The New Oregon Model: Envision → Plan → Achieve

| Steven Ames
| Steven Ames Planning
| USA

Many of today's community visioning projects can trace their work back to futurist Alvin Toffler and his concept of "anticipatory democracy" – the notion that governance can evolve and adapt to change whilst engaging citizens in the process. In practice, anticipatory democracy blends elements of futures research, long-range planning, grassroots public participation, and, ideally, a healthy measure of creativity.

As an adjunct to traditional community planning, visioning promotes greater awareness of societal change and deeper citizen involvement. It can also provide communities with a stronger sense of control over their destinies, bringing citizens together in a uniquely different context to consider their common future. And it explicitly encourages them to explore new ideas and possibilities.

Essentially, visioning is a planning process through which any community creates a shared vision for its future and begins to make that vision a reality. It provides an overlay for local plans, policies, and decisions, as well as a guide to concrete actions in the wider community.

In the English-speaking world, cities of all kinds from Blue Mountains, NSW to Bradford, U.K., Hamilton, Ontario to Hilo, Hawaii, have employed a wide range of visioning approaches and techniques. Based on two decades of working with many such processes, I have concluded that the most successful visioning efforts share five key characteristics.

1. They understand the whole community

Visioning promotes a shared understanding of the whole of a community and the full range of issues shaping its future. It also tries to engage the entire community and key stakeholders in this conversation.

2.They reflect core community values

Visioning seeks to identify a community's core values – the deeply held beliefs and ideals shared by its members. Such values inform the idealistic nature of the community's vision.

3. They address emerging trends and issues

Visioning explores emerging trends driving the community's future and the strategic issues they signal. Addressing these trends promotes greater foresight, and adds rigor and realism to the community's vision.

4. They imagine a preferred future

Visioning produces a statement describing the community's preferred future. The vision statement represents the community's desired "destination" – a shared image of where it would like to be in the long-term future.

5. They promote local action

Visioning produces a strategic action plan. The action plan serves as the community's "road map", moving it closer to its vision in the near-term future.

My own visioning work is designed to create both a shared sense of direction and a framework for future community decisions and concrete goals and strategies for action. At the same time, there can be many secondary benefits that derive from the process, such as:

- enriching public involvement by expanding the terms and scope of civic engagement;
- fostering new leadership in citizens who have not been previously active in public life;
- promoting active partnerships among government, business, civic, and nonprofit organizations; and
- strengthening community cohesion and "social capital."

Additionally, there can be significant benefits for the function of planning itself. For example, strong consensus on community goals can provide an informed and supportive context for the development of other plans and policies. This, in turn, can facilitate and even streamline public involvement.

At the same time, visioning places new demands on planning. It stretches the traditional role of planners, calling upon new skills and competencies. It demands increased levels of dialogue and trust with the public. And it requires more effective cross-sector communication and collaboration.

The New Oregon Model

Oregon was one of the first places in the United States to pioneer the use of community-based visioning. In a state recognized for innovative local planning and growth management policies, visioning was seen as an overlay for local plans and a tool to help communities better manage complex change.

Based on successful local visioning projects, the Oregon Model (see Figure 1) represents a comprehensive approach to visioning framed by five simple questions:

1. Where are we now?
2. Where are we going?
3. Where do we want to be?
4. How do we get there?
5. Are we getting here?

Step One profiles the present community's current conditions and core values. Step Two analyzes emerging trends and their probable impact on the community. Step Three creates the vision and Step Four develops an action plan. Finally, Step Five pro-

motes implementation and develops indicators to monitor and measure success in achieving the vision.

Visioning is designed to be iterative and ongoing. The action plan, having a much shorter horizon, requires more frequent updates, and monitoring provides an important feedback loop for updating the community's vision and plan over time.

THE NEW OREGON MODEL

A COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY VISIONING PROCESS

Figure 1. The new Oregon model.

Community Visioning

As a relatively new approach to planning, visioning can have a steep learning curve: it may employ non-traditional techniques such as environmental scanning or alternative scenarios; managing diverse stakeholder groups or alleviating public skepticism can prove daunting; and mid-process course corrections are typically necessary.

Fortunately, none of these challenges is insurmountable. Moreover, the ability of visioning to provide strategic input for perennial planning concerns like growth management, urban design, transportation, housing, community development, and sustainability justifies the investment. Indeed, planners increasingly use the outcomes of visioning to frame and legitimize other major planning initiatives.

Involving the Public in Visioning

True to visioning's roots in anticipatory democracy, public involvement is a critical element of this process. Engaging the public is essential in creating a shared vision and action plan, as well as in promoting their eventual achievement.

To some planners, such a dialogue seems increasingly difficult in today's society, given numerous urgent issues on the public agenda, shrinking local government budgets, citizens' busy lives, and the ever-present distractions of the media and pop culture. For these reasons, public outreach and strong "branding" of the process are critical to successful public involvement. The Internet and social networking are providing valuable new tools to accomplish these objectives.

Fortunately, for many people, there remains a fundamental appeal in talking about the future of their community. The reason is probably the abiding importance of "place." People relate to and care about where they live. It's one of the basic ways through which we continue to connect as human beings.

Correspondence

Steven C. Ames, Principal
Steven Ames Planning
Portland | Bend, Oregon
USA
www.stevenamesplanning.com
E-mail: scames@aol.com