

Smart Growth Survival Kit

Practical approaches to managing growth



A Vision Statement:

A Must for All Communities

ANJEC's Smart Growth Survival Kit

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About 15 years ago, the Washington Township Planning Board (Mercer) saw its neighboring towns going the way of suburbia, and worried that its own agrarian community would follow suit, Planning Department Director Robert Melvin said. Today, the town (www.washington-twp.org) boasts a 400 acre, pedestrian and bicycle friendly center with public parks, sidewalk cafes, and old style front porches, surrounded by 6,000 acres of land preserved for agriculture and open space.

Creating Washington's vision statement was a give and take, long-term process; the planning board members had been practicing smart growth concepts for years before they called a consultant to help verbalize the vision statement. Board members planned pro-actively, rather than reacting to individual site plans and fighting developers in court. They also drew on the good and bad images they saw when they took field trips to numerous towns and cities. Melvin explained, "The more you show (the board members) what their future could be, the easier they can verbalize what they want."

The most effective way to grapple with land use issues in your town is through the municipal master plan process. The master plan is a statement of objectives, policies and standards upon which the physical, economic and social development of the municipality are based. The master plan shows the existing and proposed locations and intensity of land development for specific uses, such as residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural, and educational uses. The future of the community's land use lies in the pages of the master plan, so it is crucial that the master plan be well thought out and carefully written with the needs of the community at the forefront.

A community is much more than a collection of streets, houses and buildings or subdivisions pieced together by one or more developers. Strong communities have a unique character that concerned local citizens have built over the years through responsible land use planning. Newer communities can learn

from this experience by exploring through a public process what their municipalities could look like over the next several decades. Developing a vision statement should be the first step when amending or writing a master plan because a well-crafted statement will tie the rest of the plan together.

The *NJ State Development and Redevelopment Plan* (a.k.a. the State Plan) provides guidance on which Planning Area a community belongs in, metropolitan, suburban, fringe, rural, or environmentally sensitive planning area, or any combination of these. The policy objectives for the applicable Planning Areas set the general parameters for a community's future growth and natural resource protection. Municipalities should provide a statement in their master plan (Municipal Land Use Law, N.J.S.A. 40:55D-28d) indicating the relationship of the master plan to the State Plan. Major goals of the State Plan are to reduce sprawl, provide affordable and diverse housing stock, and protect natural resources, so keep these in mind as you plan your vision.

Getting the Public Involved

Creating a vision should be a collaborative process among the citizens of the community, municipal officials (including environmental commission and planning board members), developers, engineers, and professional planners. The first challenge is to assemble everyone to start discussing how the municipality should develop in the future.

The easiest way to initiate discussions is to hold a number of public meetings at the start of the master plan review process where citizens can share their ideas and opinions. Advertise for these public meetings by placing press releases in your local paper, advertising on the community webpage, and handing out flyers at the schools and community centers. Hold the meetings in a central location, and provide transportation and childcare services to entice more citizens to come.

Tools for Visioning

A picture is worth a thousand words; bring visual aids to the meetings. *Photographs* from other towns and cities that have implemented their community vision can help citizens decide what characteristics they find desirable and what characteristics they want to avoid. In addition, citizens can design their own three-dimensional communities using *scale models* of buildings, houses, and other facets of a community. The three-dimensional model is beneficial because it makes the community easier to visualize, and community members can continuously move components of the model around until everyone is satisfied with the result. Three-dimensional envisioning can be accomplished with either computer graphics or block models.

Other useful techniques to gather information on the citizens' preferences include *standard surveying techniques*. A mail survey can be sent to a great number of people at a low cost and results can be easily standardized. The downside is that the response rate is usually low and the person answering the survey is limited to the questions printed, though space can be provided for extended responses.

Focus groups can be arranged as well; these could resemble a more compact and organized form of the public meetings. Responses from focus groups are more valuable than survey responses because they are accompanied with explanations and discussions. However, the person compiling the gathered information may inadvertently bias results because the responses are not standardized the way mailed surveys are. Also, the results will not be as useful if the focus group is not representative of all the people in the community. For example, senior citizens can be tapped for a discussion on senior housing options such as group homes, large complexes, and smaller developments, but this would not be representative of the entire community.

A compromise between the two options is a *telephone survey*, which can also reach masses of interested citizens. Telephone surveys have the benefit of being somewhat standardized and impersonal, so the interviewee is not put on the spot, but the interviewer can

ask follow-up questions and receive more detailed answers as if in a discussion group. Also, because a large number of people can be interviewed using a telephone survey, it is more likely that the entire community will be represented. The disadvantage is that the results may be biased towards the interviewer's preferences, but this can be minimized with well-written questions that the interviewer is asked to read.

Once you agree on how to communicate with the public, you need to focus your discussions on issues that are relevant to your community.

Essential Elements of the Vision

Because a vision statement will eventually be incorporated into the master plan, which is the basis for the zoning ordinance, it is essential that the community *identify important or unique resources, so that they are preserved through the development process*. Such categories may include, but are not limited to, environmental resources such as streams, mature woodlands, and steep slopes; agricultural resources; historic, cultural, and scenic resources, such as parks and recreation areas; and non-renewable resources of economic value, such as sand, gravel and gas deposits. Brownfields should also be identified for their redevelopment potential.

You should then consider the *costs and benefits of development*. If little planning is done, development is financially expensive, and it causes secondary environmental impacts such as air and water pollution and resource depletion. On the other hand, special attention to your community's environmental needs during the planning stage may actually reduce financial costs. For example, river and stream corridors provide flood control when they are protected from development. Also, lighter-colored materials and trees reduce energy use in cities. As a result, your community spends less money on energy and flood control because some of it can be handled naturally.

When you've envisioned all the general requirements that developers should follow, you can move on to specific issues of *character and design*. Will your

community have a historic look or a modern look? Will the center of town contain a pocket park, a high school, or a shopping district? Topics of discussion should include land use, infrastructure, and open space.

You may also want to include *aesthetic planning features* in your vision statement. For example, the characteristics you want your community to portray will determine the materials used for the buildings and the style of the architecture. Small and quaint will look very different from city skyscrapers. Such features may include building materials, styles of buildings, setbacks, lighting, and landscaping, among others.

And don't forget *traffic and parking*. Will parking be on the streets, in lots behind the stores, or in parking garages? How much space will be offered? If you gear your community toward pedestrians and the mass transit system, cars can be accommodated, but not encouraged, and your town will become more pedestrian-friendly. Reducing traffic not only helps protect the environment, but it also improves the aesthetics and acoustics of your community.

Your community should be user-friendly so people from all walks of life and ages can enjoy it to its maximum potential. Students should be able to safely walk or bike to the school and the park or recreation center. Adults should be able to walk down the street for a quick bite during their lunch hours, and mass transit should be easily accessible and convenient to travel to a neighboring community. Strip malls that are built in isolation without connection to the surrounding development should be avoided, and green buffers should separate incompatible uses.

Writing the Vision Statement for the Municipal Master Plan

The vision statement in the master plan must be specific to be effective; you can't leave room for interpretation. The community should use its vision statement rather than reacting to individual site development plans. Developers should be able to visualize from the master plan what the town will look like in the future, so it is helpful to include photographs and illustrations. The master plan should identify the characteristics that your community deems desirable, thus ensuring appropriate development.

When creating the vision for your master plan, it is imperative that the communication lines among community members remain open. Moreover, everyone must keep an open mind and be willing to compromise. Suggest alternative plans if your views are too extreme for the general public.

Once there's general agreement on a vision, you have one step left. Work with the Planning Board to write it down, and adopt it into the master plan.

For Further Information

- ANJEC Resource Center, 973-539-7547, resourcecenter@anjec.org
- Municipal Land Use Law, N.J.S.A. 40:55D et seq, available in print from ANJEC, 973-539-7547, or NJ Planning Officials, 908-412-9592
- *NJ State Development and Redevelopment Plan*, 609-292-7156, www.nj.gov/dca/osg
- Sprawl Watch Clearinghouse, 202-332-7000, www.sprawlwatch.org

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ANJEC is a statewide non-profit organization that informs and assists environmental commissions, local officials and interested citizens in preserving and protecting New Jersey's environment.

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