# How to Get Community Engagement When Creating a Strategic Vision

**Abstract**

***Local government leaders want to engage their residents and stakeholders as they are making plans for the future. However, they often struggle to find ways to elicit positive and helpful information. Many times they fear that open meetings will be a venue for negative-minded people to voice their unhappy feelings. This article shares a way to engage the community in helping to develop a strategic vision for the future that guards against this kind of negativity. It provides a way for stakeholders to have civil discussions about strategic decisions that face the city. While providing for large numbers of people to give input, it does so in a way that provides the governing body ingredients they can use in crafting a shared vision for the future.***

Strategic Government Resources (SGR) has developed a tool that we call the Cycle of Strategic Visioning. It is built around our belief that there is a difference between a strategic vision and a strategic plan. A strategic vision answers the question, "Where are we going?" A strategic plan answers the question, "How do we get there?" It is primarily the governing body's responsibility to develop the strategic vision. It is primarily the organizational staff's responsibility to develop the strategic plan that is in alignment with the strategic vision. The vision must precede the plan, and it must "govern" the plan. However, prior to the vision, the group responsible for developing the vision needs to receive quality input from the stakeholders. One way to say it is that the governing body may bake the cake, but the stakeholders must provide the ingredients. All local government leaders desire to receive input from residents and stakeholders in order to know how to more effectively serve their constituents. I have led hundreds of workshops for elected officials and local government leaders and not one time has anyone said, "We don't care what citizens say." As a Chief of Police once said to me, "We govern by the consent of the governed." This raises the question of "How can local governments receive input in a meaningful way so that they are creating a vision that will resonate with community, both residents, and other stakeholders?" This essay discusses one way that we have found to be very effective for engaging citizens and stakeholders in the process of creating a strategic vision.

Citizen surveys can be effective tools for receiving input, but when this is the only mechanism used citizens can feel that their input is being limited. Not only do they want to give more; leaders need them to give more. Surveys do not create the synergy that is needed to develop a shared vision. Both citizens and governing bodies sense that more is needed. Constructive meetings with stakeholders need to be held, but many leaders fear that animosity will get stirred up in open meetings. That is an understandable concern especially since we are living in a time when we seem to be bitterly divided about almost everything. No one wants to host a meeting that is dominated by divisiveness. The problem is that often our only concept of a community meeting is one way communication. We format the meeting so that we are sharing information with constituents and they are responding. A similar format is to have constituents voice their opinions about volatile topics while leaders merely listen. The problem with that format is that it easily drifts toward angry speeches instead of helpful solutions. Many times what constituents speak about are not related to the strategic questions that need to be addressed for developing a shared vision of the future. Local governments need an approach that creates dialogue with a cross section of the community that reflects the community's diversity. Cities must find ways for elected leaders to listen respectfully to people without surrendering the agenda to

negative-minded parties. We must ask the question, "How can elected officials create a strategic vision that relies upon the contributions of the community rather than complaints of the community?"

**Authentic Collaboration**

One option is to engage the community at the beginning of the process, allowing them to contribute the key ingredients to the vision.  This process sends the message that while having no vision is not an option, elected leaders do not consider it an option to create a vision apart from citizen input. Relying upon residents to contribute substantively to the vision is an achievable option, but it requires carefully communicating that the purpose of receiving input is to look forward together.  It is not for the purpose of complaining about what someone doesn't like or about what someone else is doing wrong.  It is for the purpose of working together toward a shared vision that everyone collaborates together to create.

This is very different from a process in which a small group of leaders create a vision and then "sell" it to the larger group.  This is not the same as developing a vision and "testing" it with a focus group.  This process is designed to promote genuine collaboration with all residents so that the finished project feels like looking in the mirror for the participants.  Ideally, when the Council creates the strategic vision, those who have participated in the process should be able to look at the strategic vision and see themselves in it.  They should see some of their own aspirations, preferences, and insights.  Their fingerprints should be all over it. If someone who has participated in the process looks at a strategic vision and cannot see any of their own hopes in it, then that would represent a colossal failure.

Creating a collaborative process that engages the community in strategic visioning is an important expression of servant leadership.  It is the desire to serve that motivates many to run for Council or work in local government.  I often hear both elected officials and local government professionals say that they want to make a difference.  Citizens appreciate that attitude, but it is easy for the average citizen to feel disconnected from what is happening in local government.  They don't know how to engage with decision-makers, and they often do not know the strategic issues that city governments are contemplating.  While it may be tempting to say, "They should become informed," it's also incumbent upon servant leaders to provide an effective way for citizens to both become informed and involved.

Servant leaders desire to lead in a way that allows everyone to feel included in the community.  Their sense of stewardship goes beyond giving a report and practicing transparency, as important as those things are.   When the leadership culture is marked by servant leadership principles, the leaders feel an obligation to organize things in an orderly way that activates the gifts, knowledge, and dreams of the widest possible segment of the population.  On top of that, they have the foresight and awareness to appreciate the positive impact of engaging the community and the negative impact of not engaging the community.  In short, community engagement—good community engagement—is not an option, it's a necessity for great servant leaders.

When a large number of residents know that they have played a significant role in developing the strategic vision, it creates a deeper sense of community ownership.  They are more likely to embrace it and defend it when they've participated in the process.  I've listened to a lot of City Councils discuss creative ways to market their vision to the city's residents. However, these marketing efforts always have severe limitations.  They must overcome the natural skepticism in a lot of people.  Many people have a persistent desire to resist things they feel that the government is trying to convince them to accept.  They are reticent to easily agree to things that they may not fully understand.  A better way to

gain support would be to develop a process that builds people's sense of ownership because they've actually collaborated with formal leaders in developing the vision.

Creating a process that builds community ownership has some very practical benefits. It is much easier to educate citizens about difficult and complicated social issues when citizens are engaged in working on the problems rather than merely critiquing the solutions. This is a crucial part of countering what in many communities has become a chorus of negativity on social media platforms about local government decisions and activities. Often that negative refrain is driven by a tendency to view complex issues as being one dimensional. One effective way to address that is to have a large segment of the population educated on the issue—not educated through staff reports—but by working to solve the problems together with the formal leaders of the city. These citizens become the raving fans that offer a different perspective because they have seen for themselves how complex these issues can be. They champion community building virtues such as empathy and inclusion because they've had the experience of listening to a variety of viewpoints in an effort to discern the best way forward.

A vision can be defined as a preferred future that inspires commitment and elicits excitement. The wonderful thing about engaging citizens in a strategic visioning process is that the very nature of a vision appeals to the positive aspects of our personalities. It makes people get excited about their city's future possibilities. Visions are aspirational. People don't create visions of gloom for a city they love as long as they feel connected to that city. However, it is much easier to create a sense of community ownership around an aspirational vision if residents have had a key role in saying what that vision should be. If they are just being asked to consent to what has already been created, they are as likely to resent as consent.

There are some other practical benefits to using an approach that is marked by authentic collaboration. One benefit is that the more residents who participate in the process, the more likely it is that the Council will hear ideas that they may not have considered on their own. Some of those ideas will relate to the need to address systemic injustices. Other ideas will focus on ways to alleviate the suffering caused by inequities. Both are needed, and the city can create a more compelling vision of the future by drawing upon the wisdom of "both/and" thinking instead of the limitations of "either/or" thinking. As the saying goes, "We is always smarter than Me!"

Another practical benefit of a process built upon authentic collaboration is the increased likelihood of voter support for bond campaigns. Cities like Gladstone, Missouri and Plano, Texas both illustrate the connection between participation in the process and success at the ballot box. Gladstone has developed a comprehensive strategic planning process that they've been using for almost a decade. It involves a substantial number of citizens and has gone through several cycles that have resulted in people seeing their dreams become tangible realities. It has also resulted in the voters approving bond measures by overwhelming majorities. Similarly, in the early 1960s, Plano was a small city of approximately 10,000 people. They were desperately needing to add infrastructure to prepare for the inevitable growth that was moving toward them from Dallas. They developed the strategy of always having more people on the Bond Committee and sub-committees than it would take to successfully pass each bond election. They knew that participation created a sense of ownership. People tended to vote for the things because they had a sense of ownership in them.

**A Genuinely Collaborative Process**

This process can be adapted to fit the needs of different cities.  In this essay, we will reference how the City of Shawnee, Kansas used this approach to help the City Council develop a strategic vision.  Shawnee is a thriving suburb in the Kansas City Metro area, with a growing population of over 50,000 and a desire to balance growth and economic development while continuing to protect the quality of life for residents.  While citizen satisfaction surveys showed a high level of satisfaction with the local government, the Council was also aware of a wide diversity of opinions about what the future should look like for the city.  This led the Council to select SGR to help guide them through the strategic visioning process, with a large emphasis being placed upon community engagement.

**Community Steering Committee**

With the City Council's approval, the management team created a steering committee that was made up of a few Council Members and a cross-section of leaders from various stakeholder groups.  This included business leaders, educational leaders, people serving on commissions, and other volunteers.  Approximately 15 people served on the Steering Committee. The purpose of the Steering Committee was four-fold:

- Provide oversight to the process
- Champion the process to their various constituencies
- Participate in Community Engagement Meetings and Focus Group Meetings
- Help synthesize the results of the Community Engagement Meetings and Focus Group Meetings

During the Steering Committee training meeting, this group began to coalesce around the idea of creating a process that would allow citizens to thoughtfully and thoroughly discuss pressing issues facing the city in a civil manner.  The Steering Committee chose a theme for the process which was "Imagine Shawnee."  They also created their own purpose statement, which was "To imagine a shared vision for Shawnee's future."  They had a graphic designer create a logo, which was used on T-shirts, signs, social media, and all communications from the Committee about the process.

We worked with them to create the questions that would be explored at the community engagement events and held some mini-sessions following the blueprint for the meetings with the community.  The Committee decided to name these meetings, "Imagine Shawnee Meetings." Not everyone was confident that the "Imagine Shawnee Meetings" would be effective.  Several committee members were concerned that the discussions would devolve into negative accusations and angry outbursts.  However, the committee agreed that attempting to create a strategic vision without gaining real community input would not work, either.  The committee planned four "Imagine Shawnee Meetings" that would be open to anyone to attend. In addition, they planned to have several focus group events that would allow specific groups to give input from their particular vantage point.   Some of the focus groups were: Senior Adults, Educators, Downtown Businesses, Teenagers, and Chamber of Commerce Members.

Steering Committee members took the initiative to give personal invitations to people that they knew and interacted with on a regular basis.  The city made use of social media and newspaper announcements to advertise the meetings, too. The Steering Committee suggested having the "Imagine Shawnee Meetings" at different locations in the city, rather than having them in city hall.  One was at a park.  One was held at a tavern, and others were held in places that could accommodate groups of at

least 50 people.  Over 600 different people attended the "Imagine Shawnee Meetings" or focus group meetings.  Shawnee City Manager, Nolan Sunderman, noted that the vast majority of the 600 were people that had not participated in any kind of city governance event in the past.  They had never been to a Council Meeting, nor had they ever previously attended an informational meeting of any kind that was sponsored by the city.

The decision to hold the "Imagine Shawnee Meetings" away from City Hall was a great strategic move by the Steering Committee. Many residents don't feel like City Hall belongs to them, even though both elected officials and employees would argue that indeed, it does.  For many citizens, events held at City Hall feels like they are "playing on the road."  They are in unfamiliar territory.  They are visitors.  This can undermine the sense of community ownership in the vision that the leaders wanted to create.  Holding the meetings in other places was a way of formal leaders saying that they were giving up "homefield advantage." By making themselves accessible on other people's turf without a fixed agenda, it lowered people's skepticism and increased their willingness to engage.  It made it easier for people to see that the vision for the city's future included all aspects of the community, not just formal city government.

**Effective Engagement**

The Steering Committee created a series of open-ended questions that people could wrestle with in small groups. We used small group discussions rather than allowing individuals to address the entire group.  We've found that most people don't like to speak "to the front of the room" unless they are true extroverts or terribly angry.  On top of that, they often overestimate the number of people who agree with them, and because they are so forceful, they often have the effect of squelching other points of view from being expressed.

Instead of that approach, the Steering Committee decided to present one or two questions at a time to be discussed in small groups.  The small groups were usually made up of approximately 6-10 people. The groups were given 10-15 minutes to talk about their answers, and then one person was asked to summarize to the large group how they answered the questions. It may seem that this would create the same dynamic as having a person give a speech into a microphone, but there were some very important distinctions.  First, we asked them to summarize what the group said, not just to give their opinion about a matter.  We have found this is effective because there's usually enough invisible "peer pressure" to keep most people from going "off script."  The presence of the group serves to hold the spokesperson accountable to be honest about what was said.  However, another subtle reality is that the person who has an axe to grind rarely wants to be the spokesperson.  They don't volunteer to do that very often.  As they gave their summary, we had people writing down the key points on a flip chart.  At times, the facilitator would ask for come clarification and some "group comments" were not uncommon at the end of each small group report, but the facilitator was careful to keep things moving.

Each time we introduced a new set of questions, we reformed the groups so that people were able to talk with a variety of others throughout the meeting.  Not only does this build community by creating new relationships, it also serves to minimize negativity.  Unless someone is really bold, they tend to practice a little more self-restraint when they are in a group with people they are just getting to know. With their best friends, they may be very unrestrained, but with a group of strangers, they usually tone down the rhetoric just a little.  However, that's just one result that comes from having people meet in small groups. In fact, we've observed several things that almost always happen as a result of this process.

1. Good ideas keep coming to the forefront over and over.  It's easy for the entire group to see the themes as they emerge.
2. Outliers tend to self-identify as outliers.  I've noticed that many times a person thinks everyone agrees with them on controversial issues.  However, when they start interacting with other people from the community, they usually discover, much to their surprise, that not everyone feels like they do about these topics.  Not only does it become apparent to the outlier—it becomes apparent to everyone else, too.  Extremely vocal people can create the mirage that the whole city is "up in arms" about this or that.  However, when the issue is discussed in a less passionate, civil manner, it often becomes apparent that this is not the case.
3. New voices are discovered and new relationships are built.  I've watched over and over again as people connect with each other, enthusiasm swells, and the city discovers new leaders as a result of a two-hour meeting.  The value of collectively focusing on solutions rather than complaints cannot be overstated.  It creates positive bonds.
4. Respect for leadership goes up—not down.  Sometimes, leaders don't want to have meetings like this because they don't want to be attacked by people who don't like past decisions or new directions.  I understand that.  I don't blame them at all for that.  However, what I've noticed is that when citizens start wrestling with strategic questions, they realize that it's really difficult to work through these things.  While this is never a reason to have a community engagement event, it is still a positive byproduct.

All of these things happened in Shawnee, as well.  By the time all the "Imagine Shawnee Meetings" had been held, it was easy to discern what citizens were asking for and there was a genuine excitement within the Steering Committee that they were going to have useful information to share with the Council.  It is likely that the sense of community ownership developed from this process will result in more leaders volunteering to serve in the future.  Not only can more volunteers be expected, it is likely that they will volunteer with a positive attitude because of the goodwill created from the "Imagine Shawnee Meetings."

**Questions Used**

The questions for the engagement meetings need to address the specific needs of each unique situation, but to be most effective, they need to meet three criteria.  First, they need to be open-ended, not yes or no kind of questions.  Second, they need to be aspirational.  Third, they should be strategic in that they put the focus on the bigger issues facing the community.  Below are the questions that were used for the "Imagine Shawnee Meetings."

1. Why did you move to Shawnee?

2. What do you like the most about living in Shawnee?

3. What's one thing you would like to change about Shawnee?

4. What's one thing you hope stays the same about Shawnee?

5. What are the strengths of Shawnee that you can build on for the future?

6. What are the weaknesses of Shawnee that should be addressed for the future?

7. What are the opportunities Shawnee can take advantage of in the future?

8.  What are the threats to the future that Shawnee should prepare for?

9.  What most needs to be added (or improved) to the City of Shawnee?

10. Where would you like your City Council to focus its future efforts?


**Helpful Guidelines**

If you are planning to hold a community engagement process as a part of creating a strategic vision, here are some helpful guidelines.

1.  Use an outside facilitator.  The facilitator should keep things positive and upbeat, but there may be times when they have to interrupt people as politely as possible.  Most of the time, it can be done without offending people, but if people do get offended, it is better for them to get offended at a facilitator than for them to be angry with the Mayor, City Manager, or other city leader.
2.  Don't be defensive.  95% of what will be said will be positive, but there is always the possibility that someone will make a remark that is out of place or downright rude.  As unfair as it seems, it's better to allow the facilitator to simply say, "Thank you" and move on, rather than to take the opportunity to "set the record straight."
3.  Don't campaign.  Nothing can ruin a community engagement event faster than for an elected official to start making campaign promises.  We've asked people to come to give their opinions about the future. It's important that we let them do it.  No bait and switch!
4.  Don't over-react.  It's important to keep the purpose of the engagement event in focus.  The goal is to hear from the community about what they want for the future.  If the meeting generates some great ideas and some common themes, then it's a success.  In the process, there will be some things that may not sit well with leaders who are heavily invested in the community or the process.  It's easy to overreact to those things.  However, my experience is that the best response, including after the meeting is over, is to merely move on.
5.  Don't label people.  Just because citizens have ideas that may carry with it a note of criticism doesn't automatically make them negative people.  Great leadership is always focused on building a coalition of the willing.  Give every person every opportunity to be a part of that coalition until they make it clear they are unwilling.  Being too hasty to label someone runs the risk of making them a martyr, and it sends distancing signals to perceptive observers.

**Aftermath**

After we conducted all the community engagement and focus group events, SGR met with the Steering Committee again to collaborate on synthesizing the results.  Our three goals were to categorize the responses, identify the main themes, and present them to the Council in a way that made it easy to see which ideas were mentioned the most often. We also tried to present conflicting points of view in an honest way so that the Council could see what the outlier opinions were.

The Steering Committee's role is very important at this point.  If you use an outside facilitator, that facilitator may not be as familiar with the nuances of your local situation, but the Steering Committee will be able to interpret the data in light of the unique setting of your city.  They need to have access to

the raw data even though the facilitator may be creating the initial report. This is important because if the facilitator inadvertently under or over emphasizes something, the Steering Committee is likely to spot the discrepancy if they can compare the report with the raw data. Ideally, the Steering Committee and the facilitator work together as a team.

Once the Steering Committee collaborated with the facilitator to create the report, that report was shared with the full governing body. It's helpful if one or two members of the governing body have served on the Steering Committee, but it's also important for the Steering Committee not to be too heavily weighted by elected officials. It's important to note that the report is not the strategic vision. It is not meant to replace the work that the governing body must do in developing a good strategic vision. It is one data point for the governing body to consider when they begin their work, but it is an important element that can serve as a type of north star for the work they do on the strategic vision.

When the report is shared with the governing body, it's important that it comes from the Steering Committee, rather than the city management team. It is likely that there will be residents who attend the meeting where it is presented, and if they attended one of the engagement events, their perspective on how much one item ought to be emphasized can be unduly influenced by what they heard at that particular meeting. If the report is perceived to be coming from the management team, it places the city in an awkward position. However, if it's clear that this is the report from the Steering Committee, while a citizen may not agree with how the report is worded or what is emphasized, it leaves the management team out of the argument. It's also important to note that the Steering Committee is not making any recommendations to the governing body. It is simply a report of what was said at the Community Engagement and Focus Group meetings. The elected officials are free to consider some, none, or all of what is submitted.

When the Imagine Shawnee Steering Committee presented its report to the Council, the Council asked a few questions and suggested a minor change to the planned process. The suggestion was to have another community engagement event after the Council had created the Strategic Vision, but before it had been formally adopted. The desire was to make sure that citizens had every opportunity to say, "Yes, that's in alignment with what we want." The Steering Committee agreed and scheduled those meetings after the Council had completed its work.


**Closing Observations**

This process worked very well for the City of Shawnee. It provided clear opportunity for citizens to speak about the future, and it provided the Council with the kinds of "ingredients" they needed to develop a shared vision. A similar process may be helpful for other cities as well. While this kind of approach has many positive attributes, it is important to manage expectations. It is important to be crystal clear about what the community engagement events are and what they are not. The parameters and purposes have to be stated simply, clearly, and repeatedly. There is not a way for the Council to escape making hard decisions about priorities or budgets or directions. Citizens should be told clearly that just because they suggest something, does not guarantee that it will become a part of the strategic vision. There are many factors to consider and community input, albeit important, is not the only thing to consider. Everyone should be aware of the reality that this process will have some messy elements. Some people will say some things that would have been best left unsaid. A few people will have some

criticisms, some of which will be valid.  However, providing healthy leadership requires a certain level of maturity, and volunteers, city employees, and elected officials have to display their maturity, especially when they feel justified at having a less mature response.

Jennifer Fadden, President of Executive Recruitment of SGR, often says, "People support what they have helped to create."  That is the most important reason to develop a robust approach to community engagement.  As the Council creates the strategic vision for the future and the management team develops the strategic plan to make it become a reality, both groups will need the support of the residents and stakeholders.  By going back to say, "This is in alignment with what the community told us," you can dramatically increase the chances of having a long walk in the same direction, and it is most often the cities that have a long walk in the same direction who also have the most success.