



A Clearer Form of Visioning Everyone Likes Visioning, They Just Don't Like the Paltry Outcomes. There's a Better Way.

One of the most heartening developments of the 1990s was the soaring popularity of visioning as a means of setting a strategic direction for cities and regions. Civic visioning is barely 20 years old, but there's little wonder it caught on so quickly: Visioning taps into one of America's greatest strengths, the creativity and energy of its citizens.

The timing was also right. Cities were at a crossroads in the 1980s and 1990s, when their old leadership – the close-knit community of business leaders and their political allies – was in steep decline and the “top-down” model of decision-making was dated. Cities were looking for something that worked – that is, generated good ideas – and had legitimacy.

Visioning fit the bill. It was creative, democratic and fun. Most who participated in visioning sessions found the experience of seeing their thoughts recorded on flip charts and printed in reports exhilarating.

But did it work? Did cities that used visioning processes end up with better plans than those who did it the old-fashioned, top-down way?

Alas, often not. When visioning failed, it did so for one of two reasons: The ideas that bubbled up from the citizens were ambitious but not workable, or the city's political and business leaders simply ignored the citizens' ideas. Either way, nothing happened.

What was wrong with visioning? In retrospect, cities depended too much on it. Visioning is a tool for effective civic decision-making – a powerful tool – but not the only one, and when cities depended only on asking the citizens for direction, they were mostly disappointed.

That's because there's more to leading cities than just asking the citizens where they want to go. There's also ego and expertise, and any decision-making process that fails to make room for both is likely to falter.



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Agendas and Expertise

In reality, power is held by individuals – some brilliant, some not, some well-meaning, some not – but all with ambitions, agendas and egos of their own. At the end of a visioning process, if these leaders see the citizens' ideas as advancing their agendas, they'll support the ideas. If not, most leaders know a dozen ways of burying the parts they oppose.

The same applies a rank or two below the elected officials, where the experts reign. If the citizens recommend a downtown improvement idea that the public works director opposes, the chief city planner thinks is too expensive and the city attorney says won't pass legal muster, then it won't happen.

The way to make visioning more successful is to bring the leaders (the people most likely to implement the plan) and the experts into the process from the beginning. At Civic Strategies, we've pioneered ways of doing that.

A Blending of Processes

Our visioning process is actually three processes blended together: a recruitment and informational process to win over the leaders and experts, a citizen dialogue process that gathers the citizens' ideas, and a strategic planning process that writes the vision and strategic plan. Near the end, we "close the loop" by taking the plan back to the citizens for review and comment.

There are several keys to working with leaders and experts:

- We begin at the top. We devote a lot of time up front to talking with the city's leaders, explaining the processes we use and responding to their suggestions. We involve some of them in the steering committee that guides the process and others in the vision-writing committees that emerge later.
- We make sure the experts are involved in the citizen dialogues and in the strategic planning committees.
- We "test market" the process with them, inviting the leaders and experts to a special version of our citizen dialogue, so they can see how we convene citizens and solicit their ideas. While we have the leaders together, we gather their ideas.
- We stay in touch with them throughout the process so there are no surprises.

We use a roundtable format for our citizen dialogues because we find it makes for more thoughtful discussions and ideas. And there's a bonus: Roundtables make it easier to identify the citizens who are most engaged and energized. That's important because as we move from citizen dialogues to writing the actual strategic plan, we balance our strategic planning committees among citizens, implementers and experts. If part of the vision deals with infrastructure, for instance, we want a council member, the public works director, the finance director and other implementers and experts on the committee, but we also want citizens who are most concerned about infrastructure there too.

Creative Tension

What often results in the vision-writing stage is a creative tension among citizens (with new ideas and energy), experts (who know the obstacles) and implementers (who are skilled in navigating obstacles), with each party contributing a necessary part to the strategic plan.

Our visioning process doesn't pit citizens against leaders but brings them together. It doesn't deny the need for expertise, it incorporates it. It marries the strengths of visioning – energy and creativity – with the cool logic of strategic planning.

The outcome: an ambitious, creative but workable plan, supported by citizens, leaders and experts. Everything, in other words, visioning has always promised but with a critical addition: results.

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.