



## VISIONING

Visioning is a community activity intended to produce a common vision, accompanied by goals, for the future. Ideally, it is broadly based and highly inclusive in order to achieve, if not consensus, then at least widespread buy-in among the various stakeholders and subgroups within the community. Achieving such a vision, however, is seldom easy and more often involves some hard work and dedication on the part of community leaders and citizens alike. In a post-disaster situation, it is particularly difficult because research has long shown that most residents already have an important vision of the rebuilt community, one that closely resembles the community with which they have long been familiar. Achieving a vision that includes substantial improvements that enhance resilience as part of the process of long-term recovery requires effective leadership, solid direction of the process, and a well-considered framework for expressing the resulting ideas and relating them to existing comprehensive plan policies, if possible.

### KEY POINT #1

***Effective visioning may help expand the window of opportunity to marshal support for change after a disaster.***

### KEY POINT #2

***Achieving a meaningful vision to enhance resilience typically requires effective direction and a solid framework for transforming ideas into action.***

### KEY POINT #3

***The vision of the future of the community should somehow relate to policies already in place or added to the existing comprehensive and other plans the community has adopted.***

### KEY POINT #4

***Building consensus and creating buy-in requires the inclusion of and full consultation with disadvantaged and minority populations.***



## **KEYPOINT #1:**

***Effective visioning may help expand the window of opportunity to marshal support for change after a disaster.***

After a significant disaster, the survivors face numerous needs that must often be met within relatively short time lines (Olshansky, Hopkins, and Johnson 2012). Electric power, water, and communications must be restored. Schools and businesses must be reopened in order to restore some semblance of normal economic and social life. And many

need temporary housing and eventually restoration or repair of permanent housing. And this is almost always not all. Developing a vibrant vision for a more resilient community must compete with these priorities.

Research has long shown that, in the absence of some larger vision for the future, residents of disaster-stricken communities already have an operative vision of the rebuilt community in their own minds, and it almost invariably closely resembles the community they already knew (Schwab et al., 1998; Geipel 1982). It is only a matter of time before residents and businesses begin to rebuild, and the only way to gain their patience is to present and win acceptance for an alternative that they will perceive as improving their lives and capable of achievement within a reasonable time frame. If that new vision has somehow come from within the community and from respected leadership, the task of reorienting people's aspirations becomes somewhat easier, although there is always likely to be some dissent.

For example, after the 1993 Midwest floods, the city of Arnold, Missouri, found itself in an advantageous position because it had already developed the idea for a greenway along the Mississippi and Meramec rivers. The city sits at the confluence of these two rivers in an area south of St. Louis. When a citizen commission prepared the greenway plan in 1991, it had no idea, of course, that major flooding just two years later would accelerate the implementation of its ambitious goals. The group had envisioned a long process of acquiring flood-prone properties in the floodplains, perhaps over 20 years, as money became available. The plan made it possible, however, for Arnold to acquire Hazard Mitigation Grant Program funds to implement the vision and move the

plan forward by decades, turning flood-prone residential areas into green space, improving riverine habitat for wildlife, creating new recreational opportunities for hikers, bicyclists, and others, and drastically reducing the flood risks in Arnold (Schwab 1998, Ch. 8). The vision for the greenway, adopted before the disaster, displaced what otherwise might well have been a desire to rebuild what was lost and thus recreate the vulnerabilities that already existed. Instead, Arnold became more resilient in the face of future disasters.

Not every community will be so fortunate, or so visionary, prior to a disaster, but it is also possible for trusted leaders to move quickly to offer alternative visions or to support those that bubble up from community discussions. Within weeks after their town was devastated by a May 4, 2007, tornado, citizens of Greensburg, Kansas, were seizing upon the idea of putting "the green back in Greensburg" by rebuilding a community that would rely primarily upon renewable energy and rebuild to LEED standards (Schwab 2014, 162). Likewise, within five days of the June 13, 2008, flood that devastated downtown Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the city council had adopted a set of visionary goals for the recovery that set the tone for the discussions that followed to determine what kind of future residents wanted for their city (Prosser 2013).

## **KEYPOINT #2:**

***Achieving a meaningful vision to enhance resilience typically requires effective direction and a solid framework for transforming ideas into action.***

Visioning does not simply happen by accident. It requires ideas, and it requires broad-based public discussion of those ideas. The larger the community, the greater is the need for a well-considered, well-organized structure for the process to ensure positive results. It is very easy for matters to go awry, particularly because many people will still be grieving

personal or material losses as well as suffering the strains of temporary or permanent displacement, loss of livelihoods, and disruptions in the life of the community. The idea that the disaster may contain a silver lining

with the seeds of a brighter future is not always easy to grasp or readily apparent. The negative public reaction in New Orleans to the famous “green dots” in a map that appeared in the *Times-Picayune* a few months after Hurricane Katrina, supposedly depicting areas under consideration for acquisition for green space, serves to illustrate how plans that are not well anchored in open public debate can destroy the foundation for a new vision before it even has an opportunity to take root (Olshansky and Johnson 2010).

On the other hand, other new ideas often surfaced at the neighborhood level in New Orleans during the Rockefeller-funded *Unified New Orleans Plan* process (Olshansky and Johnson 2010). In Cedar Rapids, neighborhood planning became the cornerstone of most visioning for the community’s future, in addition to an early framework plan (Schwab 2014, 48–49). To ensure sensitivity to residents and to foster the needed creativity, Community Development Director Christine Butterfield engaged the Chicago-based Institute for Cultural Studies to train hundreds of city employees in facilitation techniques for the dozens of public meetings that developed and considered the plans (American Planning Association 2011). However, it is also worth noting that Cedar Rapids had engaged before the 2008 flood in a more broadly focused visioning exercise following voter adoption in 2005 of a restructuring of city government to a city manager and council with an elected mayor. That led to the *Vision Cedar Rapids* plan in 2007, which was deployed just six months before the flood and largely enabled the city council to act quickly in establishing priorities after the flood (Schwab 2014, 48–49). Once again, as in Arnold, Missouri, important and visionary decisions preceding a disaster, and made largely without reference to one, fostered the capacity for effective visioning to rebuild a more resilient community afterwards.

The Internet has become a powerful means of soliciting and organizing ideas that can help a city develop a vision. This is particularly true in larger cities, where marshaling large-scale, in-person participation can become a significant challenge. One noteworthy example comes from Christchurch, the New Zealand city that suffered damaging earthquakes in both September 2010 and February 2011. Within 10 weeks after the later event, the city council launched “Share an Idea,” a “public engage-

ment campaign aimed to maximise community involvement in the Central City redevelopment.” Shareanidea.org.nz was born as a portal through which residents of Christchurch could submit their own ideas about the redevelopment of the city, resulting in more than 58,000 visits in its six weeks of operation and followed in May 2011 by a two-day Share an Idea Community Expo that drew more than 10,000 people. The combination of 106,000 ideas from these and social media channels, however, needed some organization. City planners and staff categorized and color-coded those ideas into themes, and in the recovery plan generated a “Wordle,” which uses comparative sizing of those themes to emphasize which had stronger support than others. “Green spaces” clearly emerged as a leading theme, as did various aspects of “city life.” It is important to note that such exercises are merely the opening of a visioning effort, and the hard work remains to develop those themes into a coherent plan that is capable of marshaling public support toward implementing those ideas through specific projects (City of Christchurch 2011).

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### KEYPOINT #3:

***The vision of the future of the community should somehow relate to policies already in place or added to the existing comprehensive and other plans the community has adopted.***

Florida has done more than any other state to advance the development of what it calls post-disaster redevelopment plans (PDRPs), which are really plans developed prior to a disaster to outline policy goals for how recovery will be managed in the event of a disaster. Because the law that initially mandated such plans was part of the overall system of enabling legislation in Florida governing comprehensive planning,

it followed logically that the PDRPs would be closely related to local comprehensive plans.

There are some compelling reasons why the vision behind a post-disaster recovery plan should take account of the existing community policies in the comprehensive plan. It makes sense to align those policies whenever possible, for the community is unlikely simply

to abandon its long-term comprehensive plan after a disaster—and in Florida, at least would have to amend the plan in order to do so. It is more likely that the residents of a community will seek some stability in the planning process, even as they seek greater resilience. Success is most likely if a major part of the vision for recovery has been established in pre-disaster recovery planning that takes account of preexisting community visions and aspirations. The guidance for Florida PDRPs clearly recommends reviewing existing plans when preparing recovery plans (Florida DCA/Florida DEM 2010).

The guidance is also clear about the purpose of such plans: “Without a guiding vision, short-term decisions may inadvertently restrict long-term, sustainable redevelopment and overlook opportunities to surpass the status quo” (Florida DCA/Florida DEM 2010, 4). The guide explains that in the context of recovery planning, “All communities have already prepared comprehensive plans and participated in other planning initiatives that include a vision for the community’s future. The PDRP can identify disaster scenarios in which opportunities may be present to advance the community’s already-stated vision in a compressed timeframe.” In other words, the preparation of the PDRP is not the setting for entirely new visions for the community but for reconciling the post-disaster vision with existing plans.

If, however, a community stricken by a disaster has never addressed questions concerning a recovery vision before that event, the challenge of such reconciliation becomes significantly greater. Overcoming that problem is a major part of the underlying logic of pre-disaster planning. But communities in such a position may well have to venture into new territory not anticipated by its comprehensive plan and then find ways to reconcile that plan and its recovery vision, all in a compressed time frame.

#### **KEYPOINT #4:**

***Building consensus and creating buy-in requires the inclusion of and full consultation with disadvantaged and minority populations.***

It should be small surprise to anyone that economically, socially, and physically disadvantaged members of the community are more likely to suffer adverse consequences in a disaster than others. The Florida guidance lists several such categories of concern, including low-income people, the homeless, children, the elderly, and racial and eth-

nic minorities. It also notes gender differences that may disadvantage women disproportionately (Florida DCA/Florida DEM 2010, 84–85).

All of these groups require some attention devoted to special needs, and the best way to ensure those needs are addressed is to conduct a planning process that ensures their inclusion and that their insights are valued. Without the involvement of special needs populations, planners and public officials may well miss a number of recovery-related issues of significance, including access to insurance, special physical challenges for the elderly and handicapped, and other factors. For example, Greenberg (2014) makes the case that senior citizens merit special attention in disasters, citing experiences from Sandy and other events, and that their numbers are growing as our nation’s demographics change. The Florida guidance also takes note of the likely increased need for mental health assistance after disasters, and that most mental health services are not geared to the kinds of stress associated with disaster experiences (Florida DCA/Florida DEM 2010, 90). Finally, minorities and low-income persons are more likely to be exposed to health-related pollution after disasters, leading to significant gaps in environmental justice (Florida DCA/Florida DEM 2010, 92).

The lack of inclusion of and full consultation with disadvantaged and minority populations can hinder the trust in government needed for recovery planning to succeed and cripple recovery management efforts, a problem all too much in evidence following Hurricane Katrina (Olshansky and Johnson 2010; Bates and Swan 2010). The problem, however, is hardly isolated to that one disaster, but is an ongoing challenge for almost

all communities to one degree or another. The willingness to engage those who are most likely to suffer the adverse impacts of disasters means inherently a willingness to learn what they need and potentially to uncover needs that have often remained hidden from public view. The benefit for the planning process lies in proactively addressing problems that otherwise often fester and undermine public confidence in a positive outcome, let alone one that reflects a positive vision for enhanced community resilience in the face of future disasters. Effective visioning necessarily includes positive outcomes for those who can most benefit from that enhanced resilience.

## RESOURCES

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