

Eau Claire, Wisconsin, USA

Communities with clear vision

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Summary

In the city of Eau Claire in Wisconsin, USA, a community visioning and strategic planning process is currently giving citizens new opportunities to participate in decision-making in their communities. This case study describes how a coalition of government and non-profit organisations, led by the city of Eau Claire, worked with a broad cross section of community members to develop a vision and strategic plan for the area and to find solutions to the challenging problems they face at a time of rapid change and budget constraints. Mike Huggins is City Manager of Eau Claire.

Background

Eau Claire is a city of 66,000 people and serves as the regional economic centre for 12 counties in western Wisconsin, USA. The city is located in Eau Claire County, which has a total population of 95,000. Eau Claire County includes 15 separate local municipal government organisations, 12 distinct school districts and 3 special lake districts. The greater Eau Claire community, including much of the County population, is confronting a daunting set of choices about future investments in critical public and civic facilities and services.

Decisions facing citizens and local governments are complex, interconnected and go far beyond the capacities of any single government jurisdiction or community organisation. City government alone has lost over \$4 million annually in state shared revenue funding since 1995. Similar decreases have been experienced by county government and the area school district. In 1995, 48% of local government revenues came from state shared revenue, and 26% from local property tax. In 2008, 25% of local revenues came from state revenues and 49% from local property tax. At the same time the state has limited the total growth of local government expenditures to an average of 2%.

Given local contractual obligations for annual cost of living increases, greatly increased fuel and energy costs and double-digit increases in annual health care costs (in 2007 the City confronted a 56% increase in projected health costs), local governments have eliminated jobs and reduced public services and maintenance. They have increased classroom size and reduced funding support for non-profit community agencies such as the museum, arts organisations, seniors centre and low-income housing and social services.

During the same period the greater Eau Claire area has also continued to experience physical development and a growing, more socially and economically diverse population. In addition, the combined public facility infrastructure needs for schools, arts facilities, libraries, courthouse and jail, sewer plant, and community centres exceed \$400 million in construction costs.



Dean Schultz, co-chair of the economic development work group, presents preliminary group results on identifying community priorities for economic development.

What happened and why was it significant?

In March 2007 an informal meeting of government and non-profit organisation leaders was convened to discuss pressing challenges for community services and facilities. The result was an ad hoc coalition committed to implementing an inclusive problem-solving approach to community planning. This group secured \$40,000 in funding from the City of Eau Claire, Eau Claire County, Chamber of Commerce, a local charitable organisation United Way, Eau Claire Area Foundation, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, and the Chippewa Valley Technical College. They then contracted the National Civic League to facilitate the planning process combining both large community planning meetings with small focused work groups to develop a clear set of community priorities, implementation strategies and measurable outcomes.

The subsequent 'Clear Vision Eau Claire' community visioning process was designed to bring all sectors of the community together to create a broad community vision and strategic plan, aimed at building a reinvigorated sense of community purpose with clear community priorities for the future. The 'Clear Vision' process did not replace the formal planning, decision-making and budgeting processes of the city, county, and school governments but strengthened the community's civic capacity for effective collaboration by providing an integrated and coherent community perspective essential for effective coordination between government agencies.

The initial planning phase centred on 10 community meetings held at a local church. While the planning meetings were open to the general public, a core group of 150 citizens provided a consistent core of participants. This group was recruited to broadly represent the ethnic, geographic, age, gender, and occupational status of the community. They included government officials, representatives of community non-profit organisations, business, neighbourhood activists, students, and retirees.

These participants were recruited through a two step planning process. First the initial group of leaders from

the funding organisations contracted with the National Civic League (NCL) from Denver, Colorado to facilitate the community planning process. The NCL is a 100 years+ non-profit organisation devoted to increased participatory citizenship and civic infrastructure in local communities in the US. Working with a NCL project facilitator, the initial group of convenors recruited a 15 member Initiating Committee which included some of the initial convening leaders as well as eight additional citizens reflecting the geographic and social-economic diversity of the community.

In the second step of the planning process, leadership responsibility shifted to the Initiating Committee who planned the year long community process. They created the work committees to support the process and identified 500 Eau Claire community members to be invited to participate as stakeholders. The initial list of potential stakeholders was selected to reflect a cross-section of the diversity of the community by gender, age, geographic location, race, employment and income. The Initiating Committee made particular efforts to recruit participants from under-represented groups especially from low income and minority ethnic groups. The expanded recruitment efforts included meeting directly with members of the Hmong community (a large minority Asian ethnic group in Eau Claire), African-American leaders and local trade unions. While the outcome was not a perfect representation of Eau Claire, with more women than men and fewer people from low income groups, it was an extremely diverse group of people.

The large public meetings were held every three to four weeks with participants seated around small discussion tables to encourage everyone to speak. The initial planning phase concludes in June 2008 with a report written by the citizens themselves identifying priorities in six important community areas: community collaboration / partnerships, education, health care, transportation, quality of life and economic development. The goal is to identify 'trend-benders' – strategic actions that will dramatically change the rate and direction of community change and effectiveness.

The Clear Vision process is unique in many ways:

- The many disparate local government organisations and community organisations have never joined in an inclusive citizen-based collaborative effort to identify common needs and priorities. Community planning efforts are typically conducted by a government agency as a formal decision-making process ultimately accountable to a single government authority.
- Usually in governmental planning processes, citizens provide input at designated times. In the Clear Vision process, citizens are actively engaged in designing and conducting the process, determining the format and substance of recommendations, writing the final report and determining the implementation strategies.
- The recruitment of citizens in this way is unique; many of them had never before participated in public policy discussions and came as individuals rather than representatives of organisations or government agencies
- Participants who reflected the diversity of the Eau Claire community in terms of gender, age, racial/ethnic background, and economic interests were actively recruited.
- There is an emphasis on integrating the perspectives of traditional decision-making organisations (government, business) with citizen participation.
- Large group processes and small group discussions have been integrated to facilitate active participation.

Regardless of the final outcomes, simply getting the Clear Vision process underway is a significant community achievement. Eau Claire has many different levels of government, all with similar tax systems and all providing services to the same community, but they rarely ever met. Churches and not-for-profit organisations also tended to work in isolation. Yet issues affecting Eau Claire such as cuts to public expenditure impact on services in all areas and affect all of these groups

as well as cutting across the different levels of government. It is significant therefore that despite the limited resources that government and other organisations are faced with, there was a great willingness to provide funds for this visioning process. It was as if the idea of having a broader conversation about Eau Claire seemed to resonate with all groups and this in itself was an achievement.

What were the challenges?

1. Securing joint funding from government and community organisations.

The challenge was getting organisations to contribute funds during a time of reduced funding for most of the organisations and when none had been previously budgeted. It was also difficult to find a neutral non-government organisation (the Eau Claire Area Foundation) to manage the project contract.

2. Recruiting a diverse and inclusive core group of citizens.

Identifying a potential list of over 500 citizens reflecting community characteristics of age, gender, ethnicity, income, neighbourhood was difficult.

Gender and race was fairly easy. Identifying a general occupation was possible, income was not. While recruiting a mix of generations was critical, actually going beyond 'youth, middle age, and old' was difficult.

3. Retaining participants after the initial two meetings was challenging.

Many participants wanted to move quickly to identifying solutions without working through a thorough assessment of community needs which required continued commitment over time.

4. Efforts to communicate through a project website and email were not completely successful.

This was largely due to the difficulty of working across three or four different agencies and working with volunteers. There was often not the time or skills to check that information was correct and up-to-date.

What were the lessons?

1. Never under-estimate the power of convening a public meeting.

Simply inviting citizens to come together and talk about common problems and possible actions can

generate a lot of energy. That is how the original ad hoc planning group was started.

2. Well planned, well-facilitated meetings can accomplish many things.

Much can be achieved if the meetings are designed well and there is a genuine commitment to hear the views of citizens themselves. The most effective community meetings combined succinct presentation of information in a large group setting, with small group (5-10 participants) discussions to ensure that everyone felt able to talk and participate.

3. Creating public space for citizens is important.

Places such as community public meetings – where citizens can assess and discuss important community issues – are vital to the process. Creating an environment which is accessible and where citizens feel comfortable can in itself help to facilitate discussion.

4. Blend citizen passion with technical knowledge and expertise.

Creating issue focused work groups helps move the process onto the next stage and starts creating solutions for the identified problems.