

**STRATEGIC PLANNING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

**Whose Vision is it Anyway**

 **Category: Community Building**

 **Jurisdiction: City of Decatur, Georgia**

 **Manager: Peggy Merriss**

 **Innovation Award: Yes, Please Consider for Award**

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**SYNOPSIS**

**Intent of Project:**

For the City of Decatur, public involvement and engagement is serious business. For many planning consultants and some local governments, citizen engagement is simply a project requirement on a checklist that can be accomplished by holding one public hearing to present a draft plan. We believe that the planning process should be participatory and that the net for inviting and involving the community should be cast as wide and as far as possible. A successful and useful strategic plan means that the planning process is as important as the final planning product.

As part of the City’s successful 2010 strategic planning process, we used a Round Table visioning process that we also used successfully in 2000 for the creation of our original strategic plan. The concept is based on the idea of identifying a wide variety of community leaders and issuing them personal invitations to get involved. A team of local, volunteer facilitators are recruited and trained and a series of questions and discussion guides are developed to engage the community in a conversation designed to confirm a vision and identify goals to lead the community for the next 10 years.

We had three goals:

* to encourage as many citizens to participate as possible (in 2000 we had 400 participants and we wanted to double this number)
* to assure a diversity of participants by age, race, and geographic location within the City
* to identify a clear vision and set of goals to be used to develop a true community-based strategic plan to guide our City for the next decade

During the initial phase, citizens were asked to attend a celebration kick-off and commit to attend three meetings over a six-week period. Participants were divided into small Round Table groups of between 8 and 10 individuals who met together with a volunteer facilitator to discuss specific questions designed to identify what they valued about the community; what they desired for the community; what they were concerned about and finally what they would commit to support to help accomplish the community’s goals. Team meetings were scheduled at different days of the week, at different times of day and in different locations to assure that everyone could join a group that fit their schedule. Every effort was made to assure that groups included a diversity of members. We ended this first public engagement phase with another celebration to report on the findings and kick off the next step - preparation of the plan. Over 700 citizens participated in the first phase and by the time the plan was completed over 1200 participants had participated by offering comments on the plan.

**Costs and Savings:**

The total cost for the project was $200,000 including the cost for consultant support with the initial Round Table visioning process; consultant support in developing and implementing a logo, support materials, website and social media outreach efforts; a planning consultant team to translate the community visioning and goals into a planning document; and part-time administrative support.

**Innovative Characteristics and Outcomes:**

We used social media and a dedicated website to post the raw notes and reports of each individual team to create a completely transparent process and assure participants that every comment was being captured. A series of videos was produced throughout the process to capture the voices of participants and encourage others to get engaged. As we moved into the second phase of the process, we identified four topics around which there was a great deal of discussion and no clear consensus. These issues included: Affordable Housing/Aging in Place; Transportation; the New Economy; and Density and Design Issues. We set up a series of “Community Academies” and brought in outside experts to provide citizens with the objective facts, trends and best practices related to these issues. Facilitated discussion groups followed each presentation to allow us to dig deeper and find consensus. In an effort to reach as many different constituencies as possible, we developed a shortened version of the Round Table approach and followed up with individual meetings at the public housing project, at a senior citizen luncheon and took the discussion to local coffee shops and pubs. We also worked with a local teacher at Decatur High School to set up a Round Table discussion group with high school students and involved all of the seventh graders at the middle school in a variation of the Round Table discussion. As the planning document was being drafted, we held two public input sessions to allow citizens to see our progress, confirm how goals were being defined and offer their suggested changes to clarify wording. We posted enlarged pages of the final draft on the walls at the City’s conference center and gave citizens post it notes to offer their comments. All of these efforts resulted in a feeling of ownership in the process and for the final plan that was adopted.

**Obstacles:**

The City of Decatur has a diversity of ages, incomes and cultural backgrounds that needed to be addressed in making sure we made everyone invited and involved in the process. We used old school snail mail invitations, telephone invitations and specific programs held in the community to reach older residents. To engage our younger population we took advantage of social media, the website and programs within the school system and at social gathering spots like coffee shops and pubs to get input from younger residents. To overcome skeptics who believed their input would be ignored, all comments recorded by facilitators for every individual group were posted on the website as they were recorded and were captured in the final report on phase one. In total we captured over 8700 individual bullet points from the Round Table discussions. The planners then synthesized every one of these bullet points to create the draft set of goals and tasks. Specific comments or suggestions that were not included or were not relevant to the process were listed with an explanation for why they hadn’t made the cut.

**Applicable Results and Real World Practicality:**

While engaging the community in a successful public input process is time-consuming, the process of citizen engagement results in a more productive planning process and a planning document with wide-spread community support. There are tools available that allow for community engagement that do not cost large sums of money. They key is to have a commitment to listening and engaging the public, making the process as inclusive and as transparent as possible, to allow enough time to make the public input process to work and to make the process fun.

**Private Consultant:**

We used a consultant to help guide the initial public input process, a consultant team to design a public outreach effort that utilized the web and social media and a planning team to translate the community vision into a workable planning document.

**Presentation Style:**

We will use a Powerpoint presentation format to give a general overview of the process and results of the program. This presentation will include several short video presentations that feature volunteer facilitators and participants to explain how the process impacted them. Because the public engagement process is central to this topic, we propose to divide the group up into “Round Table” groups and give them a series of questions related to a what public engagement looks like in their community, what obstacles they face in being able to involve the public in meaningful discussions and identifying tools or topics they have seen in our presentation that they can take back to their community. Each group will report out at the end of the session. Our purpose will be to model how a facilitated discussion group works, give an example of what a discussion guide should contain and encourage them to think creatively about how they can overcome perceived obstacles and use some of the tools were presented.