

If You Don't Know Where You're Going, Any Road Will Get You There or *Yogi Berra on the Vision Thing*

Chances are you know a lot about the state of your city – what the population is and how fast it is growing; who the major employers are; the lakes, rivers, forests, parks and recreational areas that are important to residents; where people shop and where they work; where the traffic problems are; and how the water supply is holding up. And, chances are, you spend most of your time as a municipal official trying to manage these circumstances.

This issue of *Quality Cities* focuses on developing positive relations with your residents and effective communication. This article takes a look at one of the most important messages you need to share – the vision for your city and the planning strategies that will help achieve that vision.

First, let's make a distinction between managing growth and planning for the future. They are related but distinct activities. Managing growth is basically reactive. Traffic concurrency is an example of a growth management tool. Traffic concurrency doesn't provide the picture of where and how your city should grow. It is a management tool. Its specific growth management purpose is to make sure that the number of car trips added to the roads does not exceed the capacity of that road. (I, for one, certainly think the effectiveness of traffic concurrency as a growth management tool is questionable, but that is a subject for a different article.) Trying to simply keep from falling further behind in providing roads and other necessary infrastructure is so complex, controversial and time-consuming that it may seem impossible even to consider spending time designing what your city should look like 20 or even 50 years from now. But that is what planning is about.

Planning is the process by which, for example, your city decides that, when it comes to transportation, children should have choices that give them independence and mobility. Neighborhoods should have sidewalks, playgrounds and parks. Schools and libraries should be located within neighborhoods in such a way that parents feel safe about letting their children walk or bike. Once you achieve that vision, planning is the process by which to set out a strategy to achieve that vision.



With that vision and strategy, you make the growth management tools work for you. That is not always easy, since the state-mandated rules don't always fit local circumstances easily. However, let's go back to our example. The state now allows cities

to establish "multi-modal" concurrency districts. In these districts, cities can consider how investment in public transit, sidewalks and bike paths can address transportation needs. Your transportation concurrency rules, therefore, can help prioritize investment in sidewalks and transit.

The vision also drives your land development regulations and your budget. Because the vision is fundamental to guiding decision making, the creation of that vision has become a hot topic in planning. I did a query for "community visioning" Web sites and stopped counting after 300 responses.

Those Web sites, and other articles in this issue, will give you ideas about two critical components of visioning: how to engage residents in the public participation process, and how to share the vision with them on an ongoing basis. The rest of this article will pose some questions for your consideration about the content of that vision.

Where have we come from, and how good a job have we done envisioning the future?

It may seem strange to start a visioning process by looking back. But where we are today is a result of previous decisions and circumstances. Understand what your city was like 20 years ago. Don't look just at what your city was like, but also at how people envisioned the city in the year 2005. How accurate were their predictions, or how successfully were their visions implemented? What did they do well and what did they do poorly?

What trends affect our future?

Just as the past provides context for visioning, so does consideration of the future. Demographic changes in the age and diversity of our population affect housing and schools. Energy costs can affect the state's tourism industry. The global economy demands that we look at our educational competitiveness, and it affects our ability to preserve farmland.

What can we do about it?

After looking at 20 years of history and peering into an uncertain future, it may seem that trying to design a vision for your city is hopeless. However, remember what anthropologist Margaret Mead said: “Never underestimate the ability of a small group of people to change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Here are some strategies for generating helpful ideas about improving your city:

- **Provide meaningful information.** If you ask how to solve the traffic problems in the community, you will probably get responses ranging from free bus service to flyovers at every intersection. Neither solution is likely to be effective. Instead of just asking for opinions, put the question in context. Tell people, “We expect 30,000 new residents to be living in the city in the next 20 years. Based on our long-range land use plan, this is our best guess about where they will be living, working and going to school. This is about how much money we will have. What decisions would you make?” This creates a whole different framework for working toward solutions.

- **Think outside the box.** Question what is “realistic” or “possible.” When rethinking solutions, do research; don’t feel you need to reinvent the wheel. For example, just by looking on the Web, you can find numerous examples of ways to promote low-impact development. (Also see the article in the December 2004 issue of *Quality Cities*.)

- **Think holistically.** Residents don’t necessarily see problems according to your city organizational chart. When

discussing new roads, or road widening, residents are concerned about the environmental and land-use effects of the roads, not just the road design. Have your staff work in teams on these issues.

- **Think in the long term.** I have heard elected officials use the term “NIMTO” – “Not in my term of office.” Of course, you need to deal effectively with the problems that are of immediate concern to your city. But be willing to take the longer view as well – to look at solutions and accomplishments that will take a decade or more to achieve.

- **Raise expectations.** Doing big, visionary things is risky. However, often it is the grand visions that excite people to work toward accomplishing a goal. As a visionary leader, you have the opportunity to work not just for the common good, but also for great things for your city and its residents. If you present them with the opportunity, you will find that they are ready for the challenge.

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