



SECTION I

A Broadly
Shared Vision



Protecting both farmlands and the Chesapeake Bay are central to Kent County, Maryland's vision statement.

Q. Do you know how to design a local planning process that brings people together to address difficult issues in a constructive way?

A. Successful communities develop a broadly shared vision of the future based on an accurate understanding of their local economy and assets. They build this vision by:

- relying on an inclusive process that engages the diverse interests of the community and working with numerous partners to ...
- foster constructive, informed dialogue that allows the community to address issues on which there is substantial agreement before moving on to more difficult questions.

Sharing a positive vision for the future has helped many communities address divisive issues. Effective leaders know how the visioning process opens channels of communication and forges relationships that help people remember their common interests when facing difficult decisions.

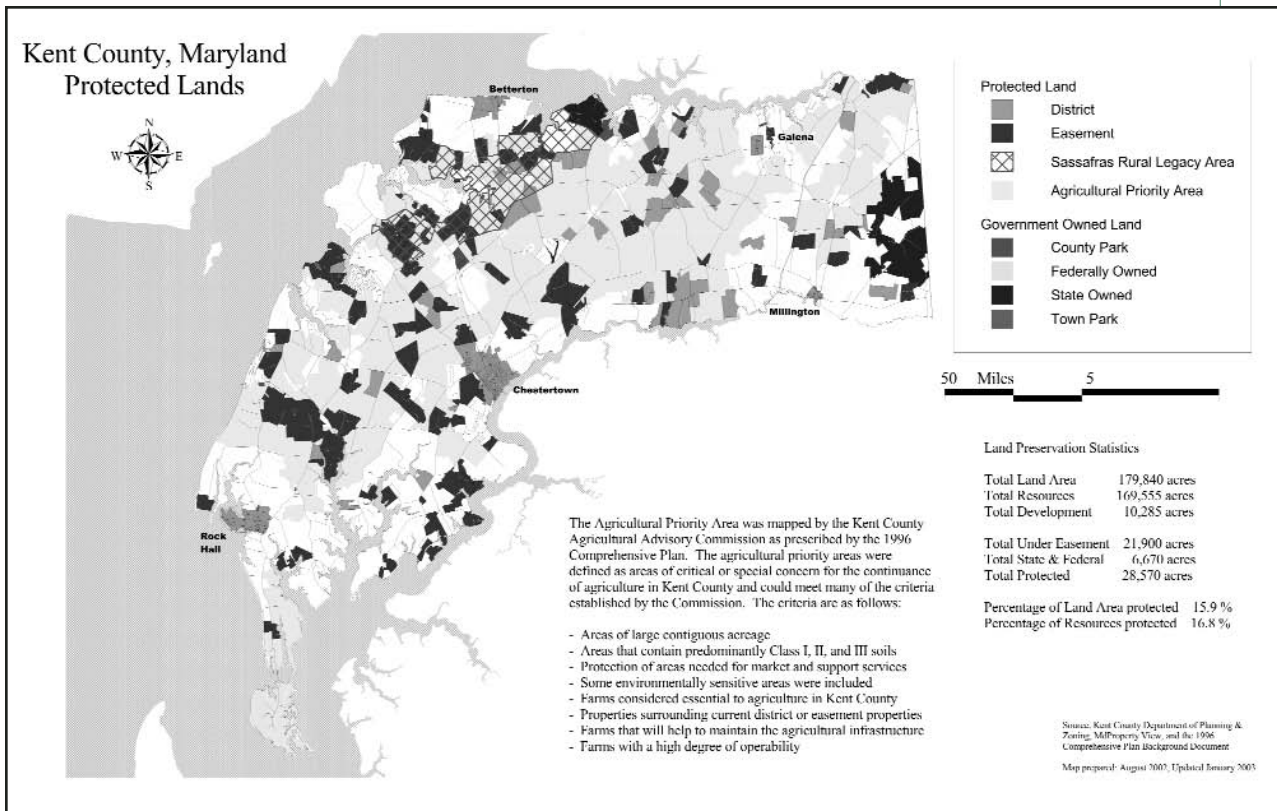
Building a shared vision is the best way to begin your local planning effort. You may refine that vision as the process continues, but it will be an excellent starting point. It will suggest the agenda for the community conversation you are initiating and tell you what research is needed to provide a solid factual background for that dialogue. The vision will also serve as common ground to which you can return when there is controversy about goals or when the planning process seems to lose direction. Revisiting your shared image of how things ought to be can help you regain focus. Ultimately, the decisions your community makes should be checked against the vision.

The vision itself should be a brief statement that describes the future toward which the people of the community want to work. Ideally this statement will be a single paragraph or page. An excellent example from Kent County, Maryland, appears on page 7. If your community hasn't gone through a visioning process, you may still find a useful starting point among the policies of the current local plan, or even in plans for specific facilities, like greenways or schools. Visions can include drawings, diagrams, or models, as well as words.

Present your image of how things ought to be in a way that captures the community's imagination. A vision should be:

- brief, so that everyone will take time to read it;
- general, so that most citizens can identify with it;
- fluid, so that it can evolve as the community conversation continues; and
- positive, focusing on what your community wants, not on what it doesn't.

It's okay for a vision to lack detail. Exactly what it means and how you are going to attain it will become clear as you set specific goals and identify the strategies needed to implement them. Chapter 1 tells you how to get people involved in building a shared vision and the rest of your local planning process. Chapter 2 describes techniques that can be used to make the discussion of your community's future a productive one.



An Exemplary Vision Statement

This vision is from the *Comprehensive Plan for Kent County, Maryland*, adopted in 1996.

Kent County is rich in agricultural, natural, cultural, and human resources. Quality soils, topography, climate, woodlands, the Chesapeake Bay with its tidal tributaries, wetlands, and marshes create an environment rivaled by few other areas. These natural features enrich our economy and the lives of our citizens. Kent County is also steeped in historic tradition. Towns and villages have a strong sense of identity, retaining their original design as a framework for their continuous and steady development. From these singular resources and features emerged our local culture, character, and economy.

We are challenged, as we look to the future, to protect the quality of our environment and its inherent quality of life while meeting the needs of all our citizens. This special place has been purchased at a high cost, one of diminishing job opportunities, particularly for our young citizens. Although our economy has expanded from a chiefly farm-based and water-related one to one which includes industry, retail, tourism, and other service-oriented businesses, we must continue to seek innovative ways to diversify our economy and provide job opportunities for all Kent County citizens. Vigilantly safe-guarding those

precious and irreplaceable resources unique to Kent County and wisely planning for change, we look forward to the challenge of the future.

The following principles will serve as a guide to decision making in the future:

- A diverse, stable economy that provides economic opportunities for all of our citizens is essential to a healthy and balanced community.
- Stewardship of our lands and waters is a universal ethic.
- The County is committed to supporting agriculture.
- Growth is planned to occur in and around existing communities in a way that complements and enhances their character.
- Elements necessary to enrich the lives of our citizens and sustain a healthy community include a good system of public and private schools, opportunities for recreation and cultural activities, effective transportation systems, a variety of housing types, and a safe and healthy environment.

This document was prepared by Kent County citizens for Kent County citizens. It remains the responsibility of the citizens of Kent County, both present and future, to promote and protect this Vision of the future.



Small groups at work at the Sonoita Crossroads Community Forum's 1996 visioning event.



Photo by Josh Schachter

The participation of residents in Sonoita, Arizona, was an important element in the creation of Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, pictured here.

After A Detour, Positive Planning Gets Results in Arizona

The Sonoita Crossroads Community Forum (SCCF) got off to a great start in June, 1996. Some 200 area residents participated in a full-day discussion of the issues raised by accelerating growth in the desert grasslands of southern Arizona. Unfortunately, the positive energy generated by this event was lost in a divisive controversy over a proposed development. It took SCCF months, until August, 1998, to re-focus the community's energy and begin moving toward its goal of developing a plan that would protect the open space resources of northeastern Santa Cruz County, Arizona, while encouraging compact and affordable development at the crossroads, the community's center.

The people of Sonoita learned that negative energy seldom leads to lasting progress in local planning. People who oppose a particular development may initiate the discussion of land use issues, but the actions that make a community a better place to live will be based on a positive vision and a shared understanding of what the future should be. Since beginning its citizen-driven planning process, SCCF and its members have played important roles in the establishment of Las Cienegas National Conservation Area and in influencing planning in Santa Cruz County.

CHAPTER 1

Engage Diverse Interests – Build Partnerships

A shared vision cannot simply be presented to the community. People from all walks of life and with differing interests, all those who are willing to seek common ground, must be engaged in its development. Having been involved, they will be more likely to understand and support efforts to implement the vision. They will also be more likely to continue participating in civic affairs and to believe that disagreements can be worked out in a collaborative way.

This chapter offers advice on how to get a wide variety of people involved in your community's planning process. It also points out the importance of forming partnerships with neighboring jurisdictions, state and federal agencies, and nonprofit organizations that may share your vision.

GETTING PEOPLE IN THE ROOM

The first challenge in a local planning effort is to get people in the room. Use every effective means to let them know about events and meetings. Some suggestions follow, but first remember that no means of communication will bring people back to meetings where they are not comfortable or where they do not feel their voice will be heard. Making meetings constructive, as explained in Chapter 2, is the best way to ensure continuing participation.

Watch Your Timing

Blend your planning effort into the rhythms of the community. If you want to talk to farmers, try winter's "down season." If you want second home owners to be involved, meet in the summer. No date is perfect, but attention to timing will help maximize participation.

Meet in Many Places

Hold meetings in multiple locations throughout your community, county, or region. This accomplishes more than acknowledging the time it takes people to travel to a central location. It is an important affirmation of the unique character of different neighbor-

Public Notice Requirements

State statutes impose specific requirements on the type of notice that must be given for public meetings. Successful communities go well beyond the minimum requirements, but it is important to understand and comply with the statutory direction.

What could developing a shared vision do for your community?

See Case Study One (page 19) to check out how visioning efforts in Custer County, Colorado, helped raise over \$3 million for the purchase of development rights, Case Study Four (page 67) to see how Kent County, Maryland, is following up on the vision we use as an example in the introduction to this section, and Case Study Five (page 77) to learn how Grand County, Utah, responded to the key need identified at a visioning event by developing a capital facilities plan and adopting impact fees.

hoods or communities. In fact, defined neighborhoods or communities organized many of the most successful planning efforts we know about.

Use the Media

A legal notice in the official local newspaper will be required for some meetings, but is unlikely to reach many people. Display ads or newspaper inserts are more effective in persuading folks to attend your events. You should also use local radio and television. Many stations air public service announcements, and local radio talk shows can be great ways to communicate in smaller places. Some tips for working with your local media appear in the box on page 11.

Put Up Posters

Posters in storefronts and at local gathering places are a good way of reminding people of upcoming meetings. Local artists can create memorable images for your posters.

SONOITA CROSSROADS COMMUNITY FORUM
PLANNING PREVIEW



Sonoita, Welcome Aboard!

Join your friends and neighbors to discuss Sonoita's future and learn about community services & civic groups at the Planning Preview.

- Exchange ideas and concerns
- Explore Sonoita's planning efforts, and
- Hear speakers on local planning & conservation areas

The Preview will also include an opportunity to provide input on the possibility of creating a National Conservation Area (NCA) in the Cienega Creek Watershed area.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 1999
11 AM - 3:30 PM
PIONEER HALL, SANTA CRUZ COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS
Lunch will be served from 11:30 - 1:00

Please join us for the next planning event on March 13, 1999.

The Sonoita Crossroads Community Forum promotes community stewardship. For additional information, contact Shel Clark at 455-4711 or Chris Peterson at 455-9388.



SONOITA CROSSROADS COMMUNITY FORUM

Use the Internet

Many communities post meeting notices and agendas on the Internet. You can also use an e-mail list to notify people of meetings. This will not reach everyone, even in prosperous places, but maintaining a Web site should be included in the budget for your planning effort. It may be especially effective as a means of communicating with partners who live outside the community and part-time residents, and posting documents on-line can save mailing costs.



Issue Personal Invitations!

This is the most effective means of encouraging participation. Build a mailing list and use it, but go beyond direct mail whenever possible. Make a list of people you know who need to be involved. Make sure they get invitations, in person or via telephone or e-mail, from an elected official, planning commission member, or some other participant in the process, preferably someone they know. Once people are involved, a telephone tree is a good way to give personal reminders of upcoming events or meetings.

GETTING OUT INTO THE COMMUNITY

A common complaint is that people don't turn out for meetings and that those who do are not representative of the entire community. The techniques described above will usually generate good attendance at an initial visioning event. They can also help sustain participation through a series of educational forums or the development of planning policies. People do have busy lives, however, and active participation in any civic activity will be limited. If you want more folks to be involved, you have to go to them.

Have a Speakers' Bureau

Let members of local civic and service clubs know that you are interested in making presentations at their regular meetings. A 15-minute breakfast or luncheon talk is a great way to inform people about the planning process and encourage them to participate. You should also be available to speak to special interest groups, ranging from the Farm Bureau to the Audubon Society. These talks can be used to invite people into the process or to report on its progress. They usually are not good forums for discussion.

Working with Local Media

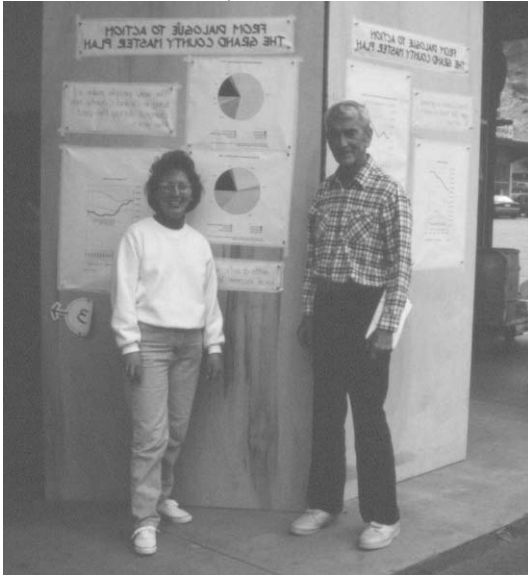
Adopt a Communication Strategy. Decide exactly whom you want to reach and the best way to reach them. Do you have money to pay for ads in the newspaper or on a local radio station? Sometimes a news story will get more attention, and it's FREE.

Develop Message Points. What do you want to accomplish? Why is it important? How will it affect those hearing or reading the story? Answer these questions in short, clear statements using everyday language. Practice repeating them so they flow easily. Think of different ways to deliver the same message. Deliver the message points consistently in interviews.

Designate a Spokesperson. Find a person who is comfortable talking with the media to be the "face" of your effort. He or she must be reliably available for interviews, well-prepared, honest, believable, and well-spoken.

Say what you need to say – THEN STOP TALKING. Don't ramble when answering reporters' questions. Be thorough, but be brief. Listen carefully to the questions you're being asked. Think about what you're saying and how you're saying it. Remember that news is created by events that affect PEOPLE.

Build a relationship with the media. Find out what media are available in your community and let them know they can count on you for good story ideas. Be open, but remember that nothing is "off the record." If you don't know something, say so. Then say that you will let them know and follow through on that promise. Respect deadlines. Think of ways stories can be improved, including what images could be used and what interviews would make the story better. If you appreciate a reporter's work, say so. Feel free also to correct errors in a positive way.



Volunteers pose with the display used at Grand County, Utah's, Listening Posts.

Survey Research

Don't use polls as a substitute for getting people in the room. Using interactive techniques that get people talking to each other and sharing the results of their discussions in a public setting is more likely to yield a reading of a community's vision that can be used as a basis for action. A civic conversation reveals the complexities of issues in ways no survey can capture. If you want to poll the community, conduct a professionally designed, pre-tested, statistically valid survey. Even then, understand that it may not give a true reading on complex questions. If you can't afford professional survey research but want to reach large numbers of people, we suggest listening posts at popular community events. (See discussion below and Appendix A for descriptions of listening posts.) Informal polls are too easily subject to misinterpretation.

Set Up Listening Posts

You can get people engaged outside of meetings. We often use "listening posts" or "drop-in centers" to encourage people to attend visioning events and solicit comment on local issues, draft policies, or plans for specific facilities.

- The Grand County, Utah, planning process (Case Study Five, page 77) began with listening posts at local grocery stores. Nearly 200 people who would not otherwise have been involved stopped at an interactive exhibit that told them how their community was changing, invited them to the visioning event, and gave them a chance to express their opinions, either quickly, by placing self-adhesive dots on posters to indicate which issues they felt should be addressed in the planning process, or in more depth, by setting their thoughts down on a form provided for that purpose. The results were posted for participants in the visioning event to review as they registered.
- Another example of how to use listening posts comes from the City of Twin Falls, Idaho, which presented alternative plans for a trail system along the Snake River Canyon Rim at a listening post. Those attending could view the alternatives and provide verbal or written comments to volunteers from the Canyon Rims Advisory Committee. Getting everyone involved helped build support for the construc-

tion of canyon rim trails in a community that now calls itself "The Most Overlooked Place on Earth."

More information on listening posts is provided in Appendix A.

Appear at Local Events

Communities have conducted listening posts in shopping malls, outside the local post office, and in many other venues. An especially effective way of talking with folks you won't usually see at meetings is to participate in local events. Displays for local events should be designed both to inform and to involve. Tell people about what you are doing, give them a chance to express an opinion, invite them to participate in an upcoming event or meeting, and have volunteers available to answer questions.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Successful communities seek partnerships with other organizations and agencies that have similar goals. The partnerships you build should reflect the breadth of your vision. If public lands are an integral part of your community, work with the state or federal land managers. If water quality is critical, work with your state water quality agency and the other communities and interest groups who share the watershed. Cooperation with neighboring local governments is essential. Also, we are seeing a growing number of

partnerships between local governments and nonprofit organizations working in the community interest.

Building partnerships takes time, but it is often the best way to achieve your vision. Here we list some keys to recruiting and nurturing partners:

Start Early

Recruit partners as early as possible in your planning process. Involving them in the design of initial events will bolster attendance and help ensure that all relevant questions are raised.

Look Beyond Your Borders

Your community is part of a region, a state, and the nation. Accomplishing your goals may require finding partners at all those levels, ranging from regional councils of government to your state's land grant university and the local offices of federal agencies. All of these potential partners can add something—knowledge, grant funds, credibility—to your efforts.

Take a Broad View of Planning

Too many local planning efforts focus solely on land use issues. Working with organizations that have different missions, but are also affected by the changes in your community, can help you see connections between issues and make your vision stronger. For example, concerns about growth spurred organizers in Red Lodge, Montana, to bring people together for a visioning event. When people sat down to talk, however, it was clear that one of the most important community needs (and one that was generated by the growing number of jobs in the local resort and services sector) was to find after-school activities for kids. Red Lodge's Beartooth Front Community Forum continues to work on growth issues, but counts the founding of a Boys and Girls Club among its major accomplishments.

What local events can you use to get people involved in your planning effort?

Case Study Three (page 49) explains how Ross County, Ohio, used the county fair as an opportunity to introduce people to its planning process and collect data about people's opinions.

Sell Your Vision

Finally, your vision can help in seeking new partners. It will show them what you are trying to accomplish and help them see how your efforts and theirs may be complementary.

The techniques presented in this chapter can help you fill the room. Once your citizens and partners are there, you have an obligation to make their discussion productive! Chapter 2 introduces some techniques for doing that.

We aren't going to stop sprawl here without helping Detroit.

Keith Charters of the Grand Traverse Bay [Michigan] New Designs for Growth program

CASE STUDIES

Which partners should be involved in your community's planning process?

Every case study in this book features efforts to build partnerships:

CASE STUDY ONE (page 19) tells how community groups in Custer County, Colorado, worked with local government and statewide, regional, and national organizations to develop a shared vision and help local people understand how to work toward its implementation.

CASE STUDY TWO (page 33) explains how a program initiated by a local chamber of commerce coordinates the planning efforts of local governments in a five-county region in northern Michigan.

CASE STUDY THREE (page 49) shows how six different agencies and organizations, including the chamber of commerce and Farm Bureau, cooperated to start the Ross County, Ohio, Smart Growth Initiative.

CASE STUDY FOUR (page 67) shows how Kent County, Maryland, implements its vision by working with landowners and the state's agricultural lands preservation program.

CASE STUDY FIVE (page 77) offers an example of how local service providers, including Grand County, Utah, the City of Moab, and three special districts cooperated to prepare a capital facilities plan.

CASE STUDY SIX (page 85) features the partnership between Wallowa County, Oregon, and the Nez Perce Tribe, which are working with other agencies to protect and restore salmon habitat.

CHAPTER 2

Foster Constructive Dialogue

Shared visions, and the policies that give them life, are created in community conversations. This chapter offers ideas about how to facilitate those conversations, about how to get people listening to each other as neighbors and make them feel that their voices will be heard. Before talking about technique, however, we should acknowledge two reasons that people are reluctant to get involved in a local planning process.

- First, many people have participated in local planning only when they would be directly affected by a decision. Whether as applicants for a permit or neighbors of a proposed development, they have experienced a formal, adversarial process, with complicated rules and potentially unfavorable outcomes.
- Second, most of us have attended meetings that were dominated by a handful of individuals, or even one person. Whether their ability to dominate is due to their respected status or to their obstreperous behavior, everyone else leaves frustrated, not having had a chance to express an opinion or wondering if what they did say was actually heard.

If you want active, representative participation in your local planning process, you must confront these realities. You must keep the focus on policy, on community values and how to sustain them. You must design the process so that every voice has a fair chance to be heard.

MAKING MEETINGS WORK

Good meetings do not just happen. They are designed by someone (or, more often, a group) who clearly understands both the purpose of the meeting and the character of the community. Here are some general guidelines for designing and conducting constructive meetings.

Set Clear Objectives

Good meeting design starts with a clear understanding of the purpose of the event. Why are you bringing people together? What do you expect to accomplish? How will you follow up on what happens?

How Do You Fit Public Hearings into the Community Conversation?

Your community's discussion of growth and changing land uses should be designed to produce results, but be mostly informal. Before adopting a local plan or regulations, however, you will conduct public hearings. Be sure everyone understands the distinction between the ongoing dialogue and these legally required opportunities for anyone to put what they think on record for consideration by the decision makers. Hearings must follow formal rules of procedure. They are not the place for questions and answers (though it may be helpful to hold an information session for people who were not actively involved in the process before a hearing begins). They are not the place for discussion or debate. Decision makers should listen carefully to all that is said at public hearings, then feed what they have heard back into the community conversation, as necessary.

Put your objectives for the event in writing before thinking about the agenda or other details. Where many partners are involved, you should hold what we call a "same page" meeting, a meeting at which all parties sponsoring or assisting agree on the objectives of the event, the agenda, and their specific roles.



Engage People on Entry

Give people something to do as soon as they walk in. This sends a clear signal that they will be asked to participate and work together. Possible entry activities include the decades, dot voting, and photo



Participants in the Sonoita Crossroads Community forum's planning effort discuss land use policies.

gallery activities described in Appendix A. You can also have people prepare for small group discussions. Have brief factual handouts for people to read while waiting for the event to begin, including a handout that explains why the event is happening and how this event fits into the larger planning process. Also, post the results of any pre-event listening posts for everyone to see. Exhibits of maps or aerial photos can be helpful in informing people and stimulating discussion. Finally, don't forget to collect mailing and e-mail addresses so you can communicate with participants after the event.

Provide Facts, Briefly

Use handouts, exhibits, and presentations to inform people and stimulate conversation. But limit presentations to no more than about 20 percent of a visioning event and no more than about 30 percent of a policy development meeting or workshop. You will need educational meetings or forums where people do more listening, but these are for later and should be designed to answer questions raised at an initial visioning event.



Get Them Listening

The key to a successful public process is that people listen respectfully to what others have to say. The "master" technique for making that happen is the Nominal Group Process (NGP), in which people work independently, in small groups, and eventually in the larger group. Appendix A (page 89) provides a description of the NGP and how it helps ensure that all comments and questions are heard. Getting people around a table as neighbors helps them set aside the positions they feel obliged to defend in highly visible forums such as public hearings and instead focus on what they have in common.

All comments and questions are valuable to the process.

Pam Shellenberger, Chief County/Long Range Planning,
York County, Pennsylvania

What techniques can help make your community's conversations constructive?

Case Study One (page 19) explains how Custer County, Colorado, used many of the techniques described here in an initial visioning event and a series of public forums. Case Studies Three (page 49) and Five (page 77) offer additional examples of how communities have made public involvement constructive.

Return to the Vision

Planning can be a lengthy and contentious endeavor. A vision that springs from an inclusive community conversation and the relationships forged during that process can sometimes be the glue that holds diverse members of a community together during difficult discussions. Remember to return to the vision when the process seems to falter.



Sonoita, Arizona, residents participate in an entry activity.

Break Bread

Whether it's a barbecue the evening before (See Case Study One, page 19), continental breakfast while folks are registering and working on an entry activity, a buffet lunch, or a potluck, one of the best ways of encouraging informal conversation and setting a cooperative tone is to have people share a meal. It is also important to consider other basic needs. Would providing day care make it easier for young families or single parents to attend? Would providing transportation help some people be there?

End on Time

Nothing is more frustrating than meetings that do not stick to the agenda and do not end on time. Have a realistic, written agenda. Designate a time keeper to enforce the schedule.

Share the Results

Have people sign in so you will have mailing and e-mail addresses. Then mail a summary to all participants within six to eight weeks after the event. Disseminate it throughout the community, as well. The Keeping Custer County Special document described in Case Study One (page 19) is an example of a publication that summarizes a visioning event and shares its results with those who did not attend. Brevity and visual appeal are important, but be sure your summary is accurate. Too much editing will make people wonder if the event's sponsors had a specific outcome in mind. It is advisable to maintain a complete record of the visioning event, including everyone's comments.



Follow Up, Promptly

Be prepared to tell participants what will happen next. You don't have to be ready with a date, time, and place, or even a specific topic. But you should be able to commit to staging follow-up events, whether they are educational forums or opportunities for further discussion, in a timely manner.

Document Your Meetings

Recruit an event photographer. Images of the community conversation in action make great illustrations for follow-up publications or your local plan. We also recommend including a brief, but complete, chronology of the process in any follow-up document. This will help those who are new to the community or just to the conversation understand how your vision and policies were developed.

Build on What People Share

In following up, it is important to start with areas of agreement and build capacity to address more difficult issues in the future. Case Study Five (page 77) describes an outstanding example of how focusing on what people share can lead to progress, even in a polarized community.

The chapters that follow tell you how to gather information and what tools you may want to use to help realize your community's vision. As you read, remember that getting people involved in a constructive community conversation is the seed from which all progress in planning stems.

About "A Few Facts"

We have provided basic background facts on each case study community to help you compare it with yours. Population data come from the 2000 Census, as do the land area and income data. For comparison purposes, the national population growth rate during the 1990's was 13.2 percent, the 2000 national median household was \$41,994, and in 2000 12.4 percent of the nation's population lived in poverty. The landscape description is based on our work in the community or visits made while writing this book. The number of persons per square mile nationwide was 79.6. The sources of income data are from Regional Economic Information System (REIS) personal income data for 2000 provided by the U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis. For comparison, U.S. figures for each sector are as follows:

- Services – 21.36%
- Dividends, Rent, Interest – 18.29%
- Transfer Payments – 12.87%
- Manufacturing – 11.53%
- Government – 11.37%
- Finance, Insurance, Real Estate (FIRE) – 6.94%
- Retail Trade – 6.37%
- Transportation, Communications, and Public Utilities (TCU) – 4.98%
- Wholesale Trade – 4.54%
- Construction – 4.37%
- Mining – 0.62%
- Farm – 0.60%
- Ag Services, Forestry, Fisheries – 0.49%

(Note that there is essentially no net commuting sector at the national level, but that commuting is an important component of most rural economies.)



CASE STUDY ONE Custer County, Colorado

COMMUNITY VISIONING IN THE WET MOUNTAIN VALLEY

This case study shows how one community applied the hallmarks explained in Chapters 1 and 2.

BACKGROUND

Custer County was “re-discovered” in the 1990’s. Its population nearly doubled between 1990 and 2000. Many residents realized that the community would need to assert its values as growth continued.

The San Isabel Foundation (the local land trust) and the Custer Heritage Committee (a group formed in the late 1990’s by five ranching families) knew something must be done. Some sought help from the Sonoran Institute, which helped stage a well-attended visioning event in Custer County in June, 1999. The San Isabel Foundation and the Custer Heritage Committee (CHC) sponsored the Custer County Successful Communities Workshop.

“Initially, there was suspicion from the ranching community about an outside group,” says rancher Randy Rusk, who is the first participant in a ranchlands protection campaign that also includes his father and son. “Ben [Alexander, the Sonoran Institute staff person who worked with Custer County] won our trust because he showed us Sonoran Institute was not here to preach, but to help us realize what options we have.”

The number of ranching families involved with the Custer Heritage Committee has now grown to 25.

ACTION

The Custer County Successful Communities Workshop was organized by a steering committee representing interests including the chamber of commerce, ranchers, and environmentalists. CHC understood that diversity on the steering



A Few Facts About Custer Country

County Seat: Westcliffe
2000 County Seat Population: 417
2000 County Population: 3,503
Percent Change since 1990: +81.9%

Land Area: 740 sq. mi.
Persons Per Square Mile: 4.7
Landscape: high mountain valley

Median Household Income: \$34,731
Percent below poverty: 13.3%

2000 Sources of Income:
Dividends, Rent, Interest – 27.36%
Commuting – 20.03%
Transfer Payments – 15.63%
Construction – 13.49%
Government – 8.17%
Retail Trade – 6.89%
Services – 5.28%
Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate – 4.21%
Transportation, Communications, and Public Utilities – 2.16%
Manufacturing – 0.81%
Mining – 0.25%
Wholesale Trade – 0
Agriculture – showed a net loss

A small group at work at the Custer County Successful Communities Workshop.



Opening session
of the Custer County
Successful
Communities
workshop.

While not everyone agreed with every point made during the day, there was significant overlap on key issues and how to address them. No attempt was made to steer workshop participants in any particular direction. Nor was any attempt made to find consensus on issues where there was disagreement. Instead, discussion focused on areas of general agreement.

From the report Keep Custer County Special

committee was a prerequisite for diverse participation in the workshop.

Initial workshop costs were underwritten by a \$10,000 grant from Great Outdoors Colorado, an organization that channels proceeds from the state lottery to land conservation. Sonoran Institute, the local sponsors, and partners that included the Stockgrowers Association, the towns of Silver Cliff and Westcliffe, the county commissioners, and the

chamber of commerce raised money to publish *Keep Custer County Special*, the document that reported the workshop results, and underwrite the costs of follow-up forums. Local funding was critical for “buy-in,” for the sense that local people were creating their own vision.

The Sonoran Institute shared a general template for a visioning workshop with the steering committee, which adapted it to local realities. A long list of logistical considerations goes into this type of event. The sponsors devised an advertising strategy using direct mail, telephone trees, and posters. They also brought the publisher and editor of the local newspaper into the process early, making advertising and press coverage easier to arrange. They found a venue that could house both a large gathering and small discussion groups. They found caterers and kickoff speakers from the community. They developed a slide show about the history of the county. They arranged day care. They enlisted and trained volunteer facilitators to moderate small group discussions. The list goes on, but these preparations proved manageable for an all-volunteer steering committee.

The Successful Communities Workshop began with a Friday evening barbecue attended by more than 400 people (remember that Custer County has only 3,500 residents). The sponsors wanted folks to know that being a part of a community is celebration AND work, an honor AND a duty. So, they threw a party and invited everyone! Besides food and music, a homespun documentary video featuring interviews with local people was produced for this event. When aging ranchers from pioneer families appeared on camera talking about the profound connection they feel to the land, many in the audience sat in silence with tears streaming down their faces.

The barbecue also helped build community. Old-timers and newcomers met one another. They talked about problems and opportunities, all informally. As CHC leader Sara Kettle put it, “We welcome everyone who has lived here all of their lives, and everyone who got here as soon as they could.”

On Saturday morning, more than 200 residents showed up to talk about the future of their chosen place. Welcoming talks and presentations were more than balanced with small group discussion and sharing the results of the groups' conversations. The structure allowed people to talk about the values that unite them, while making it virtually impossible for naysayers to disrupt.

At the end of the day, there was strong general agreement on two issues: protecting agricultural lands and open space, and improving the quality of education for area youth. There was also agreement on the need for new economic opportunities and a clean and adequate supply of water. The written report on the workshop, *Keep Custer County Special*, was sent to over 3,000 subscribers to *The Wet Mountain Tribune*, and is still given to people joining the dialogue.

RESULTS

Before the workshop, Custer County lacked a safe place for people who care about the community to meet to discuss change and its impacts and find solutions. Now there have been five public forums, with at least 150 people participating in each. "Custer County residents know they have an opportunity to live up to the grandeur of this place, but preserving it won't work unless people come together," Ben Alexander of the Sonoran Institute says. "The best way for citizens to get to know one another in any community is to get them talking. When you do that, you gain a stronger sense of place

and people in Custer County realized how much they have in common."

Beyond helping build a sense of community, the Custer County Successful Communities Workshop and forums have had considerable influence on the county's planning process. They have also led to an impressive voluntary land conservation effort. More than \$3.5 million have been raised toward the purchase of

LESSONS LEARNED

- partner with community groups to initiate and sustain the community conversation
- use media publicity and other room-filling techniques to attract participation from diverse interests
- structure meetings to create a safe space for dialogue
- use areas of agreement to move forward
- build your vision from your natural heritage and cultural assets
- use your vision to gain support for important projects
- continue to engage and educate through public forums
- take issues seriously, but also make it fun!

conservation easements on some 10,000 acres.

