



From Vision to Reality How City Administrations Succeed in the Long Haul

The mayor's office in a major U.S. city asked Civic Strategies, Inc. to produce a briefing paper on how administrations elsewhere created and implemented visions for their cities. Civic Strategies studied three acclaimed mayors – William Hudnut, mayor of Indianapolis from 1976-91, Bill Frederick, mayor of Orlando from 1980-92, and Neil Goldschmidt, mayor of Portland from 1973-79 (and later U.S. secretary of transportation and governor of Oregon). We also interviewed former Mayors Hudnut and Frederick by telephone. Former Mayor Goldschmidt was traveling and could not be reached by phone for this paper, although he offered some thoughts by e-mail.

From our research and interviews, plus our general knowledge of cities and mayors around the country, we came up with seven rules for creating and implementing successful city visions:

1. **Borrow from everyone:** The most successful mayors are magpies who pick up their visions from conversations and ideas that are already floating around the community.
2. **Start with small conversations but expand quickly:** Contrary to popular belief, the most successful visions rarely come from town hall meetings or radio call-in shows. They emerge from small gatherings in which thinkers and leaders trade ideas with elected officials. But town hall meetings and neighborhood forums do play a critical role as early proving grounds for ideas.
3. **Build from existing strengths:** Visions succeed because they “feel right” to people, and that's generally because they build on an existing asset in the community. The asset may not be readily apparent to all, but once it is pointed out, it becomes obvious.



PO Box 15250 • Atlanta, GA 30333 USA
Tele (404) 873-5343 • info@civic-strategies.com
www.civic-strategies.com

4. **Don't go public with visionary programs too soon:** Once you've settled on a vision, spend time planning for its implementation. In particular, identify the four to five greatest obstacles the visionary program will likely face and work hard to reduce them. Otherwise your vision is likely to become a political football. Also, use this time to get "buy-in" from other leaders, including city administrators, city council members and business leaders. You'll need their support later on.
5. **Show how to pay for it:** One obstacle all visionary programs face is skepticism about paying for them. Deal with this obstacle first.
6. **Begin with the parts of your vision people can most easily relate to:** One problem with visions is that they're, well, too visionary. Make sure yours is marketed on a human scale, with many opportunities for residents and business interests to see how it will improve their lives and livelihoods.
7. **Stay focused:** Most mayors are remembered for only a handful of things. Make sure that this administration is remembered for its successes, not its failures. The best way to do that is by identifying the two or three things that will be your lasting accomplishments, pour your time and energy into them – and don't fail.

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The Three Mayors

The three mayors we chose to study were William Hudnut of Indianapolis, Bill Frederick of Orlando and Neil Goldschmidt of Portland. There were two reasons we chose them:

- They were genuinely visionary mayors. Some mayors, such as Martin O'Malley of Baltimore or Anthony Williams of Washington, D.C., are "process visionaries." That is, they are in love with the management of city services. Hudnut, Frederick and Goldschmidt held strong beliefs about politics and city management – it was a key to their success – but they were best known as "outcome visionaries." That is, they envisioned a different kind of city and not just a different kind of city government.
- Their success is proven. Enough time has elapsed to judge the success of these mayors. In time, we may be able to declare today's mayors as successes (a leading candidate is probably Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley). But not yet.

What were their visions? Two of these mayors, Hudnut and Frederick, were best known for their critical roles in reviving their cities' downtowns in eras when downtowns were being written off in other places. The result is that Indianapolis' and Orlando's downtowns are thriving today.

Goldschmidt's vision was more sweeping – to change the way transportation served Portland. Before Goldschmidt, Portland's leaders thought success lay in making the city as convenient to automobiles as possible, through more and larger freeways and roads. Since Goldschmidt, the city has put its neighborhoods and transit first. Today's New Urbanist approach to city planning is rooted in what Portland did in the 1970s under Neil Goldschmidt.

What the three mayors had in common, though, weren't their visions but their success in implementing their visions. And that is what this briefing paper focuses on – how they acquired their visions and brought them to reality.

Where Do Successful Visions Come From?

Great mayors – even great visionary mayors – are rarely great urban theorists or thinkers. But they are great borrowers of others' thoughts. Here's the way one of Neil Goldschmidt's aides described him: "He was a true innovator, but the ideas were not usually his. He stole cheerfully from others, often disagreeing with them before he took their ideas. He was the master of synergy."

Think of great mayors, then, as talented retailers of ideas. They browse through the ideas that are available and pick the ones they think will solve the problems at hand – and be accepted by the political marketplace. And then, of course, they try to manipulate the marketplace to assure its acceptance. This, in a word, is politics.

But where do you find those ideas? Surprisingly, not often from the formal mechanisms of public comment – public hearings, town hall meetings, neighborhood association meetings, comment periods at City Council or radio call-in shows – but more commonly from small groups.

Great mayors are retailers of ideas, many of which come from small meetings and conversations.

Take William Hudnut's experience in Indianapolis, where he came up with and successfully sold the city on a vision of itself as the "Amateur Sports Capital of America." The idea came from a series of sessions he held early on with what he calls the "movers and shakers" of the community. They saw it as an economic development strategy – to lure mid-sized athletic events to Indianapolis, such as track and field competitions, swimming meets, perhaps a Final Four basketball game.

But Hudnut made it bigger – to encompass parks and recreation for neighborhoods and major new athletic facilities downtown. It worked, too. In 1987, the city brought the Pan American Games to Indianapolis. It has hosted four NCAA championships. And in 1999 the National Collegiate Athletic Association moved its headquarters and museum from Kansas City to Indianapolis.

Identifying the city with sports wasn't something the public was clamoring for but Hudnut recognized that it was something that would resonate with residents. His advice to mayors looking for a vision that will work in their city: "Go at it small" in the beginning.

Bill Frederick, who revived downtown Orlando, agrees. "(A successful vision) doesn't come out of the broad stuff" at public meetings, he says. But public sessions can play an important role in telling you which ideas will work and which won't. Example: One of Frederick's campaign themes was the need for city-county consolidation. He spoke about it in his inauguration speech and believed in it. But he soon recognized there wasn't enough community support to overcome

the opposition it would face from officeholders. “I could not have delivered that (vision) no matter what I did,” he said. So he quietly dropped it and moved on to things he could deliver – primarily public safety and downtown revitalization.

There’s another key test for visions, Hudnut and Frederick agreed, and that’s whether it “feels right” to the community. Hudnut says a vision feels right if it grows out of a community’s existing assets – something it’s good at but may not even recognize, as Indianapolis was with amateur athletics.

Hudnut once explained his approach this way: “You’ve got to learn to be what you are. I think that’s the fundamental lesson. When I was mayor, people used to ask me, when are you going after a national political convention or the Olympics? We’re not Los Angeles or New York. We can’t host the Olympics, and we don’t want to be like those places. We were about maxed out with the Pan Am Games, which are a smaller scale. We’ve got to be sure what we are.”

Do the ideas “feel right” to the community? Do they fit the city’s existing assets?

Goldschmidt’s vision, too, connected with Portland residents, although it wouldn’t have worked in other places. Portland was a city that was already uncomfortable with large-scale highway projects and worried about preserving its older neighborhoods when he was elected in 1973. So when Goldschmidt proposed to take the city in a different direction – toward, as one aide put it, “the idea that cities are for people, not just for commerce and cars” – it resonated. He killed a downtown freeway project and convinced federal and state officials to put the money instead into a light-rail system. He also built a popular downtown square, Pioneer Courthouse Square, a waterfront park and other amenities that connected with his philosophy of urban livability.

What Determines Success

But an administration’s success rides on more than just a great idea. There is always opposition to change, no matter how much the citizens may like the underlying philosophy. So what does it take to translate a vision into concrete programs and projects?

Successful mayors agree: smart politics. “There has to be some intuition in this stuff,” says Bill Frederick. Some of the intuition, as suggested above, lies in picking the right vision – the one the public is prepared to support. Some of it is about timing and sequence – deciding which particular part of the vision to advance at this time and which to delay.

But a large part of it lies in knowing which obstacles lay ahead and working hard to overcome them. Don’t underestimate the hard work part, the mayors say. “You’ve got to make sure that you get as many people on board as possible as soon as you can,” says Hudnut. “That means one-on-one meetings and small group meetings with Democrats and Republicans on the City Council and with others. Otherwise, you might let your project become a political football.”

One of the most important obstacles to deal with early on is paying for the vision. “It’s so important to have the financing figured out,” says Hudnut. In advancing his amateur athletics vision, he asked the business community to figure out how to finance the stadiums and other venues. “I co-opted the chamber of commerce to work on it,” he says. If the vision hadn’t come with a financing plan, he adds, it would have been easy for critics to dismiss it.

Frederick believes it is critical for mayors to have most of the support needed for a program lined up before it is announced. “It’s like fund-raising (for a new building),” he says. “Eighty to 90 percent of what needs to be done ought to be done before you go public,” he says. His rule of thumb: Figure out the four or five most important likely obstacles your project will face, and deal with them before the initiative becomes public.

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When the initiative is announced, Hudnut advises, begin with the parts people can relate to most easily, generate enthusiasm for the overall vision, then build incrementally. Frederick adds that sometimes these first parts can be as much illusion as reality. “Create a little theater,” he says. “If you’re waiting for something big that’s in the works, create a sense of action. It gives energy to the administration.”

Other Advice and Observations

It is important to stay focused on the big but achievable goals of the administration, Frederick said. “I tell elected officials, ‘Envision yourself in 10 years. What are the one or two things people will remember you for?’ Because, the truth is, that’s all most people can remember – the one or two things a mayor did.” Unfortunately, the memory of some administrations is not about their most important successes but their failures or shortcomings. That’s why, he added, it’s critical to pour your energy into the big goals – and do everything you can to be sure they succeed.

Hudnut cautioned against a “Christmas tree” approach to selling programs – where you try to hang as many ornaments as possible on a program in order to make it palatable to many groups. One of his greatest mistakes as mayor, he once said, was connecting a bond issue for the Pan American Games with “14 different kinds of neighborhood revitalization projects, thinking that would make it more palatable than just a bond issue to refurbish an empty housing project for the athletes’ village. And that was a mistake. The reason . . . was it gave the people 14 things to shoot at rather than one.”

A final key, Mayor Goldschmidt said, was to make sure your visionary programs are team efforts – with active support from city administrators, city council members and other civic leaders – because, of course, mayors can’t do it all. Take one of his administration’s finest hours – when the Nordstrom department store chain agreed to open a store downtown (“the first new retail store in 50 years,” Goldschmidt noted). The key to that deal, he said, was “one lender, First Interstate Bank (now Wells Fargo) and its president for Oregon agreeing to make a better-than-market-rate loan.” He added: “All the planning in the world would have been for naught except for that decision.”

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About Civic Strategies

Civic Strategies, Inc., is a collaborative and strategic planning firm that helps local governments and civic organizations make important decisions. To learn about Civic Strategies' services, call us at (404) 873-5343 or e-mail us at info@civic-strategies.com.