Taking Charge of Your Community's Future

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Taking Charge in Communities

Defining community

Defining community can be difficult, as community means different things to different people. It may help to think about community as a community of place or as a community of interest.

A community of place has geographical boundaries. The boundaries can legally represent a region like city, township, county, reservation, National Park or even state. A community of interest shares an interest or concern, plus both geographical and social factors are considered.

There can be overlap between a community of interest and a community of place. For example, if land use issues are being considered, then the community of interest may include certain landowners and the place will be where their land is located. Organizations can also be called communities.

Generally communities exist to carry out needed functions that individual citizens and businesses cannot do alone.

Communities are constantly in a state of change. To reach a community's desired future, community residents must plan and monitor the change that is happening. There are several community development models that are used by practitioners for planning. All can be effective, but new approaches to community development also suggest that communities should begin the planning process by focusing on assets rather than needs.

Community leaders are finding that focusing on strengths rather than problems makes it easier to mobilize the community to take action and are also able to maintain momentum in their plan implementation. This publication will outline the basic steps for asset-based community development.

Defining community development

Community development is not the same as community growth or expansion. The role of community development is to accomplish the community's purpose, or why it exists, with quality and balance. This is done with the larger community in mind and is the responsibility of all residents of the community. A few citizens are given additional responsibility by being elected to public office, such as the city or county commission. Some persons have decision-making

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responsibilities for the community as a result of a long time association in a specific job or position, such as a local banker, businessman, farmer, etc. Many times it is these people who initiate a community development planning process, but most successful programs result from broad citizen involvement.

Doing community development

Community development is doing what the people of a community want to do to reach their desired future. The more people who agree on what needs to be done and how to do it, the more people will get involved in making sure the process is completed and done well.

Any model for doing community development must be flexible and serve as a guide for the many different situations it may be applied to. It is important to remember, however, that each step must be completed to ensure the greatest chances for success. The process is as important as the product.

Following are general guidelines for community development planning. Many have used this process without being really aware of the steps they are taking. It's not difficult but does take time and an "involved" group of citizens.

Step 1. Getting started

The action planning process is driven by three basic questions related to the community:

- What do we want to preserve?
- What do we want to change?
- What do we want to create?

Planning is usually initiated in a community by a steering committee. This committee may be an existing group that is willing to provide leadership to the process and take responsibility for the effort.

Examples of existing groups would include local chambers of commerce, county jobs development authorities or commissions, community betterment clubs, local church groups and civic clubs.

The first task of the committee is to review its composition to ensure that a broad cross-section of the community is represented on the committee.

The duties of the steering committee are to define the community boundaries, to determine the expected outcomes, to determine community readiness, to determine the role of the media and to prepare for the first community workshop.

Within the first duty of determining community boundaries the group would identify the clients, recipients or stakeholders in the community and collect the most recent community population counts and other demographic information. The best source of information is the NDSU North Dakota State Data Center at: *http://www.ndsu.edu/sdc*.

The steering committee will have a better understanding of where the process is going if expected outcomes are determined at the outset. It's important that the group have some way to assess the current community situation. This assessment is used as a baseline against which to measure change. It answers the questions of where are we now and where do we want to go?

Formal assessments can be conducted in the beginning of the process or at the beginning of action planning. The key is to not conduct assessments unless you need specific information that is not available through secondary/other sources. Assessments can be heavy resource users; however, if needed information is not available through an available unbiased source, don't skip the assessment. It is critical that the community know where it is so proper monitoring and evaluation of progress can take place.

Once outcomes have been identified, the committee must ask the questions: Do we have adequate leadership capacity? Are we ready for change? Can we influence the political clout needed to make decisions? Do we have the resources to bring about the necessary organization to engage in the process and accomplish project planning and implementation? Do we have diverse participation? Does the community value participation and meaningful engagement of its citizens in community issues? Will the local media support the process and will the private sector support the process? If we can answer "yes" to these questions, we can begin to "create" the future.

Step 2. Purpose, values and vision

Many well-intended groups have faltered in planning, not from being unprepared but because they did not have a clear and shared understanding of their purpose and the outcomes they wanted. The analogy of the orchestra can be used to describe this. To perform a piece of music together as an orchestra, all of the musicians and the conductor have to be on the same page. To perform well, they even have to develop common interpretation of what experience and feelings they want to create for the audience. And they must know why they are performing together.

Shared purpose, values and vision provide the critical guidelines for weighing options and opportunities. They also provide the foundation for evaluating if community efforts are making a difference. Just the process of developing these pieces creates ownership, commitment and involvement by the participants.

Purpose gives meaning to existence. It answers the question of why do we exist, not of why were we created or what's our function. Values are the principles and guiding factors that undergird people's decisions and actions. What are the values that members of the community share? Community visions will tell people where they are going; it is the overall sense of direction, the desired destination.

Step 3. Planning and implementation

Action plans create a new kind of citizen-based community power to bring about positive change. Preliminary action plans are developed by small groups of people and are based on the vision themes or desired future of the larger groups.

Detailed action plans are then created. These will include the project, purpose of the project, members of the task group developing the plan, time frame and critical steps to complete the project. For each step it is determined who will be involved, the resources needed, the time to complete, required information and assistance and the method of measurement. The group also identifies additional project team members and the schedule for future meetings.

Before being implemented, plan projects are reviewed for potential impact on groups and individuals to analyze how each fits with the community situation and seek approval and ideas.

With a plan of work in hand, the group can then pull together all available resources and be specific on who will do what, when will it be done, and where will it be done.

Step 4. Action: implementation

Even the best action planning efforts can reach a stage where they risk losing momentum. Maintaining energy and excitement can be a challenge. Groups that pay attention to coordination, organizational development, emergence of new challenges, problems and opportunities and expansion of their volunteer base have been successful in sustaining action and keeping citizens engaged.

Step 5. Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation should be done throughout the community development process. Evaluating throughout the process gives groups the opportunity to adjust the planning process and to measure progress. This important piece is often neglected.

Community development is not an attempt to complete one particular project. It is an on-going process, where people who are involved will continue the effort if they can see tangible results. Indicators of progress help leaders communicate with participants and the community at large. Demonstrating success builds pride among participants and the public, and careful monitoring of changes as compared to the planning goals helps communities make changes in policies when necessary.

Leaders should evaluate what really happened. Did they reach their goals? What has been left undone?

And finally, the most important question of all. Is the community really improved as a result of the planning? The answers to these questions will provide a strong foundation on which to build future development efforts.

Combine Steps With "People Principles"

The pieces just outlined are basic. They're nothing more than the problem-solving steps we follow in making individual and family decisions. However, to maximize their effect in successfully guiding a community development effort, some important "people principles" should be kept in mind. These principles include:

Participation must be free and open to all who are interested. Those who desire to be heard should be given an opportunity to be involved in a meaningful way.

Broad representation can increase vision and strengthen community development projects. Too often, those affected by a community decision are not involved. Any discussion should allow all points of view to be considered without fear of ridicule or retaliation.

Use proven group decision-making processes that (a) involve as many group members as possible in the decisions made, (b) use all available resources within the group, (c) result in needed information being gathered, and (d) force the group to look at all possible courses of action.

Local leadership is essential for successful community development.

Help is Available

Use of the suggested steps as a general guide along with the "people principles" will lead most community development projects and programs to a successful completion. If help is needed, contact the following organizations:

- The NDSU Extension Center for Community Vitality has educational information, community development resources and community facilitation. For specific resources see our website *www.ag.ndsu.edu/ccv*

- The USDA Rural Development staff can provide technical assistance, facilitation assistance and grant information. *www.nal.usda.gov*

- Technical planning assistance, facilitation, and aid in applying for government grants and loans is available through the eight Regional Planning Councils. *www.eda.gov/AboutEDA/Edevdirectory.xml*

- Various state agencies as Job Service *(www.jobsnd.com)*, the State Health Department *(www.ndhealth.gov)*, the Department of Commerce *(www.commerce.nd.gov)*, Division of Community Services *(www.communityservices.nd.gov)*, etc., can provide valuable assistance in community and economic development.

- Assistance is available from community and economic development representatives from local and regional utilities.

Who is responsible for community development? **YOU are!**

There is no one who more thoroughly understands your community nor is there anyone who should have greater interest in making your community a better place in which to live and work.

Center for Community Vitality

For more information on this and other topics, see: www.ag.ndsu.edu