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# Visioning Process Can Help Communities Shape Their Future

By Yelena Mitrofanova  
 UNL Extension Educator

Small communities throughout Lancaster County, as well as throughout the whole country, have experienced demographic and physical changes. These changes affect not only land use patterns of the particular community, but also social needs of its residents. For instance, an aging and increasingly diverse population means many communities must re-evaluate how and what they provide in terms of housing, education, social services and infrastructure. Because change happens all the time, a community must decide the specific criteria they will use to judge, manage and even direct change.

In the 1980s, many local governments began long-range planning efforts and created comprehensive development plans to provide a road map for community growth. As a rule, comprehensive plans consisted of evaluating present conditions, identifying problem areas and suggestions on how to overcome existing problems and manage change. The majority of Lancaster County communities now have obsolete comprehensive plans which were developed 25 to 30 years ago and did not articulate community values or provide a rational sense of direction.

Many Lancaster County communities today experience requests for re-zoning, demands for affordable housing and needs to provide better infrastructure. Unfortunately, decisions about these issues are frequently made in the absence of a real vision of how residents want their communities to look in the future.

Thus, the new concept of public participation called **community visioning process** has emerged in the last decade. Visioning is a process by which community defines the future it wants. Through public involvement, communities identify their purpose, core values and vision of the future, which are then transformed into a manageable set of community goals and an action plan.

Visioning process does not replace other forms of community planning: comprehensive plan, land use, transportation and capital improvement plans. Actually, visioning is a useful tool in comprehensive planning and can be easily included in the comprehensive planning process. Moreover, it can occur parallel to data collection, analysis and provide



Bennet residents involved in Community Visioning Project

a foundation for developing community goals and objectives.

A planning process must be participatory, but usually community residents are involved in the last stages of comprehensive planning. For a planning process to be effective, it must incorporate the people’s vision, not only the planners or local community officials. The goals and action plans should be firmly rooted in the goals and values of the local community residents.

### What is Visioning?

- A process by which the community defines its future.
- A citizen-based process to identify core community values, goals and strategies.
- It is a foundation to develop a community comprehensive or strategic plan.
- A process identifying desirable changes for the future.
- A process visualizing what community *could* be like or *should* be like in 10 to 15 years.

### Why Visioning?

- Emphasizes community assets rather than needs.
- Assesses community options and opportunities on the basis of shared purposes and values.
- Stresses early and continuous public involvement in the process.
- A visioning process brings a community together as people recognize their shared values and purposes; creates a sense of ownership in community residents and serves as a foundation to comprehensive plan.

### When is a Visioning Process Needed?

- When there is a confusion about where the community is heading.

see *VISIONING* on page 10

## Bennet is First in Nebraska to do Visioning Process

The Village of Bennet is the first community in Nebraska going through a community visioning process. Bennet is a small, rural community (about 600 people) located 18 miles southeast of Lincoln.

Last year, members of the Bennet Planning Commission started updating its comprehensive plan and wanted to have broader public input in the process. They contacted the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension office and asked for assistance. Extension Educators Yelena Mitrofanova, Dennis Kahl and Phyllis Schoenholz offered to facilitate a community visioning process.

### First Town Hall Meeting

The first Visioning Town Hall Meeting was held in September at Bennet Elementary School. About 75 people participated in the meeting and learned what a visioning process is and why it is important.

Community residents then set up three commit-

tees/task groups: logistics, communication and research. Each committee consisted of five to six people. The logistic committee was responsible for setting dates, inviting participants and the physical arrangements of listening sessions, town hall meetings, etc. The communication committee was responsible for getting the word out and informing public and local media about upcoming visioning events and results/reports of these events. Finally, the research committee worked with Hanna-Keelan Associates planners — hired to update Bennet comprehensive plan — and assisted them in information gathering.

The Extension Educators facilitated the work of committees/task groups and conducted nine Listening Sessions held in December and January.

### Listening Sessions

It is very important for both planning and visioning processes to get as diverse  
 see *BENNET* on page 10



First Visioning Town Hall Meeting