

# From Vision to Reality: Effective Planning by the Governing Board

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Most commissioners, mayors, and council members could describe quickly and clearly what they would like to see their governing boards achieve by the time they left office. Yet, based on past experience, many of those same officials will leave office disappointed and frustrated that they could not accomplish what they had hoped for. Some will be disappointed because they could not overcome active opposition to their own ideas; but many more will feel powerless because they and their fellow board members worked long and hard without realizing even the goals they all agreed on.

Good intentions will not guarantee good results. The challenge for an elected board, like any other corporate body, is to create a shared vision and to translate it into reality by some kind of focused, organized action. The most effective organizations define the results they seek, develop plans to accomplish them, and then tailor their everyday actions and decisions to be consistent with those plans. Those that do not, find themselves captivated by current events, unable to separate important business from business that is just urgent, and unable to gain the initiative so essential to achieving what they want for the future.

The purpose of this article is to describe a planning process that might help the governing board, in partnership with the manager and staff, to achieve the results it wants. It includes some of the things a board might do to make each step of the process work and reviews the roles that elected officials and administrators might assume in various stages of the process. This planning process will not guarantee good results either; but if it is woven into a fabric of competent administration, teamwork, and communication among elected officials, manager, and staff, it could help the governing board to take actions that support its most important purposes.

## A Planning Process

Planning is a process for making decisions now about what to do in the future. In order to do that, an organization has to see two futures: the one that the organization would like to occur, and the one that would occur if the organization simply allowed events to take their natural course. If those two futures are different, then the organization has to decide what it should do to realize the fu-

ture that it wants, and then it must take the necessary action to make that happen. A process to accomplish this has six basic steps:

- (1) *Creating a vision*: This includes articulating fundamental beliefs about the mission of local government—what it should be and what it should do—and using them to form a picture of the community's ideal future.
- (2) *Agreeing on key issues*: This includes deciding on which issues are critical to realizing the vision and what specific goals will help to realize it.
- (3) *Developing program strategies*: This consists of deciding what kinds of things the city or county should do to achieve its goals most effectively. These general strategies might depend on participation by institutions outside of city or county government.
- (4) *Developing budgets*: This involves deciding how much can be done each year and how resources should be allocated among all of the functions of government, including those activities that are important parts of program strategies.
- (5) *Implementing*: This consists of organizing, scheduling, and carrying out budgeted activities completely, on time, and within budget.
- (6) *Evaluating*: This includes determining whether implementation is moving the city or county toward the board's vision and, if not, whether changes should be made in what is being done.

## Putting the Process into Practice

A board can use this six-step planning process to define and carry out a long-range agenda for the community. Although shortcuts are sometimes practical or necessary, the board is more likely to be effective in turning its vision into reality if it goes through all six steps in some form.

### Creating a vision

The power of an idea is tremendous. Ideas are what drive members of the board to seek election and to serve long, hard hours throughout their terms in office. But the governing board does its work as a corporate body, so the ideas that each member brings to his or her service on the

board will be most effective when they are shared by other members. It is human nature for each member to act and vote according to his or her beliefs and vision for the community. For example, if a member of the board believes that trees and natural beauty are more valuable than the convenience of getting around easily by automobile and envisions a town with lush greenery, he or she would probably tend to vote against street widenings in town. If the governing body knows which beliefs and parts of a vision members hold in common, it can determine what kind of initiatives are likely to have the support of the full board. If it knows which individual beliefs and parts of the vision are in conflict, it can work to resolve them, or it can at least use them to understand the rationale behind individual members' positions when they conflict.

Thus the first step of the planning process is to understand the beliefs that will drive the actions of individual board members and to see if the board has some common vision for the future. Beliefs are expressions of what members expect the future to hold ("I believe there will always be recurring energy shortages"), their values ("I believe that open space and greenery is an essential, not an amenity"), and their assumptions about the present ("I believe that citizens are willing to pay the cost of having a pleasing environment beyond their own neighborhoods"). Each member's vision describes the ideal community in his or her eyes and is determined largely by beliefs ("I would like to see compact, energy-efficient urban centers surrounded by expanses of undisturbed countryside preserved permanently for public enjoyment"). A system of *common* beliefs and *corporate* vision can provide a beacon on which the board can orient its plans and actions. It can also provide a set of reference points against which the board can measure the effectiveness and the consistency of what it does.

It is very tempting to omit this first step. By the time members reach office, they often have already translated their own personal beliefs and vision into specific positions (such as widening certain roads) that they are prepared to promote or to which they have already committed themselves publicly. Also some people are uncomfortable sharing their fundamental beliefs in a give-and-take discussion, and some become frustrated over the time and hard work required to articulate and sharpen beliefs and visions so that they are clear to others on the board. Despite these difficulties, if the governing board can establish a common set of beliefs and a vision of what it wants to achieve, the rest of its work can become easier because the board can be clearer and more focused in its day-to-day discussions of how to achieve the results it seeks.

This first step of the planning process is often conducted in a retreat setting with the manager and a skilled facilitator.<sup>1</sup> Two days in a retreat setting is probably needed to develop and discuss thoroughly the basic beliefs and visions represented on the board. Certainly many governing boards

take less time to do this—many devote as little as a half day. These abbreviated discussions are valuable, but usually they do not permit full exploration of everyone's ideas. Regardless of the amount of time spent, many boards have found it useful to publish what they agree on at this stage, both for their own use and to publicize it as an important foundation of the board's future work.

## Agreeing on key issues

Once the board has clarified the underlying beliefs and vision that will motivate it in its work, it is in a position to examine the current situation of the community. The purpose of this step is to choose the several issues that are most critical to realizing the board's vision for the community's future and on which the board might focus its energy and resources. For example, to realize a vision of a county with great expanses of undisturbed countryside in a rapidly-developing area like the Research Triangle, control of rural land conversion would be a critical issue.

The board might start this step by "scanning" aspects of the environment, such as the economy, housing, transportation, education, quality of life, and the city's or the county's long-range fiscal prospects. In each case it might look at local, state, and national trends that would affect the community in the future. For example, a falling elementary school population in a county over the last three years might suggest lower capital requirements to maintain excellence in education; but if nationwide a population bulge were moving through the pre-school ages, school facilities' needs might soon emerge as a critical issue.

The key to effective scanning is to gather enough information to decide whether an issue is important, but to gather no more than is needed to do that. There is usually a wealth of data that have been collected over time by the city or county, by businesses, and by other governmental agencies at the regional, state, and national levels. The board only needs to know enough about an issue to decide whether it will upset the board's fundamental vision for the community if events are allowed to take their own course. Exhaustive and detailed data seldom are needed to do that. In fact, too much information can cloud issues rather than clarify them. It is more helpful to distill information as much as possible in order to highlight issues and to provide sharp focus for discussion and debate. At this stage trends, not details, are important to the board.

If an issue appears to be important, the board should also consider what the city's or the county's capacity is to do something about it. It should consider legal opportunities and constraints and the capacity of existing governmental staffs and other resources to provide the quantity and quality of work that might be necessary. For example, if explosive growth is threatening the vision of remaining a friendly, small town and the town has no full-time staff

to manage development, it might either have to commit to building up its staff or abandon that part of its vision.

A board usually finds that almost every issue it examines is compelling in some way, but unless it resolves to concentrate its efforts on a few issues, it is likely to dissipate energy and resources, possibly without making a discernable difference anywhere. Achieving visible results in a few important areas can benefit the community far more than working on many desirable things or addressing many issues without much concrete effect.

The board can decide what it needs to accomplish for each critical issue and set some specific goals. This is not a repeat of the first step; the initial vision the board develops is very long-range, general, and not necessarily realistic. In this step the board sets realistic goals in each critical area against which progress can be measured. The City of Wilmington calls these goals “breakthrough objectives”—objectives that resolve issues or problems that prevent the city from achieving its vision. For example, if part of a board’s vision for a rapidly growing city were to accommodate citizens of all income levels, and if accelerating real estate prices made housing harder to obtain for all but the affluent, then affordable housing would be a critical issue, and the board might establish a goal to increase the supply of decent, affordable rental housing for low- and moderate-income persons by a certain amount in the next few years.

## Developing program strategies

Once the board has chosen critical issues and established working goals for them, it is in a position to think about how the goals might be achieved. It does this by devising strategies—coherent combinations of programs and actions that together might bring about a desired result. The board does not necessarily have to design entirely new strategies; many of the operating programs already in place might be used to reach its goals. If so, the board might modify or put new emphasis on existing programs instead of creating new ones out of whole cloth. For example, a city might examine how it could use its existing public housing authority, its Community Development Block Grant Program, and current development code incentives to help to achieve the housing goal above. Nevertheless, the board should approach the task of developing strategies with open minds. This can be hard when there are already programs in place to deal with a critical goal because an idea that immediately comes to mind is simply to step up current efforts—expand capacity or hire more staff—instead of seeking the best solution available.

Before the board locks itself into an existing strategy, it might try brainstorming to see how many alternatives it could think of, including ones that sound impractical. In the case of the landfill replacement, it might think of simple incineration, incineration with steam generation, partial

recovery and recycling, total recycling, and contract landfilling in other counties, or even in other states. The more creative and uninhibited the board can be, the more possibilities it will be likely to consider. Welcoming unusual ideas can help to keep the ideas flowing freely. It is also helpful if the board defers any debate or even reaction to an idea until the board is satisfied that it has thought of everything possible. The aim here is to generate as many alternative ways of achieving the goal as anyone can think of and to avoid cutting off or even discounting serious consideration of any alternative until all of them can be evaluated together.

If the board can develop alternative strategies for a given goal, the list of beliefs that it articulated earlier pays a handsome dividend: the beliefs and vision provide important criteria by which the board can evaluate each alternative. For example, all of the alternatives listed above might achieve the goal of providing additional solid waste disposal capacity three years hence, so the board must use other criteria to decide which method would be best. To use an earlier example, if the board evaluated alternative methods of disposal on the basis of a common belief that there would be recurring energy crises and a goal of minimizing the county’s vulnerability, it might lean toward steam generation. The board will invariably apply other criteria as well. These include political feasibility, legal feasibility, administrative simplicity, total cost, timing of costs, and others.

The board needs one more thing before it can evaluate alternative strategies. It must decide which criteria are most important. Otherwise, toting up pluses and minuses might not help to make a decision. For example, if a new landfill were administratively simple but politically damaging, and if out-of-state landfilling were administratively complex but politically desirable, each strategy would have one positive and one negative feature. The choice would not be clear unless members agreed that one of the criteria were more important than the other. If political approval by citizens were more important than administrative simplicity, then the choice would be clear. The relative importance of criteria should be reviewed for each strategy choice because they might vary according to the issue. For example, financial risk might be the most important consideration on an issue that holds the possibility of fiscal problems, whereas political acceptability might be most important on an issue on which people hold strong feelings but where there is little financial consequence.

The informal work session is a suitable setting to develop program strategies. The board might anticipate holding more than one session unless the issues and options are very simple. There might need to be one or more exchanges between board and staff concerning ideas, analyses, alternatives, and decisions, and the time between work sessions could be used to collect and prepare information, analyze, and digest presentations to the board.

## Developing budgets

Every city council and board of county commissioners in North Carolina already prepares a budget every year. If the governing board completes the first three steps of the planning process as described above, it has defined the areas where it might concentrate its attention most productively in its review of the budget: the program strategies designed to achieve the goals it has set for dealing with the critical issues. For example, if a city wanted to increase the presence of patrol officers (strategy) to make its downtown more inviting after dark (goal) to citizens who currently fear for their safety (critical issue) and eventually restore vitality to the city center (vision), then an unusually careful examination of the *police* budget might be one of the most effective uses of the time that the board had to spend reviewing the budget.

The board faces a hard decision in the budgeting step: can the resources be provided to do what is necessary to achieve the goals? It is helpful for the board to give guidance to the manager before the administration begins its preparation of a proposed budget. The manager should give the board as clear a financial projection as possible, including alternative sources and levels of revenue. In turn, it helps the administration to prepare a reasonable budget recommendation if the board can say which program strategies seem to be feasible and under what conditions. If they are not feasible under current revenue projections, then two other options can be considered: proportionate reductions in other programs and revenue enhancement from tax increases or other sources.

Many of the board's program strategies might involve more than one department. If so, it is helpful for the administration to construct the proposed budget so that it shows who has responsibility for various components of each strategy and how all of the departmental components fit together. The program budget format now used by many cities and counties is well suited to clarifying the relationship between program strategies and departmental allocations.<sup>2</sup> Projects from the capital improvement program might also be part of program strategies.

Most of the board's program strategies will probably involve more than one year's effort to achieve the desired goals. Consequently, some local governments have experimented with multiyear budgets so that budgeted activities can be considered in a form more realistic than a twelve-month slice spanning just the upcoming fiscal year. This approach can be particularly useful for examining new programs where small start-up costs in the initial year of the program might blossom into much larger financial commitments in later years. Multiyear budgets can be handled like capital improvement programs, in which the board, after review of the whole package, adopts the first

year and sees the second and subsequent years again when it reviews the next year's budget.<sup>3</sup>

## Implementing

Once the governing board has approved the operating budget and capital improvement program, the administration will assume significant responsibility for implementation. However, there will be specific activities that the board itself will have to accomplish to exert leadership and to maintain community support for its strategies.

Soon after adopting the budget, the board can review the tasks it will have to complete and schedule them, working backward from deadlines. For example, if the board has approved a major capital improvement initiative about which it wants to educate the public before a referendum in the fall, it would start with the election date and work backward to decide when members should be making presentations, when special events should be held, when material has to be prepared, and when the board will have to take the actions required by the General Statutes to hold the election.

During the year the elected board is deluged by many demands on its time and energy to deal with items that are unrelated to the achievement of its major goals. If it commits the important items to its calendar first, then the ad hoc items can be arranged as time allows. If it does not schedule important activities far in advance, then the ad hoc activities can drive its schedule, and the important items might be delayed or, worse, might not be done at all.

## Evaluation

Evaluation is important to obtain the best results from any endeavor. To evaluate properly, the board needs to know what results to expect at various stages of its plan, from the beginning of implementation to the end of the planning horizon when it hopes to see something in the community change because of its efforts. Then it can be vigilant to see that those results come about. Just as the board developed its plan at three levels—goals, strategies, and budgeted activities—so can it evaluate progress at all three levels.

The easiest and most concrete level of evaluation is to monitor progress on budgeted activities to see that they are being carried out as expected by the persons and departments who are responsible for them—for example, whether revised development ordinances were recommended, approved, and put in place on time by the planning department. Many boards review progress on budgeted activities with the manager every ninety days.

At the next level the board can evaluate whether the combinations of budgeted activities are working together



as well-coordinated, well-managed components of important program strategies—for example, whether open-space ordinances and open-space acquisition together have increased the amount of open space actually usable. This level of performance is usually harder to evaluate clearly. However, it might be done annually before the next budget cycle and might be considered in the board's annual evaluation of the manager's performance.

Finally, the board can seek data and information to indicate whether the programs and strategies are having the desired effect in the community—for example, whether revised development ordinances, active land acquisition by the county, and other measures have actually made the vision of undeveloped countryside a reality in the county. This is the hardest level of achievement to evaluate, but it is the ultimate test of success. One of the reasons it is harder to evaluate is that the end results probably only become evident over many years. For example, a set of programs aimed at improving rural housing conditions or moving traffic capacity ahead of growing demands might take years or more to get started and several more years to have any effect on the problem. Nevertheless, regular evaluation of activities for the previous ninety days and annual assessments of strategy success can help the board to stay on top of the activities and programs that are the building blocks by which it seeks to achieve its goals. If they are successfully carried out, it might be possible to assume that progress will be made toward achieving the goals.

## Roles in the Planning Process

Partnership in city hall and in the courthouse is important for successful governance and administration. The elected official, the manager, the administrator, the supervisor, and the first-level worker each brings special skills and perspectives to the endeavor of local government. The relationship works best with a combination of collaboration and division of labor where everyone understands each other's role and responsibilities and where each has reasonable expectations of the others involved in the process.

The old maxim that strictly divides policy and administration, with the governing board making policy and the administration carrying it out, has never provided satisfactory role guidance to anyone actually working in local government. Neither does it offer reasonable guidance to the interaction among board, manager, and staff in the planning process. James H. Svava's research on the roles of councils and managers in effective governance has provided a more helpful description of the general relationship between board and manager. Svava suggests that the board and the manager are both involved in policy and administration at every level but that their shares of responsibility and initiative vary.<sup>4</sup> The board takes primary

responsibility for setting the overall direction of government, but the manager assists as a close working partner with the board. Both share responsibility for formulating programs and budgets, with initiative varying by kinds of issues, local culture, and individual preferences. Finally, the manager takes most of the responsibility for administration, but the board exercises general direction and re-direction as necessary.

The cooperative roles in this planning process for the governing board, the manager, and the administration are consistent with both the North Carolina General Statutes' and the International City Management Association Code of Ethics' prescriptions for the manager's responsibilities. They are also consistent with one of the significant findings in Svava's research: elected officials and managers who were interviewed both wanted the elected board to take a more prominent role in framing the basic mission and direction of the city or county than they felt it did in practice.<sup>5</sup> Nobody but the governing board can formulate the *beliefs and vision* that will frame the overall direction that governance takes in the community, but the manager can assist. The manager can help the board to articulate and refine its vision and, through participation in this initial step, gain a thorough understanding of that vision and become an integral part of the policy team.

Involving staff in the issue analysis takes advantage of administrators' access to the most thorough and up-to-date information related to most aspects of local government. Also the administration often can provide a valuable institutional memory to illuminate the board's consideration of issues beyond its review of the data. It would be hard to suggest exactly how much the board might be influenced in its choice of important issues by the staff and the manager. That would depend on many factors such as experience of the board, experience of the staff, and degree of knowledge and trust among the individuals involved.

The manager and staff are in a position to take the initiative in the formulation of *program strategies* and the recommendation of *budgets*. Their technical, administrative, and managerial skills and their detailed knowledge of their functional areas make them qualified to recommend how to go about achieving results that the board seeks. The board still has an important role in these two steps, however. First, it certainly can contribute to the initial ideas or alternatives that are considered. Second, the board is ultimately responsible for judging whether the staff has successfully analyzed and recommended programs and budgets that will serve the board's purposes.

Both board and administration have significant but distinct roles to play in *implementation*. The board is concerned foremost with exerting leadership—sustaining the support from citizens and other institutions in the community that is necessary to carry out program strategies.

**Table 1**  
Possible Governing Board Planning Schedule

Step	Calendar Time	Could Be Done During
Vision	1 month	December
Issues/goals	1½ months	January and February
Program strategies	1½ months	February and March
Budget	1½ months	May through June

At the same time the administration will be responsible for carrying out budgeted activities that make up the program strategies. Still, the board retains the responsibility for re-directing budgeted activities that fail to contribute to the success of strategies or that have unintended and undesirable side effects.

Finally, it is up to the board to *evaluate* success in realizing its vision. Of course, routine evaluation of activities and progress toward goals should take place at every level in the organization. Nevertheless, the body that established the goals to be sought is the body that ultimately must satisfy itself that they are being attained. Moreover, regular evaluation by the board, like the establishment of overall direction and clear goals, tends to provide valuable guidance to the administration on a continuing basis.

## Time and Timing

The planning process described here constitutes a significant workload for the board. How much time might it take? How can a governing board, whose regular agenda is already overloaded, find the time that would be needed? How long the process could take, measured by the calendar, might vary quite a lot depending on how often the board can meet during the process, how many other people the board has involved, how complex the issues are, and how much homogeneity there is among board members' beliefs and visions for the future.

Table 1 presents a schedule that might be feasible for a *first-time* effort with moderate-to-heavy commitment of meeting time by the board. This schedule is for the *elected officials' deliberation* and direct involvement. For example, staff or a board-appointed committee could start to collect and analyze data about trends and issues before the elected board met to develop its vision and could present the material when the board members were ready to discuss issues.<sup>6</sup> Also, between March and May, the administration needs time to develop, assemble, and refine budget recommendations for the board to consider and decide upon before June 30. Of course, implementation would span each twelve-month fiscal year, and evaluation might be done by report every three months, with an annual review in March before budget preparation for the following year begins.

The whole process need not be repeated in the second

year. The annual evaluation before the second year's budget is prepared allows the board to consider adjustments or changes in program strategies, to reevaluate its current situation, and to provide general guidance to the manager for the approaching fiscal year and beyond. The calendar schedule suggested here would enable a board to start the full process after each municipal election. Having newly-elected members take part in formulating goals right after they took office would help to bring the new board together quickly and give each member responsibility for planning and implementation throughout each two-year term. However, it would thrust inexperienced officials into the process without any time to adapt to their new roles. Going through the full process in the off-election year would give new officials a full year to learn the job, but one group of elected officials would set the agenda for most of a following group's term. As a practical matter, that would make continuity in each long-range agenda uncertain.

The only way to find the time for planning is to make time for it. One way to do that is to reduce distractions by supporting the manager to develop a first-rate administrative structure. An administration that is adequately staffed, well trained, and highly motivated can prevent many problems that might otherwise come to the board and can solve others before they escalate to become the board's concern. The board can also examine its average agenda and ask itself how much of what is on each agenda reasonably could be delegated to staff or to committees. An opportune time to consider this might be after the board has chosen its priority issues so that it can see how much of its regular work has actually been devoted to the matters it has decided are most important for its attention.

Giving calendar priority to the planning process also can make time available. Once the governing board decides to embark on a systematic planning process, it might agree on the procedure it intends to use and reserve calendar time for the steps that have to be taken. The manager and the board can block in mandated or uncontrollable events like elections, budget deadlines, and regularly scheduled meetings and then schedule the time it needs to do the planning. If the board gives its planning this kind of priority, then as the continuous flow of urgent matters vies for that time, the board can ask in each case whether the matter is urgent and more important than its planning or simply urgent.

## Conclusion

The board that cannot commit the time suggested above to develop an adequate plan for the future could abbreviate any of the steps that have been described. Each board must decide for itself how much additional knowledge, insight, and understanding it can gain by additional discussion or collection of data. Many elected boards use a two-day retreat to talk about vision and to develop goals;

then later they talk about strategies in a pre-budget workshop with the manager and staff. The critical feature of even the most abbreviated process is that the vision of the elected board is expressed so that it can be translated systematically into budgeted activities and used to make day-to-day decisions.

Planning and acting on the basis of a long-range vision is hard to do. It is hard to find agreement among all of the members who come to the board with individual beliefs and visions for the future of the community. It is hard to find agreement over time as members come and go from the board every two years. It is hard to make judgments in the face of an uncertain future—judgments about what will happen, how it will affect the community, what is important to do, and how it can be done effectively. Finally, it is hard to make the time to consider important matters of the future when the board is barraged by so many urgent matters of the present. But if making that time provides direction and allows the board and the administration to govern and manage effectively, then it might be some of the best time that officials will spend in office. ♦

## Notes

1. For a discussion of retreats, see Kurt Jenne, "Governing Board Retreats," *Popular Government* 53 (Winter 1988): 20-26.

2. Past efforts to construct budget documents according to program strategies that cut across departmental lines have not been successful, because they did not provide adequate control and accountability by the responsible departments. What is suggested here is simply that the connection be made clear—that it be shown which activities in which departments collectively make up the program strategies.

3. Two cities in North Carolina, Charlotte and Wilmington, are experimenting with the use of a two-year horizon in the budget process. In each case only the first year is adopted. Several cities and counties include up to five years of expenditure and revenue forecasts in the budget process; however, these are projections of current programs and are not forecast on the basis of planned initiatives.

4. James H. Svara, "Contributions of the City Council to Effective Governance," *Popular Government* 51 (Spring, 1986): 1-8. The article was based on five large cities in North Carolina. Professor Svara has since extended the study to include a total of 131 cities and 58 counties in the state.

5. James H. Svara, "The Complementary Roles of Officials in Council-Manager Government," *Municipal Yearbook*, 1988, (Washington, D.C.: International City Management Association, 1988), and "Council-Manager Relations and the Performance of Governing Boards," *Popular Government* 54 (Summer 1988): 27-32.

6. For example, in Wilmington a Foresight Committee prepared a Strategic Issues Analysis for the city council to review in advance of developing its program strategies and budgets for the 1987-1988 and 1988-1989 fiscal years.

