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“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever does.”

- Margaret Mead

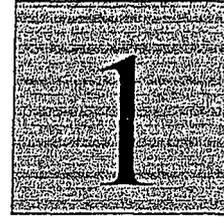
The Vision

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Visioning

Visioning



INTRODUCTION

Visioning is a term used to describe the process of obtaining useful information from the residents and merchants of a community to assist in the development of a long-term plan. The Kansas State University students who prepared this plan possess skills in gathering and analyzing information to prepare a comprehensive plan update. However, none of the students reside in St. Marys or in the surrounding area, therefore, they lack general knowledge about the community. Meeting with local residents is the best way to learn about history, culture, and societal norms. The planners' role is to assist decision makers in preparing for the future, but strong participation from the community is essential.

A variety of methods are used to organize local residents and facilitate an exchange of information and ideas to address major issues. The methods used in St. Marys were designed to gather information from citizens representing every element of the community. Five methods were used: (1) a visioning session with the Planning Commission, (2) two focus-group sessions, (3) a downtown merchants survey, (4) "Planners-in-School Day" at the elementary school, and (5) interviews with major employers.

METHODOLOGY

Planning Commission Visioning Session

The Planning Commission visioning session was held on January 20, 1997. At this meeting, students identified the general information to be gathered and analyzed for the study. Then, the commissioners were asked to discuss the community and answer general questions in an effort to identify critical issues. Flip-charts were titled with different topics to initiate this discussion.

Focus Groups

The focus group consisted of representatives of specific community elements, such as education, labor, homemaking, clergy, local government, the business community, and the senior citizen and youth segments of the population. Two meetings were held, the first on Tuesday, February 25, 1997, and the second on Tuesday, March 11,

Chapter Sections:

- Introduction
- Methodology
- Findings

Visioning is a term used to describe the act of obtaining useful information from the residents and merchants of a community.

Four critical questions:

- How has the city developed?
- Where is the community now?
- Where does the city want to go from here?
- How will it get there?

Information was gathered via a visioning session with the planning commission, focus-group sessions, merchant surveys, interviews with employers, and a session with fourth-grade students.

The focus group is representative of the community as a whole.

1997. The purpose of the first meeting was to identify the major strengths and weaknesses of the community. The 24 citizens in attendance were divided into three groups and each was given a stack of "post-it" notes on which to write their ideas. Weaknesses and strengths were addressed separately and grouped by major topic, such as economics, downtown, civic pride, and recreation. The second meeting was designed to prioritize the issues identified at the previous meeting, answer questions related to downtown and to the local economy, and brainstorm for solutions to the priority issues.

Downtown Drop-By Survey

Local businesses were visited on Wednesday, February 19, 1997. Thirteen business owners participated and discussed their opinions about downtown conditions.

Planners in School

"Planners-in-School Day" is designed to assess how children view their community. The fourth-grade students were given an opportunity to draw their favorite things about St. Marys.

Major Employer Interviews

Seven major employers (Bayer Stone, Custom Wood Products, Unified School District 321, St. Mary's Academy, St. Marys Health Center, Telecommunications Research Associates, and Farmers Union CO-OP) were interviewed to gain insight into the economic conditions in St. Marys. Each employer answered questions that are addressed in the economic analysis.

FINDINGS

All methods used to gather information proved to be successful. The following is a discussion of the major issues, concerns, strengths, and weaknesses identified by the community. They are organized by major topic to assist in analyzing and developing recommendations and strategies for the future of St. Marys.

Economic Development

Residents indicate that St. Marys has a supportive business environment. A prime location at the intersection of U.S. Highway 24 and Kansas Highway 63, a business park, strong major employers, a variety of businesses, supportive financial institutions and agricultural industries provide a good base for economic development.

Thirteen business owners discussed their opinions about downtown conditions.

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However, continued economic development appears to be a primary concern. This topic was mentioned during the visioning session and identified as the primary issue at focus-group meetings. A desire to increase job opportunities is coupled with retaining existing businesses and jobs. Additional recommendations made by the focus group include the following:

- Increase industrial and retail businesses
- Promote the business park
- Promote the heritage of the mission
- Reduce the complexity of the zoning ordinance
- Improve loyalty to local businesses
- Promote a family entertainment/restaurant establishment
- Promote spin-off businesses related to the communications industry
- Retain downtown businesses
- Improve transportation and communication
- Improve the Chamber of Commerce

Housing

Residents seem to be satisfied with local housing stock. There are no significantly deteriorated neighborhoods, and there is a strong demand for housing and increasing availability. However, future housing demands and the quality of housing appear to be concerns. Focus group recommendations are as follows:

- Provide affordable housing
- Identify areas appropriate for housing development
- Ensure quality housing
- Provide different types of housing, such as rental and multi-family units

Recreation

St. Marys has an abundance of high-quality recreation facilities that satisfy local residents, as indicated by elementary students and focus-group participants. Parks, summer activities, arts-in-the-park presentations, well-rounded sports programs, a golf course, a swimming pool, and the Oregon Trail recreation area provide a variety of recreational amenities. Community officials should take the following actions to enhance existing facilities:

- Improve and support the golf course
- Offer concerts and plays throughout the year
- Establish a community center

Continued economic development is a primary concern of citizens.

Focus group members and elementary students expressed satisfaction with the city's recreation facilities.

- Offer fitness classes during the winter
- Upgrade existing parks

City Services and Facilities

Results of focus group meetings suggest a positive feeling toward city facilities and services.

Results of the focus group meetings suggest a positive feeling toward city facilities and services. A good street department with quick response to snow removal, an effective police department, friendly city staff, excellent city maintenance (including storm clean-up, trash removal, and street sweeping) were identified during visioning and focus-group meetings. However, residents do find room for improvement and make the following suggestions:

- Keep the city landfill open
- Manage property taxes
- Improve relations between citizens and police
- Reduce costs of electric service
- Reduce trash pick-up costs
- Install curbs and gutters where needed
- Encourage community leadership
- Coordinate city services

Transportation and Parking

Transportation and parking issues are major concerns of citizens.

Transportation and parking appears to be major issues and concerns, especially as they relate to safety. The following issues should be addressed:

- Railroad grade crossings
- Manage heavy traffic on U.S. 24
- Provide safer angled parking on U.S. 24
- Encourage compliance with parking regulations
- Provide additional downtown parking spaces

Downtown

The central commercial district appears to be vital, but citizens are concerned about its future viability. Local residents are shopping downtown and using local services, but critical issues must be addressed:

- Improve parking
- Improve cooperation among business owners
- Rehabilitate older buildings
- Increase visibility of pedestrian crosswalks

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- Fill vacant buildings
- Improve selection and competitive pricing

Other Issues

Other issues of slightly less concern were identified during visioning activities. Frequently mentioned were issues relating to the youth and the elderly in the community, ensuring that St. Marys remains a safe community with small-town, family values, and maintaining a quality natural environment. A list of additional recommendations follows:

- Provide places for teenagers to congregate
- Offer extracurricular activities for youth
- Support youth needs
- Create a support system for senior citizens
- Improve community relations
- Promote greater community consensus
- Minimize segregation
- Establish a city-wide neighborhood watch
- Keep the city clean
- Improve recycling centers
- Encourage maintenance of air and water quality

All issues, concerns, and recommendations revealed during the visioning process are incorporated in the Plan Update. These issues helped identify community strengths and weakness and guided the creation of action statements to help community officials make decisions. The following plan blends academic studies with the desires and needs of local residents to provide a path that will guide the city into the 21st Century.

Other issues of concern to the community include those related to the youth and the elderly, ensuring that St. Marys remains a safe community with family values, and maintaining a quality natural environment.