



Structuring a Successful Community Development Effort *An Organizational Framework*

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Many communities recognize the need to engage their stakeholders in community development of one kind or another. Whether addressing issues impacting quality of life and marketability, preparing for a major new employer, or simply addressing community gaps, effectively leveraging community knowledge and resources to focus on the most important elements is key to success.

Identifying Priorities

Every community has a laundry list of changes they – or at least some community members – would like to see. But all communities have limited resources, not least volunteer time, with which to work. Therefore, focusing on the most important topics is critical.

A broad definition of “stakeholder” that is reflective of your community is key. Including residents from key constituencies, including interest groups, in the decision process, in addition to the usual business, industry, education, and government entities, encourages community buy-in and a broader identification of concerns.

Depending on your objective, there are a number of ways to narrow priorities to an achievable list. Surveying key stakeholders – including residents – for their thoughts is a good start. Focus groups, though time consuming, can elicit more detailed feedback. Finally, bringing stakeholders together to share their ideas, then prioritize as a group (the dreaded “colored dot” exercise) can be a great method. Using the first methods – surveys and focus groups – to focus the efforts of the decision-making group may offer the best success.

While it shouldn’t take the place of the other feedback options mentioned, don’t undervalue the benefit of getting a few key people in the room in advance to identify topics and concerns you need to be sure are included. Even the most inclusive of community stakeholder groups has blind spots.

Forming Task Forces and Action Plans

Once you’ve identified the key elements on which your community needs to focus, creating a plan with specific goals to accomplish in each area will keep the group on track. Forming task forces for each priority to investigate and assess challenges in that area, then formulate goals to address them, engages stakeholders in a meaningful, results-oriented, way. Goals can then be incorporated into a comprehensive plan reflecting all priorities, including an action plan for each goal.

Community Consensus and Support

With the plan in place, now you can build community support. This is where inclusion of a broad range of constituencies pays off, as they can provide a trusted introduction to those whose agreement will help move the effort forward. This is the step that will make or break the success of your effort – if you don’t coopt the NIMBYs (Not in My Back Yard), CAVE people (Citizens Against Virtually Everything), and

BANANAs (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone) in advance, they can completely derail your efforts. Presentations to civic organizations (such as Rotary, Kiwanis, Historical Society, etc.), key community institutions such as public safety groups, parent-focused education forums (school board, PTAs, etc.), larger homeowner associations, etc. give you a chance to present a coherent case including their potential benefit from the effort, identify opposition in advance, and address it before it festers. Go in with answers but be sure to listen to their concerns – nothing derails a consensus-building process like people feeling their opinions weren't considered.

Support from traditional sources is also important. City and county councils, major employers, Chamber of Commerce board, state (maybe even national) legislators, and any government agencies or personnel who could derail or defund efforts if not convinced of its benefits should all be informed of the plan. A representative from each of these should have been part of the stakeholder group and therefore can be helpful in scheduling presentations. You may need resources from these groups as well, but best to keep this first session to present and listen - save the requests for later.

Implementation

Now that the community is behind you, it's time to make things happen! Your task force members and other key people you've identified are needed to optimize success can divide into smaller action groups focused on specific goals, with milestones established for interim steps. A steering committee composed of task force chairs, key government officials, and others who have been instrumental in getting things to this point – no more than 15 people if you want to get anything done! – should oversee the action groups and evaluate progress towards established goals at least quarterly. They can then address any hurdles action groups are facing, even if it's just the need for a gentle reminder of agreed deadlines.

Celebrate Successes and Build for the Future

As goals are accomplished, celebrate your successes – publicly! Seeing initiatives moving forward will build community trust creates a solid foundation for future collaboration. Everyone knows about the plans that gather dust on a bookshelf – make it clear this isn't one! While it takes time to circle back to constituencies (and some of that can be done through written updates), it is a worthy investment in the future success of your community.