

# Planning your city's future

## chapter 4

One of the key qualities of a leader is the ability to see the big picture and plan for the long term. What should a city look like for future generations? What trends—both positive and negative—does the city need to address? These questions can get lost in the day-to-day challenges of keeping city services afloat and balancing the budget—but it's the city council's job to see that they don't.

Long-term planning is essential not just because conditions are constantly changing, but also because it's the way a community defines itself and commits to working towards a common goal. That's why it's so important to involve residents—including people from all walks of life—in creating a clear vision for the future and a plan to achieve it.

### Strategic planning

A strategic plan is a big-picture document that lays out a city's future and specifies the actions needed to achieve that vision. A good strategic plan also includes benchmarks or mileposts along the way that mark the city's progress towards achieving its vision. Having such a plan brings focus and accountability to the work of the city government. It creates a way to measure progress and to quickly identify obstacles and overcome them. Most important, the process of creating a strategic plan involves everyone—councilmembers, staff, and residents—in shaping a shared vision that can unify and energize the community.

Strategic planning can help the city develop a vision, identify long-term goals and annual objectives, and provide detailed strategies to address community needs and organizational performance.

The development and implementation of a strategic plan is time-consuming and requires the sustained attention and work of city staff, elected officials, and community members. Objectives defined by a strategic plan often require a long-term commitment of staff resources and funding to make effective change.

Areas often addressed as part of this process include economic development, improving municipal services, diversifying the tax base, and improving the infrastructure within a community.

While there are many ways to approach strategic planning, here are a few key elements to keep in mind:

- Agree on a clear vision of the future.
- Put together a mission statement—why are we here?
- Involve people—elected officials, city staff, and community members.
- Create a strategy that defines what success means.
- Establish clear priorities.
- Create action plans that carry out your strategy—the what, who, when, and how to measure.
- Get buy-in for the action plans.
- Integrate your action plans into all aspects of city hall operations.
- Decide how you will monitor and measure your action plans—and follow through.
- Stay focused and keep communicating.

## Strategic planning retreats

Many cities schedule annual planning retreats for councilmembers and city staff. A retreat is an opportunity to get away from the daily routine and focus on long-term, big-picture issues. Retreats also provide valuable opportunities to address problems in working relationships and forge a more productive, collegial team. Retreats don't have to be expensive resort getaways but should be in a relaxed environment. A library, community center, or any public meeting space can work well. A city retreat is subject to the Open Public Meetings Act.

The most important part of a retreat is that it provides the opportunity for the council and key staff to take a moment out of busy schedules and look at the city's direction from a holistic perspective. Encouraging the group to gather in a new location is important. This gives the group an opportunity to truly "retreat" from daily business and explore new ideas about the city's vision and strategic direction.

Having a facilitator who is not a member of the city council or staff is also important. This allows everyone to participate more freely. If your city can't afford a professional facilitator, consider choosing a facilitator who has some local standing, such as a school superintendent, a chamber of commerce director, or a service club president. Cities can even ask another city's manager or administrator to act as the facilitator. The most important qualities in a facilitator are impartiality, fairness, and respect for all those who wish to be heard.

## Community involvement

It's difficult to determine the collective community vision without involving residents first. Ways to involve the community in long-term visioning include:

- Focus groups
- Resident surveys
- Analysis of political and demographic moods (e.g., anti-growth feelings versus low-income housing concerns).

For more ideas about how to gather resident input, see the last section of this chapter.

## Other long-range planning tools

Cities must make long-range decisions based on good, current information. Economic and population forecasts can help cities plan for changes down the road. See the long-range financing planning section in Chapter 6 and the comprehensive planning section of Chapter 10 for more information.

## Economic development

Many of Washington's small cities are skilled and successful in promoting economic development. Whether its tourism promotion in Leavenworth, high-speed telecommunications investments in Forks, or historic building preservation in Rosalia, small city governments undertake various activities that bring economic vitality to their communities. But these things don't just happen overnight. They require specific, deliberative steps on behalf of residents and the city council.

Small city economic development can involve:

- Working with the business community to attract, retain, and expand businesses
- Revitalizing downtown areas
- Revising land use policies to invite particular investments (e.g., housing, industrial, commercial)
- Building infrastructure to support various enterprises
- Partnering with other governments and organizations to support job creation and training programs

Washington's economic development toolbox is more limited than other states. The state constitution contains provisions that strictly limit the lending of state credit and gifting of public funds. Therefore, a city does not have authority to construct and operate industrial and commercial facilities or to use city funds to attract private industrial development. The most important economic development tool a city can offer is a well-developed infrastructure system, and partners such as the Infrastructure Assistance Coordinating Council, USDA Rural Development, and Washington State University Extension can help small cities leverage limited resources and expertise in this area.

## Legislative advocacy

Many small cities don't realize just how much influence they can have on changes at the state level. When a city council adopts an official position and lets legislators know about it, it can make a difference in how they craft a piece of legislation and how they vote. The Legislature and state agencies listen to the concerns of cities, so it's important for elected leaders to educate their residents and representatives about city challenges and to be aware of AWC's legislative work and priorities.

Although the Legislature only meets for a portion of the year, involvement with the legislative process is a year-round activity. There's no substitute for having a close relationship with state representatives and senators. Staying in touch with them throughout the year helps city officials gain access to busy legislators when they're in session.

## Volunteer strategies for involving your community

Every city official knows that residents are a city's greatest asset. Having enough staff for city hall to function on a daily basis, much less complete a large project, can be a major challenge.

That's one reason many cities recognize the advantage of putting the skills of their community members to use in volunteer programs. Such programs can increase the quality and quantity of public services at a minimal cost and provide an opportunity for residents to contribute to the betterment of their community. An even bigger dividend is that volunteering creates a sense of ownership and civic pride and sets a good example for the next generation. Volunteers also gain firsthand knowledge of the challenges facing the city, which may even motivate them to run for elective office.

## Connecting with residents

Cities need to communicate with residents about the value of their government and the mutual responsibility of all residents to make it work. Many opinion polls, and a growing number of ballot initiatives, indicate that many residents feel disconnected from government and believe they have little influence on community decisions. If this trend isn't reversed, it will erode our ability to sustain our democracy. That is why it's important to consider using new ways to reach out to residents, understand what they need and want, and find ways for them to connect with their local government.

As Washington's demographics change and the state becomes more diverse, it becomes more important to find new ways to bring people together. And it takes empathy and skill to understand and fully include those of differing perspectives while keeping the city's focus on the common good. To do this, cities need to provide opportunities for resident feedback that go beyond public hearings.

Some approaches that can help improve public input:

- **Host community meetings** on a specific issue or topic where stakeholders have the opportunity for discussion.
- **Change the physical setting.** More informal settings can reduce feelings of separation and power differences between public officials and residents.
- **Involve interested parties** in the process of developing alternative solutions and approaches. Do this early in the process so that promising new alternatives can be fairly addressed.
- **Use small groups and committee work** to involve residents.
- **Schedule meetings** at times and places that are convenient to those who want to be involved.
- **Consider using a trained facilitator** to conduct meetings if issues are especially controversial. Someone who has no personal stake in the issue can be more fair and impartial, and skilled facilitators can help maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect even when people have passionate opinions. One way to gain confidence and trust is to choose a facilitator who has some local standing, such as a school superintendent, a chamber of commerce director, or a service club president. The most important qualities in a facilitator are impartiality, fairness, and respect for all those who wish to be heard.

Feedback collected from residents should be a focal point in creating a city's strategic plan and vision for the future.

## Know the law

- [Article VIII, Washington State Constitution - State, County & Municipal Indebtedness](#)
- [Article XXXII, Section 1, Washington State Constitution - Special Revenue Financing](#)
- [RCW 35.21.703 - Authority to engage in economic development activities](#)
- [RCW 4.24.670 - Liability of volunteers of nonprofit or governmental entities](#)
- [RCW 51.12.035 - Volunteers \(Industrial Insurance\)](#)
- [RCW 43.101.200 - Law enforcement personnel exempts "volunteers" and "reserve officers" from the requirement that law enforcement personnel must complete basic law enforcement training](#)