

Community Visioning



Community visioning is a planning tool that empowers people to express a vision for the future of their community; ideally, this vision guides land-use decisions and regulations.

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Introduction

Community visioning is a process that gives residents, business owners, local institutions, and other stakeholders the opportunity to express ideas about the future of their community. Through a series of meetings, workshops, surveys, and growth-scenario comparisons facilitated by local leaders, participants create a community vision—a written statement that reflects the community’s goals and priorities and describes how the community should look and feel in years to come. Ideally, the vision shapes—and cultivates a sense of public ownership and buy-in for—future land-use decisions and regulations in a municipality, county, or region.

The [Pennsylvania Municipal Planning Code](#) (MPC) does not require municipalities to facilitate a formal community visioning process as described in this guide. Nonetheless, many communities in Pennsylvania (and nationwide) have used community visioning to inform their land-use decisions.

This guide provides an overview of the visioning process, outlines key ingredients for a successful process,

and offers case studies of real-world visioning efforts in four communities. For a more in-depth, nuts-and-bolts description of the community visioning process, see [Planning for the Future: A Handbook on Community Visioning](#) published by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

Visioning Process

Sometimes the community visioning process begins reactively when a project (such as a utility expansion or subdivision proposal) sparks community opposition; this type of circumstance often pits groups against one another and signals the underlying need for a collaborative community visioning process. Generally, a more effective approach is to initiate the process *before* development pressure or land-use conflicts become hot-button issues. This forward-looking approach allows the community to lead the development process rather than simply react to it.

Though there is no set formula, successful community visioning processes typically include the following steps.

Define Community

Before embarking on a community visioning process, it is crucial to define the boundaries of that community—the boundaries dictate which stakeholders to include, as well as the geographic extent of the visioning exercises. A community can be as small as a single neighborhood, business district, or municipality, or as large as an entire county, watershed, or region. The key is to draw a boundary that includes people who are impacted by common land-use decisions.

Form Steering Committee

Typically, local governments or planning agencies lead the visioning process, often as part of a larger comprehensive planning process; however, the visioning process can also be more grassroots in nature—spearheaded by a group of committed residents, for example. Either way, the first step is to form a steering

committee, which ideally includes residents, business owners, government officials, and representatives from community groups. Throughout the process, the steering committee is responsible for encouraging community participation, leading meetings, promoting the visioning process, and guiding implementation and follow-up actions.

Hire a Consultant?

If it is financially possible, hiring a consultant to advise and guide the steering committee can be very helpful. A consultant can provide expert advice about growth scenarios, advise on potential funding strategies, navigate technical aspects of the process (e.g., producing graphic renderings or using [CommunityViz®](#)), and develop effective community participation strategies. See the [Experts section](#) of this guide at ConservationTools.org for a list of consultants with experience leading communities through the visioning process.

Inventory Community Resources

Taking inventory of a community's existing resources such as parks, public transportation facilities, and natural areas is crucial. This is best accomplished in a public meeting or [charrette](#); surveys and interviews can also help compile an inventory (see "Community Participation" below). For instance, participants could list resources they like, dislike, or want to change, as well as resources the community lacks. They could also identify areas for potential conservation or development. Once created, the inventory serves as the basis for community priorities and informs potential development scenarios.

Study Potential Development Scenarios

The next step in the process is scenario building, which involves leading stakeholders in a charrette focused on forming a vision of the community five, ten, and twenty years into the future. Stakeholders should identify the community's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and discuss potential development scenarios and their impacts. These scenarios can include any hypotheticals devised by the participants, such as the build-out of a residential community, preservation of remaining developable land, or industrial development along existing freight

infrastructure. The steering committee should develop distinct scenario concepts and present them at a public workshop that gives community members the opportunity to choose a preferred scenario.

Graphic representation of the scenarios is incredibly helpful. The committee can create these using [CommunityViz®](#), a robust software that projects the population, employment, environmental, and fiscal impacts of various scenarios. A cheaper, less technical option is gathering photos (from aerial and street-level perspectives) of different types of developments, roads, signage, green spaces, and other planning typologies and asking the charrette groups to decide which are appropriate for future growth in the community.

Write and Adopt Community Vision Statement

Once the community selects a preferred development scenario, the steering committee should draft a community vision statement that identifies and explains specific community goals and expands upon how the preferred development scenario satisfies those goals. The statement should also include a description of the existing development patterns and regulations, as well as details about how the visioning process unfolded. The vision statement should be broad in scope and clear in vision, as it will be used by government agencies, nonprofits, and community groups to guide development and operations decisions.

The steering committee should present the draft statement to the public for review; after comments and feedback are incorporated, the local government should adopt the statement. Ideally, other key entities such as school boards and business associations will also adopt the statement, helping ensure that all major community entities follow the same guidelines when making land-use decisions.

Develop and Implement Action Plan

The visioning process and vision statement allow a community to clearly articulate its values—however, without proper implementation, they are generally ineffective. The steering committee should create a detailed plan of actions to be performed by government officials, community groups, nonprofits,

business associations, and other key entities (e.g., the municipality will adopt zoning regulations to promote increased density within the [urban growth boundary](#), or a university will commit to locating new buildings near public transit stations). The plan should identify and prioritize specific projects, assign responsible parties for each action item, lay out a timeline, and detail potential funding sources.

Key Ingredients for a Successful Process

Diverse Leadership

A steering committee that represents a diverse range of stakeholder groups from all segments of the community helps keep the committee accountable to the public, ensures that no voices are left out of the visioning process, and boosts community participation and buy-in.

Community Participation

Community participation is absolutely critical for a successful visioning process; after all, the goal of the process is to create a vision that reflects the priorities and concerns of people in the community, and that can't happen if they don't speak up. Furthermore, without public support, the steering committee will likely struggle to make the vision statement a reality.

The steering committee should advertise community visioning meetings and encourage public attendance while also providing examples (perhaps through an education campaign) of how the visioning process can help a community. Additional ways to gather community input include:

- Charrettes
- Public surveys
- Stakeholder interviews (in a one-on-one or focus group setting)
- Comment boxes at local libraries and government buildings
- Websites or social media accounts to share information and materials related to the visioning process

Using a variety of methods gives more people a chance to participate. For instance, some may not have time to attend a charrette or sit down for an interview, but would happily complete an online survey or leave comments on a Facebook page.

The amount of community participation can vary depending on local situations. For example, if growth is not likely for a community or there are few issues of concern, it may be more difficult to get high turnout at visioning events. However, people will probably show up in droves to hear the steering committee discuss a contentious local planning issue, especially if the visioning event occurs on an evening or weekend.

Open Minds

Participants should not enter the community visioning process expecting a specific outcome—though some stakeholder groups may represent singular interests, the visioning process and resulting vision statement will reflect the goals and priorities of the entire community. The steering committee should encourage all viewpoints (even the most extreme), particularly in the scenario-building portion of the process.

Awareness of Context

Though focused on a specific community, the visioning process should reflect an awareness of how that community fits into a larger context of surrounding communities and land uses. Key points to keep in mind include regional infrastructure, transportation networks, and land-use conflicts in adjacent municipalities.

Financial Support

The planning and visioning process can cost money, from potentially hiring a consultant to renting meeting space, advertising meetings, printing documents, and providing refreshments for participants. Various county, state, and federal agencies offer funding for community planning and visioning activities, including:

- The Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development offers a [variety of resources](#) to help communities with planning-related initiatives, including grants to local governments through its [Municipal Assistance Program](#).

- The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources awards [technical assistance grants](#) to help communities plan for parks, recreation, and open space.
- The Orton Family Foundation helps small cities and towns navigate growth and change through its [Community Heart & Soul planning program](#).
- The Environmental Protection Agency maintains a [list of funding sources for smart- growth projects](#), including planning and visioning initiatives.

In-kind donations of time or materials from local people and businesses can also help offset costs.

Case Studies

Millersville, Pennsylvania

Millersville is a rural college town in southcentral Pennsylvania. Its visioning process began in 2008 when members of the community and the borough council came together to form the Vision 20/20 Committee. According to borough council president Scott Bailey, Millersville did not have the typical big development issue that spurs many communities towards the visioning process. Participants instead initiated proactive planning by defining a vision of their community before the threat of development pressures arose.

The visioning process consisted of five public meetings, a vision statement, and a five-year action plan. The borough, along with Millersville University, the Penn Manor School District, and the Millersville Area Business Association, funded the process and served on the steering committee. In late 2008, the borough council unanimously approved the community vision statement, which included priorities such as engaging college students in the community; making neighborhoods more ecologically friendly; enhancing the business district to promote small businesses and gathering places; and encouraging the principles of life-long learning, growing, and neighborly cooperation.

After the borough adopted the vision statement, the steering committee moved towards the action-plan phase of the visioning process, organizing several issue-oriented subcommittees to set goals and timelines

(e.g., Organizational Development, Physical Improvements, and Community Marketing). The committee sought commitments to the vision statement from planning entities, government officials, and major local institutions, ultimately getting signatures from Millersville's representatives in the Pennsylvania General Assembly as well as the Pennsylvania Downtown Center, Millersville Ministerium, Millersville Business Association, and Millersville University.

Pike County, Pennsylvania

Community visioning sometimes happens over the course of several years as a part of multiple planning processes.

Pike County, located in northeastern Pennsylvania, faced major development pressure due to its close proximity to New York City. Issues and challenges in Pike County were the subject of the 1995 International Countryside Stewardship Exchange, during which an international team of rural-development professionals visited Pike County to explore the local issues and recommend findings and recommendations for future development. The team found that local citizens were not fully engaged in the decision-making process and recommended a community visioning project. Three visioning workshops followed, in which participants rated environmental protection, regional planning and zoning, and preservation of historic resources as the most important issues alongside education, healthcare, and economic diversity.

Two years later the county commissioners and the Office of Community Planning initiated another planning process to build upon the earlier effort. More than 100 Pike County residents attended the first meeting, and a steering committee and six task forces took shape (the task forces focused on economic development, quality of life, environment, government, infrastructure, and land use). Over the course of the process each task force created a report detailing issues, goals, and implementation benchmarks, based on information gleaned through public surveys, research into existing development patterns strength, and analysis of opportunities and threats. Together, these reports formed a final report, which was reviewed and adopted by the county commissioners.

The goals, objectives, and implementation strategies identified in these visioning exercises provided the basis for the [2006 Pike County Comprehensive Plan](#), which features a citizens advisory board comprised in part of visioning steering committee members.

Hazlet Township, New Jersey

Hazlet Township, New Jersey faced several challenges, including heavy summer traffic, vacant commercial land, disjointed pedestrian and bicycle facilities, and the need for multi-municipal cooperation in preservation of wetlands and open space.

Responding to these issues, the township applied for and received a grant to conduct a community visioning process. It formed a steering committee called Hazlet 2030 that included representatives from both local stakeholders (the township, county, and community groups) and statewide entities (New Jersey Office of Smart Growth, Department of Transportation, Board of Education, and New Jersey Transit). The township hired a planning consultant to lead the steering committee through the process, which began with a series of four day-long workshops (announced by [this press release](#)). Public turnout for the first workshop was low; however, after extensive advertising, word-of-mouth, and the creation of a website, more people participated in subsequent events. Showing examples of streetscapes and asking the audience to choose the preferred look for Hazlet Township was particularly effective, sparking a conversation about traffic, alternative transportation methods, and necessary streetscape features like bike lanes.

The process produced eleven major goals for the township, each accompanied by indicators and actions. For example, for the goal of smart development and redevelopment, an indicator was new mixed-used development; associated action items included amending the township zoning ordinance to encourage pedestrian-scale, mixed-use development and promoting redevelopment through tax increment financing.

Damariscotta, Maine

The town of Damariscotta, Maine faces issues common among older communities: integrating new commercial development in a traditional commercial

corridor, managing historic resources, and allowing growth without compromising small-town charm.

Residents first realized the town's identity was at risk when Wal-Mart proposed a store in the town; local officials reacted by passing into law a 35,000-square foot retail cap, temporarily halting the development (a response that may not be legally viable in some jurisdictions). Two years later, seeking a more comprehensive and long-lasting solution (including updates to its comprehensive plan), the town formed the Damariscotta Planning Advisory Committee (DPAC) to spearhead a community visioning process.

DPAC partnered with the town government and Friends of Midcoast Maine (FMM) to lead the process, funding the effort with community donations, a [Community Heart & Soul](#) grant from the Orton Family Foundation, and cash matches from the town and FMM. DPAC's visioning activities included:

- Hosting community forums on bike and pedestrian issues; shore and harbor issues; and new growth.
- Distributing a survey to gather input from citizens on the strengths and weaknesses of the town.
- Experimenting with various growth scenarios in CommunityViz®.
- Running a four-day charrette to discuss the town's priorities and elements related to potential development scenarios, such as parking, business revenue, green space, façade improvements, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, and design guidelines for new development.

DPAC presented the results of the process in a [final report](#) that outlines a vision statement, lists goals and priorities, and provides a starting point for updating the town's comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance.

The most recent version of this guide and related resources can be found online at <https://conservationtools.org/guides/51>

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