to the design team.

Sprecker also attributes Woodbine's success to the strong sense of community attachment she has witnessed among residents of all ages. The commitment of the community is evident in the "snowball effect" that the visioning process has had. For example, the completion of the public art project on the historic grain elevator prompted residents to propose more public art downtown.

Sprecker recalled that hundreds of people, many of them youth, attended the lighting ceremony of the sculpture on the grain elevator. "Those kids will have that memory for the rest of their lives," she said.

Sources

Field Notes by Madison Dierks, Katherine Gould, and Emma Lorenz, July 2016

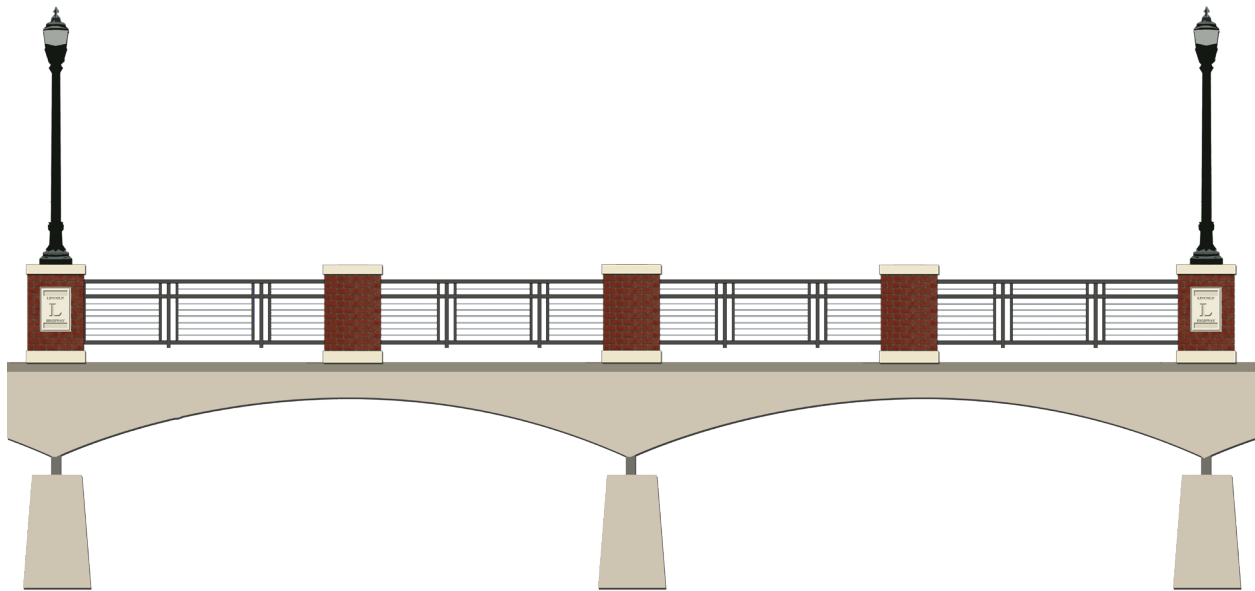
Follow-up Interview by Brad Riphagen with the Woodbine Main Street Committee (former Visioning Committee) in March 2014

Interview with Deb Sprecker, Executive Director, Woodbine Main Street, September 2016

Main Street Now: The Journal of the National Main Street Center, Spring 2014 issue.

Press Clippings from the Woodbine Twiner and the Missouri Valley Times-News

Woodbine Visioning Application



Above: The visioning design team proposed enhancing the Boyer River bridge with masonry columns, lighting, and decorative lighting. Right: This image edit shows how the proposed enhancements to the bridge would appear. The DOT agreed to adopt some of these features in the bridge currently under construction.



Project Implementation

The site visit in July 2016 revealed that Woodbine has completed only four visioning projects in eight years. These projects include the grain elevator sculpture, native prairie planting in the foreground of the elevator, tree planting, and an entrance sign and landscape that has since been removed to accommodate road construction.

However, as the grain elevator public art project demonstrates, the visioning projects, in conjunction with the Main Street façade projects, were catalysts that inspired residents to seek out additional community enhancement opportunities. For instance, the native prairie plantings that resulted from the visioning process inspired Woodbine to create a community orchard of native apple trees.



Top: Woodbine was able to save its historic grain elevator from demolition by raising funds to install a metal sculpture and lighting to the structure. Left: Part of the visioning concept plan for Woodward included planting trees along the highway corridor.

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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