

# Comprehensive Plans and Your Bottom Line

“The combination of a plan’s well-defined vision for the future and community leadership support is powerful.”

New York State Law offers some prescriptive guidance about the creation of comprehensive plans, but does not actually require a community to formally adopt one. This is unfortunate, since the planning effort is far more valuable to a community’s “bottom line” than many realize.

When land use or other local government decisions are challenged, a community’s planning efforts can suddenly take center stage. Court decisions have referenced the perceived “interest of the community” when discussing local decision making that’s under fire.

In the absence of formal adoption of a planning document, board meeting minutes, published documents, even records of public discussions have been cited as communication of an implicit “comprehensive plan”. At precisely the moment when a community’s sense of direction is needed most, someone’s “out of context” interpretation of a smattering of public documents can ultimately decide a legal case – or worse yet, establish a community’s future goals by default.

As a community leader, why would you want anyone else to define who you are -- and what you will become?

## COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING IS VITAL

Not just fluff, comprehensive plans can get to the heart of what matters most to your community residents. When led with fortitude, the process can foster deep and heartfelt discussions about core values, character, and how quality of life is defined.

Fortitude is required because - if you haven’t yet noticed - people don’t always agree on such fundamental definitions.



### About the Author:

Diana M. Smith is Director of the Municipal Services Division and Business Development Director for MRB Group.



She is the Former Mayor of Seneca Falls, New York, and a Past President of the New York Conference of Mayors.

As Mayor, she was responsible for municipal budgeting and managing operations – including \$7 million in annual expenditures. She currently advocates for strategic planning, implementation of best practices, and municipal efficiency. She is a frequent speaker and trainer for professional organizations serving local governments.

The greatest benefit of comprehensive planning is getting through difficult discussions about the character of your community and the direction it should follow – ONCE – and being able to utilize the result – FOR YEARS. Board decisions are clearer, and receive far less criticism when there is hard evidence of widespread community support.

Ironically, choosing to confront difficult issues is often the easier path, when compared to the need to hash over – and re-hash – fundamental questions at contentious meetings. People remember things differently, and interpret to their own benefit. A comprehensive plan identifies collaborative goals and direction, once and for all – then puts community residents in a position of “ownership.” To a Board, that can be liberating. There’s no longer a need to worry about providing compelling justification and lengthy explanations. Pointing to the plan will suffice, and you can move on to the next topic.

## A COMPETITIVE EDGE

While New York’s Consolidated Funding Application process for grant submissions has proven to be an annual traffic jam of workload and anxiety for local grant writers and public officials, one can’t help but respect the State’s new, more intelligent approach to allocating funding.

Although each agency still coordinates its own funding request within the CFA process, there are consistent requirements for applicants to show how a proposed project aligns with regional strategic planning. Questionnaires many times ask IF a comprehensive plan has been adopted and IF the proposal supports - and is supported by – planning goals at the local, regional and state levels.

This means that as State taxpayers, we’re getting more bang for our buck, thanks to cohesiveness – AND PLANNING. It’s nice to know, for instance, that next year’s grant awards are less likely to have New York State residents pay twice for opposing objectives that cancel each other out.

Locally, this means an adopted comprehensive plan strengthens applications in the competitive process. Demonstrating alignment with planning at all levels positions a community to better compete. It further allows the State to justify a grant approval as a wise investment – one that is consistent with taxpayers’ wishes.

It appears that comprehensive planning is finally gaining recognition for its value: improving and justifying decision-making by clarifying the public’s best interest -- at all levels of government.

## LOCAL COMMITMENT

Whenever a community leader does point to a comprehensive plan to justify a board action, it demonstrates local government commitment - to listen and make decisions in accordance with residents’ wishes. The combination of a plan’s well-defined vision for the

future and community leadership support is powerful. Together they transform a comprehensive plan into a trustworthy “compass” that can keep a community headed toward its own True North.

The compass is beneficial in keeping community values in focus – for the long term. It ensures that the community's direction and progress are maintained beyond election cycles and terms, even well after originators of the planning are no longer in office. This is important. New, young and attractive voices will emerge in a community at any time. Like victims of “mid-life crisis”, voters can easily forget what's important to them – then regret it later. Especially in times of turmoil, when radical ideas are delivered with fresh enthusiasm, a compass is an important tool that helps a community keep an eye on True North.

## A RETURN ON INVESTMENT

When business owners, locators or start-ups are looking for the best place to invest their financial future, an established and adopted Comprehensive Plan communicates loudly that a community has chosen a destiny of its own making - and is committed to staying on the path toward True North. A comprehensive plan and local government commitment can give a community a tremendous competitive edge in attracting private investment.

Business investors look for indicators that their financial model is sustainable within a geographic area. A community that has documented compatible values will gain notice, and a community that has defined its own future becomes a contender. A community with a good comprehensive plan, AND a demonstrated commitment to achieving its goals – is a winner.

The key is using the comprehensive plan each and every day, and shouting about it.

The commitment to a comprehensive plan must be demonstrated by a local government that reports on its progress regularly; that updates the plan routinely; and that clearly translates plan goals into action items – then acts. Reflection on the accomplishments of a local government should tie each achievement to implementation of the comprehensive plan to further demonstrate commitment. This creates the planning-focused environment, when the document can be used most effectively as a tool to foster economic development.

For community leaders who struggle to understand local government's role in economic development – the comprehensive plan is the answer. Because it's a compass, because it's a decision-justification, because it reduces controversy; and because it defines the vision of the future – it becomes a compelling reason to invest. It can give reasonable assurance to developers that your community is the right place to invest. It tells them your community is going to grow in ways that will support their own plan. It can even help them predict lower start-up costs, if there is a clear path to approvals with less likelihood for the kinds of objections that come from disunity. Finally, if incentives to develop were recommended, and local government has implemented them, that's even better!

Whether the potential investment in question is a \$7 Million dollar hotel, or a \$200 Thousand dollar house – each is a step towards building a win-win relationship, getting everyone a little closer to where they want to be.

## MARKETING THE PLAN

Some potential investors will already know if you have a plan and how well-supported it is. Others may need to be told – and sold. If your plan doesn't have a one-page summary, then create one. Know your plan and be able to communicate its vision. Be ready to share its goals, and what you've done to implement them. Get the story down pat – and refine it - until you can tell it in one minute or less.

Don't assume that business owners can necessarily draw the lines between your vision and theirs. For your story to be compelling, your vision of the future should INCLUDE them. Help them understand how your community vision supports theirs, and that your past demonstration of local government support means they can continue to count on it, in the future.

In your hands, a proactively utilized comprehensive plan can be a very effective marketing tool, and communicate to everyone that your community is “open for business.”

A comprehensive plan can be the self-fulfilling prophecy that leads your community toward its own definition of success. What's YOUR vision of a thriving community? No matter what you put at the top of the list, success means a better bottom line.



# **NY** *Municipal* **COM** Bulletin

NEW YORK STATE CONFERENCE OF MAYORS & MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS

---



**SUMMER 2013**



# Local Government and Business: Bridging the Gap

by Diana Smith, Business Development Director,  
MRB Group Engineering, Architecture and Surveying, P.C.

Ask a community business leader about local government: How does it operate? Which services are provided? In many cases, the answers will be far from accurate. One response will invariably be: “My taxes are too high!”

In all fairness, many municipal officials would not be able to answer similar questions about local businesses: What do they do? Who do they employ? How do they contribute to the community? What support would help them thrive?

Many local government officials leave business development discussions and economic development planning to those “who know better.”

As community leaders, however, there is likely **no one** who knows a community better than its local elected officials. City and village mayors, council members, and trustees are in an ideal position to promote economic development in their community.

## AN INFORMED COMMUNITY

A strong community requires interaction and collaborative discussions among groups -- most importantly between business leaders and local government leaders.

To foster this interaction and collaboration, city and village officials should consider creating a “Community 101 Toolkit” which provides resources critical to supporting public participation and informed decision making. A community’s Toolkit should include demographic information, geographic highlights, economic information and trends, local government costs and impacts on taxpayers, and information on local businesses and employment.

## FOSTERING COMMUNITY SUPPORT

A natural extension of the “Toolkit” is a public information foundation. But, in reality, the toolkit can provide much more. Published for the benefit of local community members, this information can identify the **roles and functions** of government, business, not-for-profit and community support groups. Once community members understand the value of the contributions these groups make to the quality of life in a community, they will perhaps better appreciate efforts to preserve those community “institutions.”

## COMMUNITY SUPPORT IS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

There are two important reasons why Economic Development should begin with support for a strong community, both in and out of the business district.

While good business development is largely based on aggressive efforts to reach out to new partners, **effective** development requires that equal attention be paid to “retention.” Current relationships and institutions should not be taken for granted. Furthermore, the benefit of supporting existing businesses is two-fold. First, a thriving business community is a “**welcome sign**” to other potential investors. Second, “quality of life” is not just an abstract philosophical discussion. In today’s world, it’s a critical commodity that can determine whether a growth-oriented employer chooses to locate in your community. Corporate leaders know they can’t attract top-quality personnel to want to live and work in depressed environments.

## GOING ONE STEP FURTHER

Not only should “Community 101” information be extended to community members to encourage support for businesses and preserve quality of life, but community leaders can further support economic development by thinking beyond their own borders.

Many local governments utilize a website as an informational resource for residents, like a dynamic community newsletter. Corporations seeking expansion, or “headhunting” business locator firms are also going to utilize your website as an informational resource. What does it say to them?

A strong community, one with a clear sense of core values and how to preserve them, will attract these individuals. The “Community 101” information will be valuable to “outsiders” looking in. In addition, critical information included on your local government website can do much to captivate these potential investors, giving you a distinct advantage over other locations.

## BE OPEN FOR BUSINESS

When campaigning for new investment, local officials need to be able to show that the **infrastructure necessary to support development** is already in place or is demonstrably planned. Anything short implies to potential developers insecurity, risk, and high cost. Communities must engage in a proactive approach. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding requirements emphasized the need for having infrastructure in place, as the State of New York promoted preparation with expedited support for “Shovel Ready” projects.





Communities cannot stop there, however. Communicating this preparedness is equally important. Community websites should have an "Open for Business" tab or section, which clearly describes, point by point, why investors should "look here first." Information about your community should include:

- Infrastructure framework: high speed internet, water and sewer systems (including plant capacities), area transportation systems;
- Proximity to transportation hubs, metropolitan centers;
- Accessibility to health care, arts / entertainment, amenities;
- General tax info;
- Available support agencies, such as an IDA, Chamber of Commerce, etc.;
- References to PILOTs / incentives currently in place;
- Database of currently available properties with acreage, existing infrastructure, etc.; and
- Key contacts for further info.

These are just a few of the critical pieces of information that should be readily available to prospective developers and businesses.

Officials who are unsure about what information to include on their website should consider adopting the perspective of a "skeptical" prospective business owner. Additionally, local officials should consider meeting with business leaders to gain their perspective regarding what would attract businesses to the community. What types of new businesses would enhance those businesses already in the community as well as enhancing the community as a whole? Should specific businesses be targeted? Should special incentives be created to attract and retain businesses? The discussion can become the beginning of a Community Economic Development Plan, or a larger Comprehensive Plan (or Update).

At the very least, the communication should be the first of many insightful discussions between local government and business.

Once your business community understands your efforts to support them, you will have taken bold steps to bridge any gap between the public and private sector. As a result, you will strengthen your entire community's appreciation for their local government.

*(Diana Smith is a former Mayor, former President of NYCOM, and currently serves as Business Development Director for MRB Group, a municipal service-based engineering and architecture firm.)*

[www.mrbgroup.com](http://www.mrbgroup.com)

## *Solutions You Can Trust*

Municipal experts in:

- Water
- Wastewater
- Infrastructure
- Architecture
- GIS Technology and Support
- Grants / Funding
- Operational Efficiency



# MRB | group

Providing municipal services since 1927

**To support local government efficiency,  
MRB Group created**

## The Strategic *Municipal* Initiatives Project

Efficiency Consulting / Operational Analysis  
Dissolution Planning & Studies  
Consolidation / Shared Services  
Municipal Asset Management Planning  
Municipal IT Planning and Support

Helping Local Governments to Be  
SMARTER • STRONGER • MORE EFFICIENT

(585) 381-9250 • (585) 410-1003

[www.smarterlocalgov.com](http://www.smarterlocalgov.com)





Association of Towns of the State of New York

# TALK OF THE Towns & Topics

ASSOCIATION OF TOWNS OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK



*Happy Holidays*



# Shovel Ready

## Welcoming Growth and Economic Development to Your Community

By Diana Smith, Business Development Director, MRB Group

During the time I served on my local board, I remember speaking with a director of a regional chamber of commerce in another state where I was visiting. The tourism flyers and business development brochures nearly covered an entrance wall. I marveled at the organization's aggressive efforts to market local amenities and available tax breaks. The list of incentives to invest in the area was enticing. From a marketing perspective, it was an impressive picture; the future was bright and the atmosphere was celebratory. I imagined an ongoing party and a conga line of successful start-ups, dancing their way to the bank.

"So," I asked, "there's infrastructure in place to support growth?"

The look on her face stopped the music in my head with a screech. "What?" she asked.

"Infrastructure," I said. "Infrastructure like roads or sewer and water lines."

She stared.

I was shocked by her response, but more alarmed by the realization that my world was being rocked by my bad assumptions. I had always regarded economic development as the "mystical" doings of people who know far more than I do about business and what attracts investors.

### It's Our Job, Too

I suddenly realized that economic development was as much my arena – and my shared responsibility – as the agencies and personnel who traditionally

carry its related job titles. Those individuals may be the shepherds of economic development, but the truth is closer to some famously wise words: "It takes a village..." (Or a town. Or a county.)

Community participation and preparedness is the key to successful economic development.

"Community support for maintaining resources can serve as an indicator of future costs. Who will be responsible, short-term and long-term, for the infrastructure that is critical to the success of their business?"

Economic development involves effective marketing. Those responsible for economic development must place a spotlight on area resources. If communities want to strengthen economic development efforts, they need to first focus on their resources and then provide information about them to the marketing professionals. The issue that too often becomes an obstacle is understanding what should be considered a resource.

### Infrastructure Isn't Sexy

Certain resources are obvious. Available properties, tax incentives, amenities, transportation systems and proximity to transportation hubs are the usual suspects atop the list. In more recent years, focus on a skilled and ready workforce has become central to successful industrial

development. Forward-thinking planners are prepared to discuss community living and quality of life issues that can attract high-caliber executive personnel.

If the marketing professionals tend to put their

[See: Communicating on Page 10](#)

## From Page 9: Communicating Your Vision of Growth Will Bring Economic Successes

best face forward, these would surely be the most attractive features that would captivate prospective business investors.

Sewer? Who wants to talk about sewer?

Well, the investors do.

### Cost is King

Investors are concerned with costs. They must consider what it takes to establish and operate their business / industry. They must also consider the potential for growth. Community support for maintaining resources can serve as an indicator of future costs. Who will be responsible, short-term and long-term, for the infrastructure that is critical to the success of their business?

The cost-benefit analysis that drives an investor's decision-making process is certainly not rocket science to anyone in business or government. It's really a matter of common sense.

### Tipping the Scale in Your Favor

Community leaders can make that analysis easier for potential investors, by identifying costs, but, more importantly, also by identifying what the community is doing to minimize them in preparation for growth. Even if you, as a community leader, are not directly responsible for controlling the resources, your relationship with the management of those resources and knowledge of their strategic planning is critical. Facilitating communication is more than a minor role in economic development. It's the opportunity to make sure everyone knows that in your community, the cost-benefit ratio clearly supports investment.

For example, the cost of water is important. Equally important is the plant's capacity to deliver quantities that would support growth. Limitations indicate future costs that will factor into the equation. The same holds true for sewer plants. What increase in volume will tip the scale and require a plant upgrade to achieve a reasonable margin of safety for sudden increases in flow? For each community, the answer is a unique consideration. If the community has a history of issues with an aging sewer system affected by stormwater or groundwater infiltration and inflow, for instance, even a minor increase in volume results in a significant impact.

### A Strategic Plan for Growth

If your community has a strategic plan for infrastructure growth, then the prospective investor knows that not only is capacity not an issue, but that his firm won't be held hostage by a community's reluctance to address problems that may arise in the future. In essence, the planning becomes another resource to market – one of which the economic development professionals should be aware.

### Communicating Your Plan

To a firm seeking to locate a manufacturing plant, any lack of information about infrastructure can mean delays, additional research and cost calculations. For a "locator firm" specializing in identifying prime areas, it can mean that your community is left off its list. It's critical that information about your infrastructure be included among the many resources marketed by economic development professionals.

Yet another resource you can provide to them is you! You can either relay your knowledge about infrastructure to the marketing professionals, or meet with prospective investors directly. They will respect your appreciation and understanding of their most basic needs.

The bottom line? Your ability to communicate the strategic plan for long-term infrastructure maintenance and growth is a key component to your community's economic development successes. Prospective investors need to know that infrastructure is a recognized resource, and it won't be left to them to create, manage or finance.

With this understanding of your community, investors can enter into a long-lasting relationship with you as a partner in your community's growth. □

## About the Author

Diana Smith is a former mayor, former president of the New York Conference of Mayors and currently serves as Business Development Director for MRB Group, a municipal service-based engineering and architecture firm that specializes in local government operations and efficiency.





## The Comprehensive Plan

A comprehensive plan is a written document that identifies the goals, objectives and devices for the "immediate and long-range protection, enhancement, growth and development" of the community.

The effect of adopting a comprehensive plan is that all local land development regulations must be in conformance with its provisions. Other governmental agencies, such as state agencies, must consider the local comprehensive plan in planning their capital projects within the locality.

The New York State Court of Appeals noted in *Udell v. Haas* that "the comprehensive plan is the essence of zoning. Without it, there can be no rational allocation of land use." Indeed, the statutes require that all land use regulations must be made "in accordance with a comprehensive plan." Therefore, planning should precede any adoption or amendment of a land use regulation.

New York statutes define a comprehensive plan as the "materials, written and/or graphic, including but not limited to maps, charts, studies, resolutions, report, and other descriptive material that identify the goals, objectives, principles, guidelines, policies, standards, devices, and instruments for the immediate and long-range protection, enhancement, growth, and development of the [locality]."

While there are no required components of a comprehensive plan, the statutes suggest fifteen elements for inclusion:

a general statement of goals, objectives, and standards upon which proposals for the immediate and long-range growth and development of the municipality are based;

consideration of the regional needs and official plans of other government units within the region;

existing and proposed location and intensity of land uses;

consideration of agricultural uses, historic, and cultural resources, coastal and natural resources and sensitive environmental areas;

consideration of population, demographics and socio-economic trends, and future projections;

the location and types of transportation facilities;

existing and proposed location of public and private utilities and infrastructure;

existing housing and future housing needs, including affordable housing;

present and future location of historic sites, educational, cultural, health, and emergency services;

existing and proposed recreational facilities and parkland;

present and future locations of commercial and industrial facilities;

specific policies and strategies for improving the local economy in coordination with other plan topics;

proposed measures, programs, devices, and instruments to implement the goals of the comprehensive plan;

all or part of the plan of another public agency; and

any and all other items which are consistent with the orderly growth and development of the municipality.

### **Why have a comprehensive plan?**

The comprehensive plan creates a blueprint for the future development and preservation of a community. Often referred to as the "master plan," it is the policy foundation upon which communities are built. A good comprehensive plan guides not only the physical and economic development of the municipality, but also accommodates social, environmental, and regional concerns.



## The Conversation Map: A Supplemental Tool for Facilitating Group Participation

Although there are several “versions” of this concept floating around, the basic premise of the Conversation Map is that it provides an alternative mode of communication in group facilitation. It can also be a subtle force in fostering “positive” expression.

A conversation map is a written collection of commentary that’s (somewhat) organized by topic.

We don’t recommend using it exclusively to gather public commentary. Nothing can replace a good, healthy public forum. Instead, we use it to supplement other forms of opinion gathering, usually at a charrette or workshop.

### ALTERNATIVE MODE OF COMMUNICATION:

Some folks are not public speakers. They’d rather sit and stew than risk ridicule for expressing a belief that doesn’t fit with the dialogue in the room. A conversation map allows them to contribute, without the perceived risk. While comments aren’t signed or owned by any individual, other participants can potentially see who wrote a comment as it’s being added. This allows the benefits of a sense of anonymity, but can prevent the disgraceful and unhelpful disrespect and hostility that’s apparent in online chat rooms.

### POSITIVE INFLUENCE:

We do believe that frustrated people tend to blurt out what’s on their mind, and negativity breeds more negativity. In communities where hot topics tend to rule, we know we’ll have to exercise some influence to keep things respectful and moving forward. The Conversation Map can be helpful. In implementing it, we use a rule that encourages a shift from negative to positive thinking. We tell folks that they need to add a positive suggestion or commentary for every negative they add to the Conversation Map. This forces an equal amount of positive or constructive input, and makes people stop and think about the character of their comments.

### USING A MAP:

Our version of a Conversation Map is little more than a large format sheet of paper or posterboard (40 x 40” or larger), and a set of markers in an array of different colors. The center of the paper shows a circle with a “starter topic” written in it. A “starter conversation” or thread, gets things moving. We usually pick a generally unavoidable issue or topic, and write it into a secondary off-shoot. The result looks something like this:



## USING THE RESULTS:

A finished map can often be converted to a list of comments that takes the more traditional form of an outline. The levels immediately radiating out from the center are first level, and each subsequent radius appears beneath it. The format is intuitive, and in outline form, is much more transportable!

Useful to a Steering Committee in assessing what's on resident's minds, the map can be used to "zero in" on specific topics. If used in an initial charrette or workshop, it can identify key community assessment issues, what they value most, and concerns otherwise unheard. When used in a "visioning" session, the map can allow people to freely brainstorm.

## CAUTIONS:

People do tend to jump on bandwagons, and despite their own thoughts can get sidetracked by – or simply choose to run with - other people's comments.

Just because an item doesn't get added to the map doesn't mean it's not on people's minds. Instead, they may have been distracted temporarily by their neighbor's comment. Sometimes, they simply become focused on today's headline. One or two hot issues can easily pre-empt the rest – in the heat of the moment.

Please remember that any conversation, mapped or not, is a snapshot in time. This is precisely why Conversation Maps are a supplemental tool, and why we suggest more than one method for soliciting public opinion.

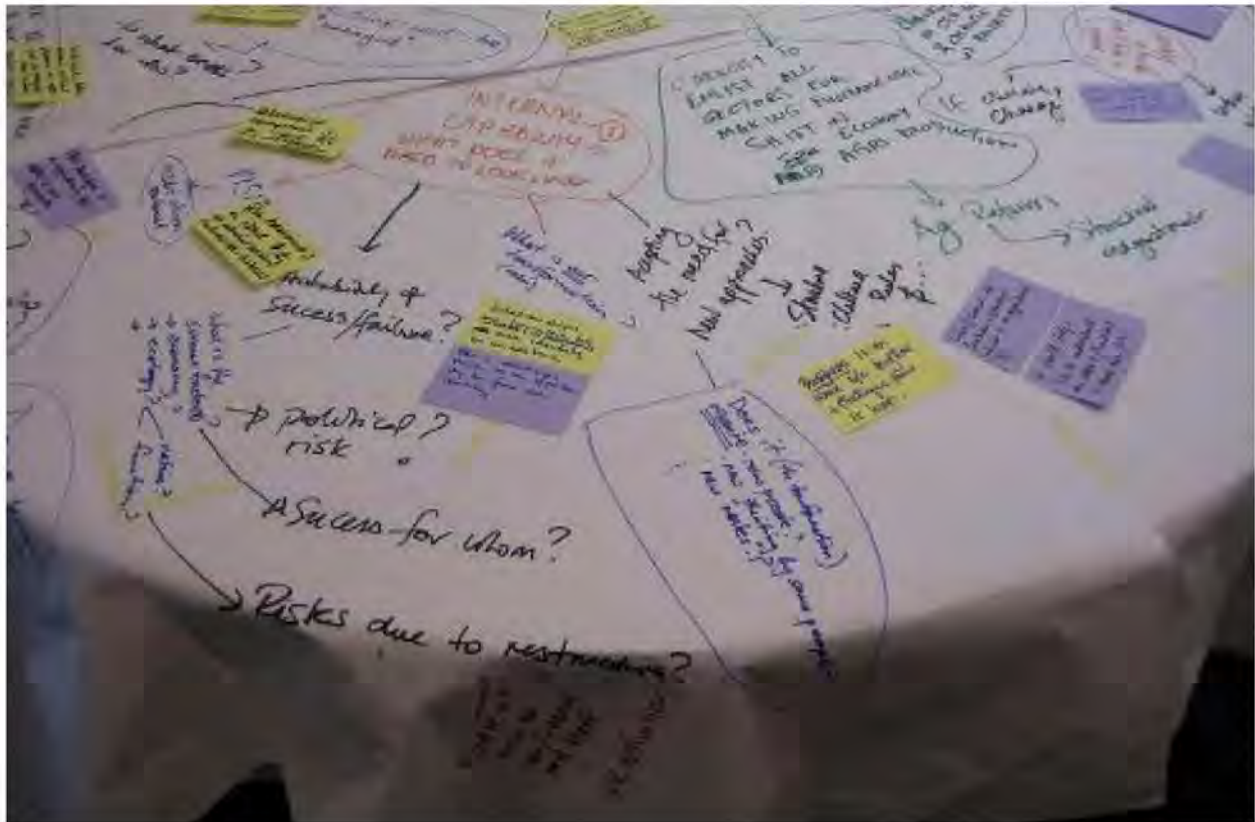


Photo credit: Philip Wallis



### Comprehensive Plan Implementation Matrix Sample

Goal:	Objective:	Strategy:	Timeline:	Benchmark:	Responsibility:
To improve experience of visitors to community	Improve gateway appearance	Establish a committee of volunteers to adopt and care for gateway	Immediate	Committee Plan Development	T/V
		To provide funding for materials	May 2016	Town / Village Board Resolution	T/V
	Improve downtown sidewalks	Establish budget reserve account / program	Immediate (2016-2017 Budget)	Village Board Resolution	V
	Improve wayfinding (signage)	Apply for a DOT TEP grant	2016	Village Board Resolution	V
				Grant Application	V
		Establish reserve account for grant match or self-funding	2016-2017 Budget	Village Board Resolution	V
Goal 2	Objective 1	Strategy 1	Date	Benchmark	Resp
		Strategy 2	Date	Benchmark	Resp
	Objective 2	Strategy 1	Date	Benchmark	Resp
	Objective 3	Strategy 1	Date	Benchmark	Resp
				Benchmark	Resp
		Strategy 2	Date	Benchmark	Resp
Goal 3	Objective 1	Strategy 1	Date	Benchmark	Resp
		Strategy 2	Date	Benchmark	Resp
	Objective 2	Strategy 1	Date	Benchmark	Resp
	Objective 3	Strategy 1	Date	Benchmark	Resp
				Benchmark	Resp
		Strategy 2	Date	Benchmark	Resp