Strategic Place-Based Planning for Urban Regeneration: Lessons in Social Sustainability from Mid-American Cities

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A FRAMEWORK FOR STRATEGIC POLICY PLANNING

Finding time and support for strategic planning is difficult. Local officials are constantly reacting to crises such as fiscal instability or the complex socioeconomic problems of homelessness, joblessness, and property abandonment. Orchestrating a planning process, regardless of scale or size, runs afoul of the emergency nature of life within cities in transition. Staff is often consumed with day-to-day operations. Even so, taking a step away from crisis mode and spending energy on strategic thinking will serve a city better in both the short and long terms. The following section offers a strategic policy planning framework grounded in the realities of cities in transition. This framework borrows from a number of strategic planning models and the experiences of several cities in transition. Various elements of the framework can apply to planning processes of different scales and types, such as revisions to comprehensive plans or the creation of special area or neighborhood plans. Our goal is to provide planners with a flexible framework they can use and adapt to their needs.

While planners familiar with the literature on strategic planning may recognize certain elements of our framework (see textbox), it covers new territory by establishing the overarching goals of integrat ing policy and orchestrating action across a spectrum of issues. At its core it seeks to align multiple government and nonprofit players, programs, and policies behind a series of consensus-driven principles and goals. In many respects this hybrid framework resembles policy plans that local governments are now developing as sustainability, climate-action, or community-energy plans. In fact, these emerging sustainability-planning frameworks have important parallels for cities in transition, as many integrate a wide range of policies and programs across multiple departments and agencies in areas such as green buildings, land use, transportation, and energy.

THE EVOLVING NATURE OF PUBLIC SECTOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

Modern concepts of strategic planning originated in private-sector strategic management developed in the 1950s and 1960s in response to rapidly changing and competitive business environments (Bracker 1980). With the expansion of the discipline of organizational development, companies today routinely follow strategic planning processes to craft new mission statements, visions, goals, and objectives. Classic strategic planning helps organizations understand where they are now, where they want to go, what actions they should take to get there, what resources they will need, and how they will know when they get there. By creating a strategic plan an organization hopes to increase overall effectiveness, use resources more efficiently, and facilitate stronger communications within and outside of itself (Bryson 2004). During the 1990s municipalities began to embrace strategic planning processes and principles and adapt them to their operations, with the support of organizations such as the International City/County Management Association and the American Planning Association. Over the past 20 years the practice and process of public-sector strategic planning has become more sophisticated and complex. John Bryson, the guru of public and nonprofit strategic planning, developed a 10-step model with dozens of actions for each step and complex organizational mapping and diagram ming tools (2004).

Most public-sector strategic planning processes indirectly affect policy by improving the operations and direction of organizations and entities. They may establish visions, principles, and goals that guide government officials in budgetary decision making and allocation of resources. However, since these strategic plans typically have no legal standing, they may change with the election of a new city council or mayor or the appointment of a new city/county manager or chief executive officer. Although strategic policy planning still seems comparatively new in the planning field, Roger L. Kemp's 1992 casebook, Strategic Planning in Local Government, includes examples of local govern ments using strategic planning processes to ad dress a range of planning and policy challenges, such as growth management, program manage ment, long-term fiscal planning, citywide vision ing and goal setting, and small-city revitalization. These case studies not only illuminate the political and policy drivers behind these planning efforts but emphasize the importance of strategic plan ning in an ever-changing political and economic climate. Kemp synthesizes the insights from these cases into a six-phase model.

Our framework envisions a much broader role in the planning process for planners and planning departments than is typical, one that extends beyond land use, transportation, housing, and the en vironment. It proposes that planners or planning departments lead or assist in the design, facilitation, and management of the strategic planning process in collaboration with political leaders, city officials, and community-based organizations to ensure effective implemen tation. Strategic planning processes rarely follow each of the steps below in sequence; they often weave back and forth among these phases. The sequence of the phases should always remain fluid to accommodate changing conditions.
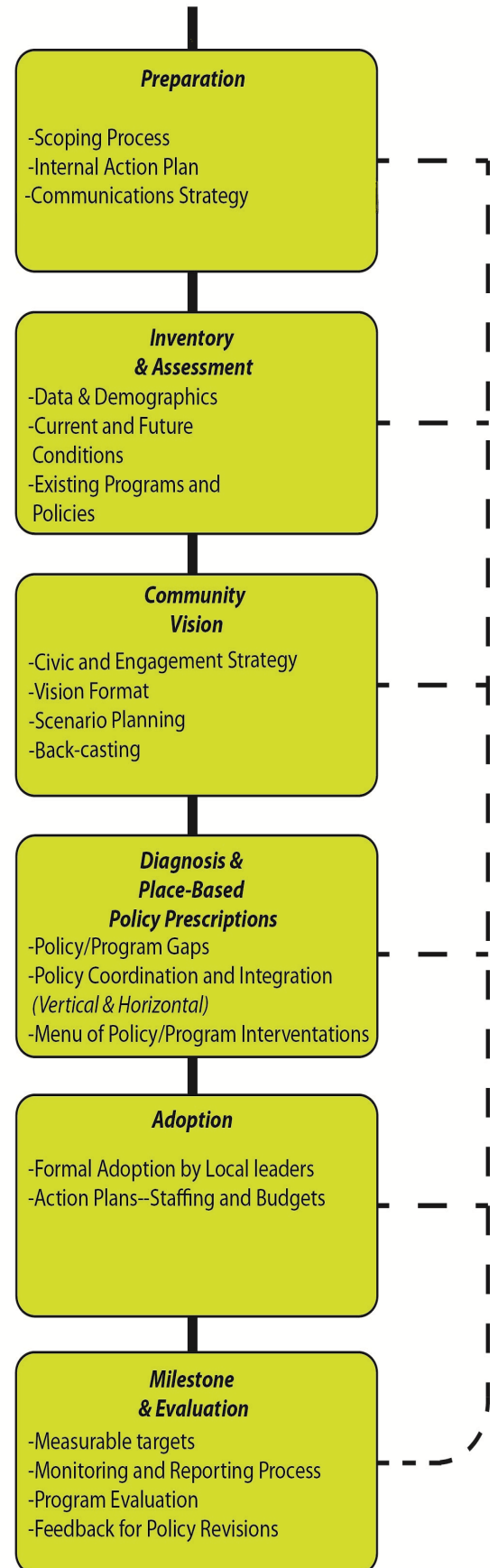
Internal Action Plan, Preparation, and Process Design

Before embarking on the strategic planning process, planners should identify stakeholders and build support inside and outside of city hall. A preliminary step is to develop an internal scoping process with planning department core staff and other department and agency di rectors across the organizational structure, who then vet initial ideas up the chain of command; this scoping process is critical to get input and set the stage for a more formal review and analysis later. It may be important to organize an executive group to manage the initiative, designate its leadership, and identify a spokesperson for the process. A core element of the process design is a communications and outreach strategy to provide feedback loops and opportunities for adjustment throughout the initiative.

Inventory and Assessment

The first step in any classic planning process is to understand the issues and the environment. For cities in transition this means casting a wide net so that planners understand the interplay among their cities' distinctive physical, social, economic, and environmental characteristics, conditions, and challenges. The inventory and assessment of current conditions should establish an accurate baseline of information for use in the plan ning process and policy interventions.

In addition to gathering data about the past and the present, planners should explore potential futures through simple forecasting or identification of reliable and relevant forecasts of future trends done by others, using data and visualization techniques to model alterna tive scenarios. Baseline data should also be used to develop indicators of change and other outcome- or performance-based measurements to enable ongoing feedback. The assessment stage should also focus on the human side of the equation through stakeholder analysis of internal and external partners and qualitative information gathering from focus groups, community meetings, and similar processes.

Strategic Policy Planning Process

Preparation

-Scoping Process
-Internal Action Plan
-Communications Strategy

Inventory & Assessment

-Data & Demographics
-Current and Future Conditions
-Existing Programs and Policies

Community Vision

-Civic and Engagement Strategy
-Vision Format
-Scenario Planning
-Back-casting

Diagnosis & Place-Based Policy Prescriptions

-Policy/Program Gaps
-Policy Coordination and Integration (Vertical & Horizontal)
-Menu of Policy/Program Interventions

Adoption

-Formal Adoption by Local leaders
-Action Plans--Staffing and Budgets

Milestone & Evaluation

-Measurable targets
-Monitoring and Reporting Process
-Program Evaluation
-Feedback for Policy Revisions

A Collective Community Vision

While some cities in transition may need to make only minor revisions or amendments to existing plans, most will need a new vision. This is the case for both older industrial communities that have struggled for decades and boom-bust cities that had planned around a now-obsolete growth model. The new vision must be consistent with the current reality, supported by the data previously gathered and assessed.

Acknowledging reality is a critical step in the process of recovery. In Youngstown, Ohio, this took place in 2003 and 2004 at the beginning of the process that led to the Youngstown 2010 plan; through a series of town hall meetings, residents came to the realization that Youngstown would never return to its former size or economic base but could still become a great smaller city.

While the vision may take different forms, strategic planning practice calls for developing a mission statement, goals, and objectives. The goal of any visioning process is to navigate the changes between the past and the present in order to move a community toward a new future-a Zen-like process more often art than science. The vision could be supported by a set of internal principles for guiding the strategic planning process, and it should also enable the articulation of broad community principles and goals that describe a more positive community future.

While there are many books and courses on community visioning, one model that may resonate with cities in transition is "backcasting," part of the Integrated Community Sustainability Planning model developed by the Natural Step of Canada (www.naturalstep.org/en/canada/icsp). Backcasting starts with a vision of the future or successful outcome and works back to determine what steps must be taken to get there. In contrast, forecasting builds on existing assumptions and information to identify trends and then projects those trends into the future. Thus, backcasting may work best when a community is searching for a different future, while forecast ing is most effective as a continuation of the status quo (Park, Purcell, and Purkis 2009).

Place-Based Policy Prescriptions

This strategic planning process is set apart from others by its emphasis on policy integration and coordination. We take policy to encompass federal and state economic development programs as well as those within local government that have control over subjects such as land use and development. Although a local plan cannot govern policies and programs beyond its scope, it becomes a blue-print for deploying policies and programs in a more strategic way and incorporates a body of tenets to promote collective action.

In addition to facilitating policy coordination, the strategic policy plan should incorporate a menu of long- and short-term policy and program interven-tions. At the tactical level, the plan should establish a place-based approach, focusing on adoption of the strategies most appropriate to differ ent market conditions and neighborhood typologies. It should also include an assessment of the city's internal capacity to manage the programs and projects needed to support the policy interventions. These policies and pro grams should further positive change, improve local conditions, and rebuild civic infrastructure. In addition, it is critical to have contin-gency plans or alternative policy interventions ready if possible, so the city can respond to changing conditions and circumstances.

Adoption and Implementation of Strategic Policy Plan and Action Plan

Place-based policies must be turned into a co-hesive strategic policy plan. The plan should be subject to an adoption process by the local govern-ing body. This adoption gives weight to the plan, shapes policy, and sends a strong signal of commit-ment to the plan which will ultimately make the plan and its policies more effective.

After adoption of the strategic policy plan, plan-ners should oversee the creation of a more detailed action plan that assigns responsibility for each program and project and designates target neigh-borhoods or sites for specific policy interventions. The action plan should detail staff allocations and potential restructuring of city functions as well as partnerships with and roles for regional and local nonprofits, businesses, community-based organiza-tions, universities, and others.

Setting Milestones, Monitoring Performance, and Evaluating Outcomes

The last step in the strategic policy planning process is to set concrete mile stones or measureable targets, regularly track and report on performance, and synthesize and evaluate these performance measures to make midcourse corrections. All three of these steps are necessary; it makes little sense to measure performance if no process exists for sharing this information or determining whether policies and programs need changing.

While local governments have come a long way in developing performance measurement systems, these programs-such as the CitiStat program pioneered in Baltimore (see www.baltimorecity.gov /Government IAgencies Departments/ CitiStat.aspx)-typically focus on municipal service delivery. Cities in transition need access to data that focus on measuring change in concrete terms at different scales, from the region to the parcel. Examples from recent sustainability plans offer cities in transition good models for setting targets across a wide range of policy issues. Baltimore and Philadelphia's sustainability plans establish a set of sustainability policy principles and goals, such as conserving natural resources, preventing pollu tion, promoting environmental education and awareness, creating green jobs for city residents, and expanding access to local food systems. Baltimore's plan lists 132 program and policy strategies to help achieve these policy goals along with setting timeframes and identifying potential funding and public and private organizations that might assist with implementation. Philadelphia's plan frames sustainability through five "lenses"- energy, environment, equity, economy, and engagement-and 15total targets. Each of Philadelphia's five sustainability themes contains an overarching policy goal along with a few measurable targets set for 2015. Each target includes a laundry list of proposed programs and initiatives that could help the city reach its short-term targets and longer-range goals.

This excerpt is taken from "Cities in Transition: a Guide for Practicing Planners". Schilling, Joseph and Alan Mallach. 2012. American Planning Association.

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Urban Regeneration & Sustainability Worksheet

Step One—Inventory and Assess what have you done? Include existing plans, policies, programs, initiatives, etc.

Step Two—What makes the most sense? Where does it make the most sense?

Step Three—Who should be involved? Who would be your strategic allies and opponents within and outside of city hall?

Step Four—How are you going to do it—get it approved, adopted, launched? What are the processes of engagement with community, partners, etc.? How are you going to frame and talk about it?

Step Five—How are you going to implement, measure, and assess it?