

DEVELOPING

A Community Strategic Plan



A GUIDE FOR LOCAL OFFICIALS

Published by Illinois Association of Regional Councils in partnership with Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity



Developing a Community Strategic Plan

A Guide for Local Officials

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Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity

The Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) is the lead state agency responsible for improving the competitiveness of Illinois in a global economy, resulting in growing, prosperous industries, high-quality jobs and world-class communities. DCEO provides information, financial and technical assistance and advocacy to facilitate and advance the economic development process in partnership with Illinois' communities, businesses and a network of public and private service providers.



The Illinois Association of Regional Councils (ILARC) serves as the recognized organization in Illinois representing regional councils at the state and national levels. ILARC works to advance communication, education and cooperation among regional planners, local officials and government agencies. ILARC works closely with state and federal agencies on various public policies related to community development and fosters local involvement and regional cooperation.

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Table of Contents

What is a Community Strategic Plan?	6
Getting Started	8
Planning to Plan	10
Creating the “Community Vision”	12
Developing the Plan “Framework”	14
Developing the Plan “Focus”	16
Community Strategic Planning SWOT Process	17
From Strategy to Action	20
Plan Evaluation	22
Community Strategic Planning Process Flowchart	24

Appendix A **Other Illinois Strategic Planning Processes**

Competitive Communities Initiative (CCI)	26
MAPPING the Future of Your Community	27
Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)	28

Appendix B **Worksheets**

Worksheet 1 – Getting Started	32
Worksheet 2 – Developing the Plan “Framework”	37
Worksheet 3 – Developing the Plan “Focus”	38
Community “Strengths and Weaknesses” Survey Example	42
Worksheet 4 – From Strategy to Action	49
Worksheet 5 – Plan Evaluation	50



A Shared Vision

A community is a group of people tied together by a common geographical, social, economic, educational and public environment. Communities are also the product of the choices made by its members over time. Preferably, the people that comprise a community have a shared vision of what a community should be.

A shared community vision will be essential for Illinois communities to address the many challenges of the 21st Century. In particular, many communities throughout the State of Illinois are facing ever more complex issues in the face of limited financial resources. Others are faced with the consequences of tremendous short-term growth, which strain local tax bases, transportation systems and natural resources. These challenges are intensified by an extremely volatile world economy that can cause very sudden and widespread changes at the community level.

Communities will be in this dynamic environment for decades to come. Many will use the narrow short-term approaches of raising taxes and cutting services. However, these traditional approaches may create long-term problems in the areas of sustainable growth, public health and safety, infrastructure support and the ability to adjust to changing conditions. Communities that identify, develop, implement and evaluate long-term approaches will be the ones that will grow in ways best suited to both their desires and their resources.

A community strategic plan can be an excellent tool for pointing communities in the direction they want to go. This publication, *Developing a Community Strategic Plan*, is a straightforward guide designed to lead local officials, planners and citizens through a strategic planning process. The publication highlights clear examples of plan concepts and includes plan “worksheets” which provide local officials with hands-on-tools to develop a community strategic plan.

What is a Community Strategic Plan?



The strategic plan is the basis for change in a community.

In particular, it is a detailed blueprint leading to its “vision” – what a community wants to be. A community strategic plan provides direction on how to get there. For example, a community might envision its future as follows: “By 2015, our community will be the regional center for commercial and industrial development, providing adequate opportunities for employment and a high quality of life for residents.”

The important aspect of a strategic planning process is not to have a finished plan but to have and maintain a framework for the paths that should be followed to ensure the future of the community. A well thought-out community strategic plan stresses visioning, goals and objectives, and the plan process (not the plan itself). The final product will be a collection of very specific goals, along with specific and detailed objectives of how to achieve these goals. Each of these is described as follows:

1. The Vision

A community “vision” is the definition of what a community wants to be. The process of creating the vision is called *visioning*. The visioning process itself can be a rather lengthy process involving citizens from all walks of life.

2. Goals and Objectives

A goal is a specific statement of what the community would like to be. Goals should be derived from the vision for the future. It must be clear and concise, providing direction toward your vision. For example, to work toward the vision as stated above, a goal could be: “To enhance accessibility for industrial development, our community will review its development strategies to determine if there are any inherent weaknesses or biases that would be a detriment to future industrial development.”

Objectives are tools that are used to determine the progress toward meeting established goals. As such, the objectives should describe the key results to be achieved, quantifiable measures of progress if possible, identification of what parties are responsible for achieving the objective, and target dates for completion. Objectives must be detailed, realistic, and attainable. They may also be challenging, and may involve some element of risk. As an example: “By October 10, 2004, our community’s planning and zoning department will have completed a review and update of current ordinances, to provide a detailed summary of any current development practices that may hinder industrial development efforts and suggested improvements.”

3. Strategic Planning Programs

There are many strategic planning programs in place in Illinois to assist communities in the strategic planning process. These include programs through the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), including the Competitive Communities Initiative (CCI) and the MAPPING the Future of Your Community Program administered by the Illinois Institute of Rural Affairs (IIRA), as well as efforts driven by specific federal agencies such as the Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration’s Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy process. A more detailed summary of these programs can be found in Appendix A.

While all of the forementioned programs involve similar basic steps – strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation – this guidebook will walk the reader through a community strategic planning process that incorporates all of these factors.

Getting Started



Where does your community want to be in ten years?

Communities that identify, develop, implement and evaluate long-term approaches will be the ones that will grow in ways best suited to both their desires and their resources. A community strategic plan can be an excellent tool for pointing communities in the direction they want to go.

In completing its strategic planning process, the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity realized that most traditional processes lack a framework – a foundation on which to build a plan. It was identified early in the DCEO process that the first step needs to be a “Plan to Plan.” Not only must it be determined what the community is going to do, but also who should be involved, who is in charge of the effort, and other details that will guide the development of the vision for the future.

Questions to answer in your plan to plan include:

A. Why Plan?

- What is the motivation behind this effort?
- Are there certain issues in the community that prompted an interest in a planning effort?
- Has the community ever undertaken a strategic planning process before?
- Has it been a number of years since the community has reviewed its strategic plan?

B. Who is in charge of this effort?

- Who will be responsible for making all the necessary arrangements for meetings and notices?
- Will the locally elected governing board (i.e., city council, village board or county board) be in charge, or should another community group be the leader of the effort?
- Are there reasons why one group should be in charge instead of another?
- What group is going to have the authority to ensure that the planning process will yield results?
- Which group can motivate and render the necessary resources to effect the suggested changes?

C. Who do we think should be involved?

- What groups in the community should be included?
- How do we ensure that everyone is given an opportunity to participate?
- Should everyone participate at every stage of the process?
- Based on why we are undertaking this effort, are there groups that we need to make sure are involved?

D. What resources (monetary and non-monetary) can we bring to bear on the planning effort?

- Are we going to have the right people and groups involved to ensure that we can enact any changes that are brought forth in the planning process?
- As the planning process progresses, are there groups or people we may need to add to the mix to ensure that we can accomplish the things that are being identified?
- Do we have the authority to initiate a change based on the planning effort, or do we have the right groups or agencies involved that will have the proper authority?

E. What are the planning process “logistics?”

- When are the meetings to be held?
- What is the appropriate time to schedule meetings to ensure maximum participation?
- What organization will send out the meeting notices, prepare minutes, and reports?

Planning to Plan



Communities need to define who its “customers” are.

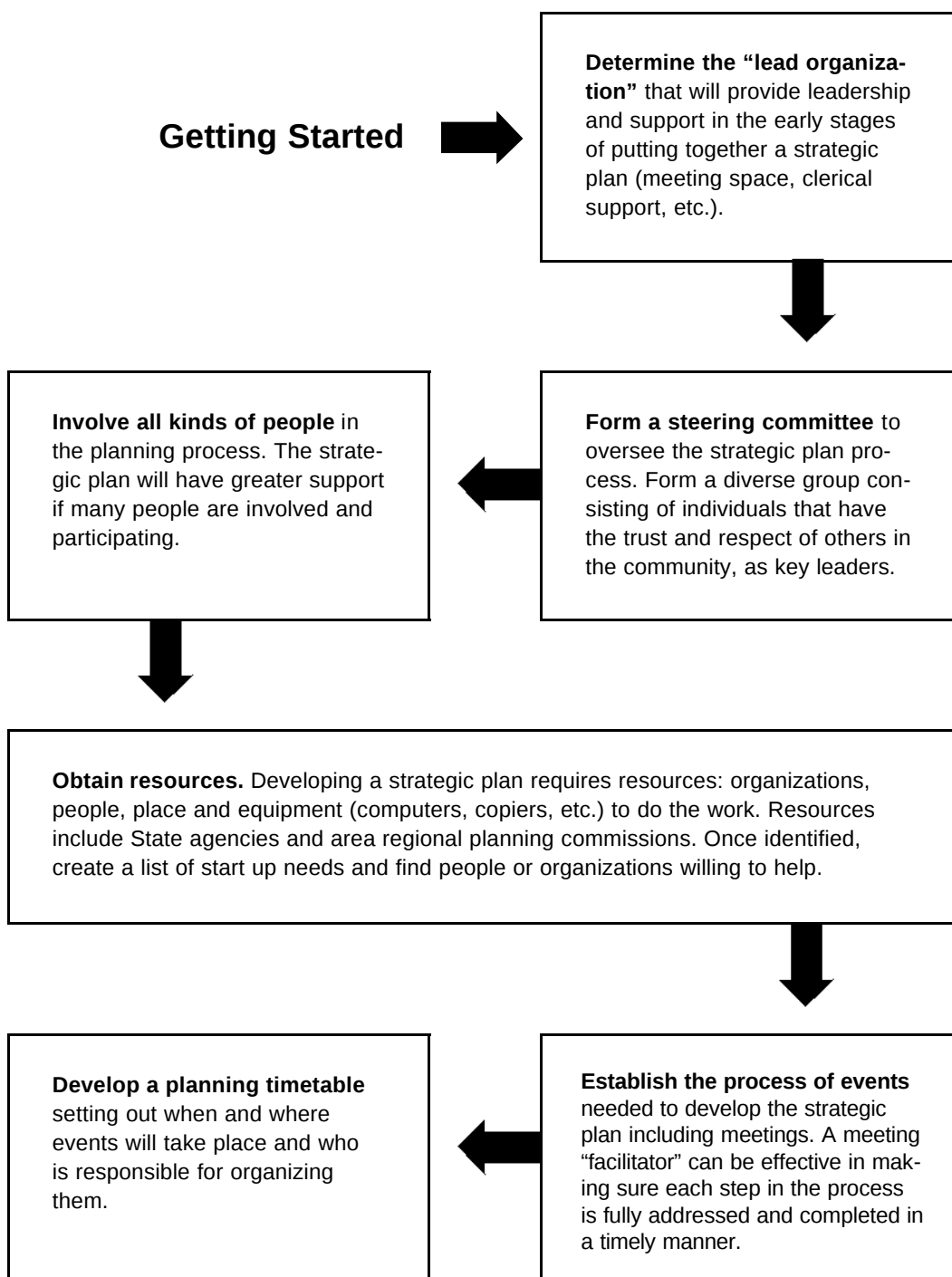
In its planning process, the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity needed to define who its “customers” were for economic development planning in the public sector. This process started off with interest groupings:

- local governments
- community organizations
- small business
- development organizations

Communities group their interests under major concerns which vary from locality to locality. Often however, communities group their interests under the following major concerns:

- Advanced and Basic Infrastructure
- Availability of Comprehensive Medical Services
- Economic Development (workforce development, business development, downtown revitalization)
- Education (especially primary and secondary)
- Housing Stock
- Public Health and Safety (law enforcement)
- Recreational Opportunities
- Transportation

Once the foregoing questions have been thoroughly addressed, the Strategic Plan process can begin. Based on the concepts outlined in “A Guide to Strategic Planning for Rural Communities” published by U.S. Rural Development in March, 1998, the following steps are suggested in getting the strategic plan process started.



Creating the “Community Vision”



What kind of community do we want to become?

The process of creating the vision is called “visioning”. Creating a community vision requires the development of a “vision statement”.

A Guide to Strategic Planning for Rural Communities (U.S. Rural Development) emphasizes that the community vision starts with asking questions such as “what are the community’s shared values?”, “what is important to the community?” and “what values will guide a community’s activities?” This is definitely the time to involve as many people as possible in the visioning process to brainstorm these questions and others. When crafting the vision statement, the following perspectives need to be taken into account:

- How the community’s citizens, economy, public institutions and environment will interact
- Where the community wants to be in the next 10 to 15 years
- How the community of the future will be different from today

The community's vision statement is a foundational part of its strategic planning efforts and is shared among policy makers, city staff, residents and business owners alike. It should describe community values, inspire pride and community spirit and serve as the benchmark to guide future actions.

For example, a community might envision its future as follows:

Another example is:

"By 2015, our community will be the regional center for commercial and industrial development, providing adequate opportunities for employment and a high quality of life for residents."

"Our community is a place that people choose to call 'home.' It offers its residents a progressive tradition of good government, civic participation and a vibrant economy for business and industry."

In our community, residents cherish their children, value education, embrace their diversity, respect their neighbors and protect their environment. Their promise to future generations is an even greater, more beautiful city than the one they inherited."

Or, it could be similar to:

"By 2020, our community will have maintained its population and employment levels to allow our graduates to remain in the community with opportunities available to them for adequate employment levels, housing, and services."

The remainder of the planning process will be focused on achieving this vision.

Developing the Plan “Framework”



How a community strategic plan is structured is absolutely critical in determining its direction and ultimately, the direction of the community. It's much more than developing an outline. It goes to the deeper question of how planning components are determined. In particular:

A. How are the plan “elements” determined?

- How and when will it be decided what to include in the plan?
- Values and goals play a key part in the planning process – to be able to select among alternatives, the planners must understand the goals and values of the audience being served.

B. What questions are we trying to answer?

- What are the issues that prompted the community to undertake the planning process?
- What changes are needed?



Developing the Plan “Focus”

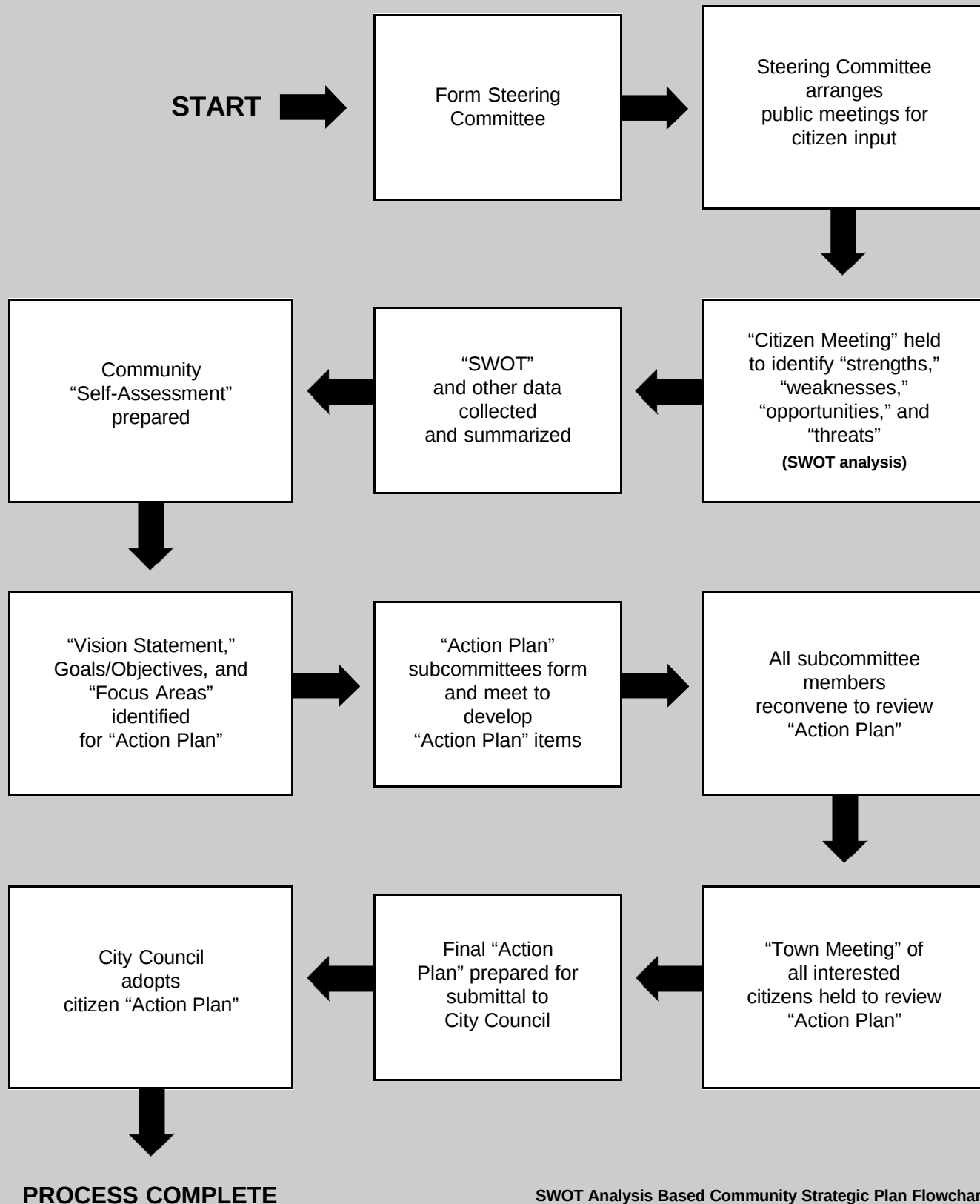


Assess current conditions in the community and determine potential futures.

In order for a community to attain its vision, it must assess its current conditions, determine potential futures using various analytical tools, evaluate its current state based on analysis of information obtained, determine major priority issues and identify goals and objectives.

There are several approaches to developing the plan's focus. The “Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats” (SWOT) process is one that can be an excellent tool in evaluating a community's current state. “Strengths and Weaknesses” are factors that are considered within a community's control. “Opportunities and Threats” are factors that also affect a community but are considered beyond a community's control. The flowchart on page 17 illustrates a community strategic plan “SWOT” process. The detailed elements of developing the plan focus can be found on page 19.

Community Strategic Planning SWOT Process



SWOT Analysis Based Community Strategic Plan Flowchart



Once again, keeping the “Community Vision” in the forefront as the guide for development of the plan, address the following steps in developing the plan’s focus:

A. Assess the current conditions in the community.

Conduct an “environmental scan” (identification of the key factors both inside and outside the community which determine its character).

- Population data – historical and projected.
- Community facilities – water, sewer, transportation, telecommunications.
- Local economic development factors – current employers, types of employment, recent and long-term trends in employment levels and types.
- Identify what the community has (sometimes known as “asset inventory”).

Determine potential futures.

- Identify potential short- and long-term changes that may occur in the community.
- Use current statistics and forecasts of population and other data that will allow for best estimates of the changes to affect the future of the community.
- Analyze how these short- and long-term changes in the community will have positive and negative impacts over time.

B. Using the results of the environmental scan from the previous section, evaluate whether current state of affairs is “positive” or “negative” for the community.

- Decisions regarding the status of the situation should be made in the context of the Community Vision.
- SWOT (Internal Strengths and Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) Analysis Summary (see chart on page 17).

C. Determine priority issues to be the focus for development of goals and objectives.

- Group issues into like categories to develop priority issues (two examples are “education” and “infrastructure”).

D. Goals and Objectives Identification

- Use priority issues to develop overall goals that will move the community closer to its vision for the future.
- Discussion of “what should be done” to address or solve community related problems.
- Develop specific objectives to meet the more general goals. Keep in mind the need to obtain these objectives within the confines of the available resources – both monetary and non-monetary.

See SWOT Analysis based Community Strategic Plan Flowchart on page 17 for an outline of the above steps.

From Strategy to Action



To realize the community's vision, it needs to be translated into an action agenda.

A Guide to Strategic Planning for Rural Communities, published by U.S. Rural Development, well summarizes both the challenge and the “vision to action” concept necessary to achieve community goals and objectives when it states:

“No strategic plan is complete just because it gets written. The hard work of implementation comes next. Everything cannot be done at once, so a strategic plan should be divided into several programs of work. Divide a 10-year plan into five 2-year work programs. Each two-year work program describes who will do things, to or with whom, what will be done, at what cost, and how success will be measured.”

“Implementation may be the most difficult but most important phase in the community development process. It is in this phase that the planned-for resources can be lost, partnerships become either close or distant, projects are started and then managed, and results become visible.”

The following principles should be adhered to when communities formulate their work plan:

- Work plan should be for one year – the work program is the means by which the strategic plan is finally implemented and results are achieved, evaluated, and revised on an annual basis.
- After goals and objectives are clearly defined, the committee will need to formulate specific programs for action to meet the objectives, as well as establish the organizational structure necessary to implement the programs.
- Focus on specific tasks. Tasks must be stated very deliberately, not ambiguously. Identify the scheduling of tasks – start date, duration, completion date, estimated cost, responsible party/agency.
- Target activities to the proper group to accomplish them. Communities do not implement plans – agencies and organizations do. Each must know its responsibility for action. Each must know the desired results. Each must accept responsibility.
- Allocate resources – make sure not to make commitments of resources over which you have no control.
- Community representatives may need to restructure 'goal statements' into 'problem statements' to lead to more innovative ideas for solutions.

Plan Evaluation



A strategic plan is never really finished.

A community strategic plan is not just a “paper publication” that is finished when completed but rather a continuous planning process designed to address short-term and long-term community needs over time. *A Guide to Strategic Planning for Rural Communities*, published by U.S. Rural Development, emphasizes the importance of this as follows:

“A strategic plan is never really finished. It will change as your community’s needs, resources and priorities change. Your first version will change over time as you learn from your experiences and improve it. Think of your plan as being in a looseleaf notebook, not as a hardcover book which never changes. Constant evaluation will help you see how well the community is doing, understand the benefits and impacts of certain activities, and make decisions based on better information. However, you should not immediately revise your strategic plan every time you identify something that needs to be changed. Planning experience has shown that an annual review cycle works well and no more than two per year should be allowed.”

An ongoing step in the overall planning process is evaluating the performance and progress of the effort. This should be done continually during the planning process.

A. Monitoring of plan's progress and performance

- Continuously monitor activities to determine if specific actions and activities are being achieved. Keep track of time schedules and projected expenditures. Activities need to be well documented.

B. Performance Review

- Who does it and how often?
- Evaluate the status of the work plan and related projects.
- Evaluate performance of those responsible for managing and implementing tasks and projects. If necessary, revisit assignments.

C. Impact analysis

- What changed in the community? What's different? What's better? Are we closer to the goal?
- Are goals and objectives met?
- Is the community closer to achieving the vision?

D. Process of adjusting the plan

- Continual evaluation during the entire process dictates the need for changes.
- May need to change goals/objectives or implementation strategies.
- Continual monitoring and assessment are a necessary part of the process throughout its entirety.

E. A summary description of “scorecards and benchmarks”

Scorecards measure an activity's progress against certain numerical standards (example: number of actual homes rehabilitated compared to the total number of homes to be rehabilitated). *Benchmarks* measure an activity's progress against specific milestones over time (example: Out of an estimated total of 50 miles of cable to be installed in the Village of Westdot this year, 5 miles will be installed within 60 days). Action Plan activities subject to scorecard and benchmark measures should be evaluated and summarized by answering the following:

1. To what extent has the activity been implemented?
2. Is the activity's progress tracking according to schedule?
3. If an activity is lagging behind, what's the reason? Are established scorecard standards and benchmark milestones unrealistic?

Community Strategic Planning Process

Below is a community strategic planning process flowchart which summarizes the critical steps in developing and preparing a community strategic plan.

