UNH Cooperative Extension Community Profile Program

Introduction

Sound planning must be based on the best available factual information about a municipality, its resources, and its people. An updated master plan is perhaps the most complete source of information about current conditions and trends in the community.

Although the actual content of a master plan may vary from community to community, essentially, it is a document which establishes an individual community’s goals for its future development and recommends actions to reach those goals. Since people are the most essential ingredient to consider when preparing or updating a master plan, it is imperative that the process provide ample opportunity for the ideas, concerns, and aspirations of the people to be expressed and incorporated in that plan.

A vital component in the master plan process is a community survey or opinion poll to assure that the plan and its recommendations truly reflect the goals, interests, and needs of the residents of the community. The Community Profile process provides an excellent opportunity for a community to take stock of where it is today, and develop an action plan for how they want to operate in the future. It is suggested that the following Community Profile process be considered by the planning board when developing or updating the master plan as a mechanism to strengthen citizen participation, volunteerism, and involvement by various community organizations or groups in the master planning process. Concerned citizens, across the state, meeting both formally and informally are recognizing the need for their community to take stock of their assets and evaluate critical areas for development, and, that this process must supersede the “politics” of the community. The citizens have also come to the realization that to tackle the process of assessment and evaluation on their own is a difficult task.

History

The Civic Profile, the forerunner of the Community Profile, emerged from the Governor's Commission on New Hampshire in the 21st Century as an initiative to help preserve two themes that identify and unite New Hampshire people: Citizen Responsibility - a belief that individual citizens can and will take responsibility for the future; and, Living Landscape - a strong attachment to the environment of the state, including both its natural resources and the working landscape of business and industry, farms, and forests. The Civic Profile was designed as a process to enable communities to solve problems and deal with change by strengthening their "civic infrastructure" - the people, systems and institutions used to make decisions and come to consensus.

Process

The Community Profile is a process by which communities take stock of where they are today and develop an action plan for how they want to operate in the future. It is a self-evaluation tool that draws heavily on the collective wisdom of the participants, and helps communities develop problem-solving abilities. The process provides a method for citizens to affirm community strengths, find collaborative approaches to meet challenges creatively, and manage change. One of the major outcomes of the Community Profile is more citizen participation in the community and the affairs of its government.
The Community Profile takes about six months to plan and organize, and a weekend (usually a Friday evening and all day Saturday) to implement. There are two distinct parts of the Profile, planning/preparation and the event itself. The planning is critical to the success of the Profile. If the entire community is not represented within the event or not given the opportunity to participate then the result will be open to challenge. The participants must represent a broad cross section of the community so the process is not perceived as an attempt by a specific group to impose its wishes and values upon the community. This must be avoided to ensure success of the process.

Once a group has recognized the need for this kind of process in a community, representatives of UNH Cooperative Extension meet with them to outline the Community Profile. If they decide to proceed, they are asked to form a Steering Committee who will do the following:

- Make public announcements (press releases, cable television announcements, flyers, posters, etc.) to inform citizens who wish to participate.

- Make arrangements for a date, site and refreshments. Often local schools can be used at little or no cost. Local volunteer or church groups or businesses may be willing to provide food. Organize Friday night pot luck dinner.

- Research and contact funding sources if needed.

- Identify and invite a broad cross section of residents to participate. Everyone should be represented.

- Identify facilitators and arrange for facilitator training.

- Evaluate process, develop structure and plan for follow-up support of identified projects.

**The Profile Event - Friday Evening**

The Profile event starts off with a pot luck supper on the evening of the first day. After presentations by the Steering Committee, the lead facilitator takes the community participants through a variety of exercises. As a large group, they are asked to share their positive or negative feelings about what their community is like now and what they would like the community to be like in the future. All responses are recorded for inclusion in the final report.

The facilitator then introduces eleven components of a successful community, which are as follows:

1. Effective Community Leadership
2. Informed Citizen Participation
3. Sense of Community
4. Fostering Healthy Families, Individuals, and Youth
5. Lifelong Education and Learning
6. Community Services, Facilities, and Utilities
7. Recreation and Cultural Heritage
8. Working Landscape and Natural Environment
9. Economic Vitality
10. Growth and Development
11. Transportation
The facilitator then randomly assigns participants into eleven small groups, with each group corresponding to one of the above components. Each group is led by a community person who has received training in facilitation skills. Once in these groups, participants discuss their community as it relates to their assigned component. Groups adjourn for the evening once their task is completed.

**The Profile Event - Saturday**

On the morning of the second day, the lead facilitator welcomes participants back as a large group and reports back on the results of the Friday night small group discussions. Participants are asked what key issues they heard, which are then grouped by the lead facilitator into six to ten broad themes. This is done by consensus of the entire group. Once completed, people break out into small working groups for the theme of their choice. The small groups define the problems or opportunities as they pertain to the issue and what they hope to accomplish in the form of project goals. Potential problems or solutions are proposed and these are rated on an impact-feasibility basis. Three projects are selected based on their location on the impact-feasibility grid, to bring to the entire group.

At the end of the morning, the large group reconvenes to hear the reports from the morning's small groups. The lead facilitator asks: "Which project do you think we should move forward on? Which is the most important project for our town right now?" The large group votes on projects and the ones with the most votes are worked on in the afternoon small groups. Participants choose the project they want to work on in the afternoon, addressing critical steps to implementation.

The final plenary session includes a discussion on "Where do we go from here?" What kind of communication system will exist and can the group decide on future meetings. A member of the Steering Committee closes the event to give the community ownership of what has occurred. The report which is produced by UNH Cooperative Extension includes all the information recorded throughout the one and half day event. The Steering Committee has the responsibility for printing and distributing the report in a timely manner. Enough copies should be produced so that everyone who attended receives a copy and there are extras for the general public, public library, etc.

**UNH Cooperative Extension will provide:**

- Staff support to Steering Committee
- Assistance in outreach and engagement plan to inform and recruit citizens to participate
- Facilitator training for community members
- Leadership and coordinating for the Friday and Saturday Profile events
- Final report
- 6-12 month staff follow-up with action committee(s)

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