

A Strategy for Creating Character Towns *A Big Plan for a Big Idea*

THE IDEA OF VISION-DRIVEN STRATEGY.

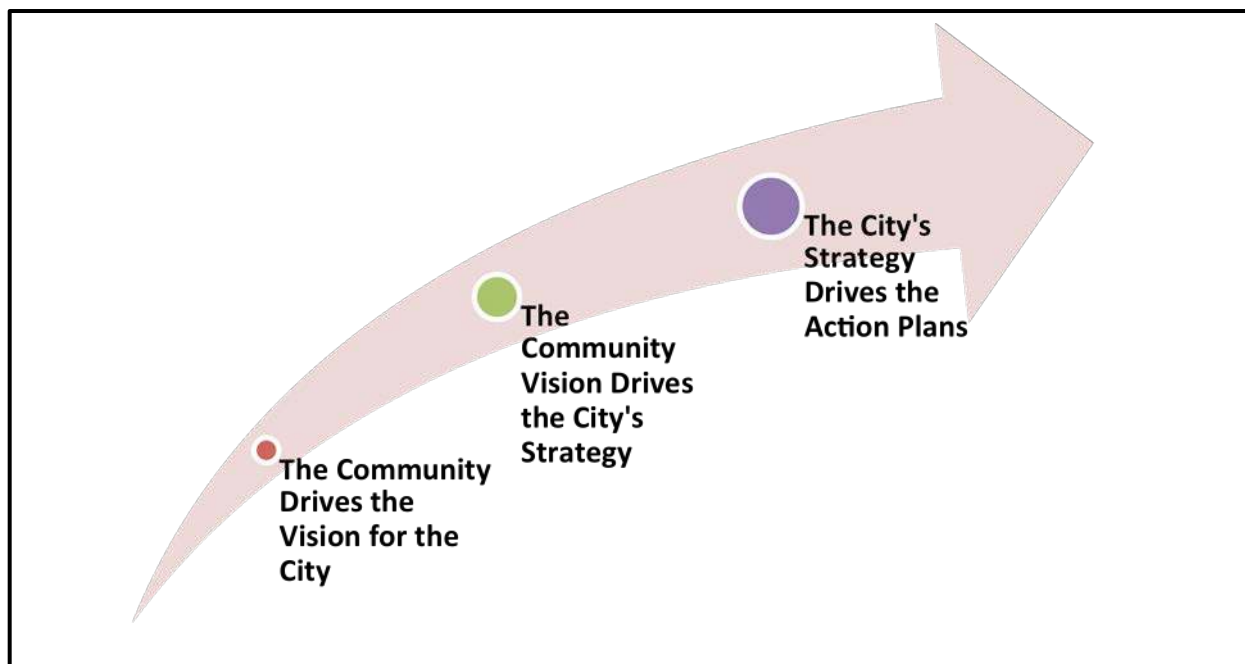
A strategy is the general idea one has about how to implement a vision. Essentially, strategy is the “**thinking**” aspect of enacting a vision by planning a change, organizing individuals, preparing an attack or campaign, launching a business or managing a city through strategic-driven action plans. Action Plans are tactical.

Strategy responds to the vision that wants to be accomplished; the strategic plan is the plan for achieving the vision. Strategy can be simple or complex and multi-layered. It may give consideration to tactics or ignore tactics as details to be worked out later. Feedback always appears; it can be anticipated and prepared for by the enterprise; or dealt with as a surprise when a third party offers a critique. In the strategic planning process, feedback may cause a re-evaluation of the vision or a re-planning of the strategy.

The fundamental process is simple, in concept. A community-based vision is developed with extensive stakeholder participation. A sound vision of the city supported by residents and businesses is the critical starting point.

The community-based vision drives the strategic plan. The strategic plan is the general approach that will be taken to organize city and private activities to help the community realize its vision.

The subsequent strategy-driven action plans are the “**doing**”; they consist of programs, design and construction plans, implementation policies and adopted and executed annual and long-term budgets. The action plans implement the strategy that, in turn, produces a city as envisioned by its residents and businesses.



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A SYSTEMIC APPROACH.

A successful vision-driven strategic plan for the municipal enterprise consists of a defined, four-part approach:

- **Community-Driven Vision, including Mission and Values.** There must be a reason for the enterprise to take action, expend energy and assume risks. Call it what you will – mission, vision, values, goals, objectives or aspirations - but there must be a concise, articulated reason or motive that inspires the enterprise and its adherents to act; be the enterprise a person, a business, a city or a community of interest. The term “vision” is used here to encompass all of the motivational terms even though they actually have different meanings and nuances.
- **Vision-Driven Strategy**
 - Strategy is the link between vision and action. It is the thought process that interprets the vision of the enterprise and translates it into action. Strategies are comprehensive, long range, internally and externally aware; focused on achieving the enterprise’s vision. Strategy is the discernible pivot point between aspirations and actions.
 - Strategic Objectives articulate the strategy and help drive the Action Plans.
- **Strategic-Driven Action Plans** – Action plans are driven by the strategy; each action must be visibly and specifically linked to a strategic objective. They are programs, budgets, policies, procedures, regulations and other measurable activities and tasks designed to achieve the strategy.

- **Vision-Driven Metrics** – At the end of the day, is progress being made toward achieving the vision? Performance measurement is the method for assuring that the vision-driven strategies, as implemented by the strategic-driven action plans, are actually achieving the vision. Metric systems are most effective when they are up-front, transparent, understandable to stakeholders and an inherent part of the entire system.

The Relationship of Strategy and Actions.

- **Strategy** is the thread that ensures the actions undertaken every day are joined into a bigger, predetermined program that yields pre-meditated, tangible, desirable outcomes that are vision-based.
- **Actions, or tactics,** are the operational tasks done every day: the decisions made at the front desk, the appointments made, the blogs posted, the metrics you measure, the incremental progress logged every day. The cumulative power of daily accomplishments achieves long term goals.
- To paraphrase an old adage...it is important to do things right and to do the right things. Doing the right things is strategic; doing things right is tactical.

Empowerment and Transparency.

An essential aspect of every successful enterprise is that everyone understands its vision, values and strategy. Since every decision cannot be controlled by the visionary leader, all decision-makers must understand the vision.

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LITERATURE.

The guru of strategic planning for business enterprises is Michael Porter. Many of his ideas for business strategies and their development are directly applicable to municipal enterprises. In addition, Msrs. Lafley and Martin have ideas that are very helpful to city management.

Playing to Win, How Strategy Really Works, by A.G. Lafley and Roger L. Martin, builds on the work of Michael Porter [*Competitive Strategies*]. They present a clear discussion of strategy and its enactment. Both are great resources for city planners and managers.

An Approach to Strategic Planning for Cities Based on the Lafley/Martin Template

The five choices presented by Lafley and Martin serve as a great basis for thinking about strategy for a community and a city government. While the translation of the business-oriented approach of Lafley/Martin into a municipal strategic plan is not one-for-one, the system for creating an executable aspiration-driven strategic plan for a city organization can consist of a defined approach using their concepts:

- **Aspirations.** Aspirations include the community's and city's thoughts about vision, values, and goals; the more simply and precisely stated the better. A vision of the future is the guiding light for the venture; values provide the ideal parameters for acceptable behavior; goals are the describers of the desired outcome. They collectively constitute the aspirations of the community or organization.
- **Strategy.** Strategy is the general approach to be taken to achieve the stated aspirations. "Where to play" embodies the idea of defining the field of interest. Determine the services and facilities necessary and desired, the financial resources to be assembled and the role of the citizenry. The aspiration-driven, or vision-driven, strategy provides the motivation for the organization to accept the mission and proceed with the actions necessary to fulfill the organization's aspirations within the bounds of behavior set by the statement of values. Strategy is the translation of aspirations into actions within the defined field of interest.
- **Strategic objectives.** Strategic objectives refine the basic strategy in a way that helps define and organize the Action Plan. "How to win" lives in the strategic objectives. The strategic objectives articulate the big things that must be achieved to fulfill the community's and organization's aspirations.
- **Actions.** The Plan of Action includes the specific, measurable actions to be taken to achieve the strategy to build the infrastructure for the city and the community in terms of regulations, financial resources and community spirit. Actions may be policies, improvement programs, budgets for operating or capital activities, partnerships, regulations or community-building events. In every case, every action must be driven by the strategy.
- **Management/Monitoring Systems.** Metrics matter. The management and monitoring systems are essential to know if progress is being made and what lessons are being learned to improve performance. As the aspirations and strategies are articulated, the system for measuring performance should be constructed concurrently as part of the organizations' learning process that constantly improves the organization's capacity to achieve the community's and the organization's aspirations.

Source: The ideas are from Lafley, A. G. and Martin, Roger L.; *Playing to Win, How Strategy Really Works*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass., 2013; the interpretation is from wckplanning.com.

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SIMPLE IS OK.

Strategies do not have to be elaborate, complex or difficult to understand. Simplicity actually has its virtues. This doesn't mean strategies are simple or easy to construct. Remember the harried apology – "I am sorry I did not have time to write a short letter." Concise strategic plans that are easy to understand and articulate are hard to construct.

Simple can be hard, but pounding out a statement that contains only the essence of the strategic approach is useful; and easy to understand by those who must implement it. As an example, the vastness of the Roman Empire had four strategic objectives to direct its actions.

A.G. Lafley and Roger L. Martin, building on the work of Michael Porter ask only five questions; although the answers may be more extensive.

*Michael Porter inspired A.G. Lafley and Roger L. Martin to write a book about strategy; namely, **Playing to Win, How Strategy Really Works** [Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass., 2013]. Lafley and Martin present strategy as "an integrated cascade of choices:*

- *"What are our winning aspirations?"*
- *"Where will we play?"*
- *"How will we win?"*
- *"What capabilities must be in place?"*
- *"What management systems are required?"*

Serious answers to these questions produce a strategy for defining and achieving the aspirations of the enterprise. The discussion in the book is very instructive and provides a clear picture of what strategy is all about.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE'S STRATEGIC PLAN

The Roman Empire, including the Republic, reigned for more than 500 years [100 BC. to 483 AD.] during a tumultuous time for human civilization. The Romans relied on four elements of action to organize for both survival and expansion.

- **Diplomacy** – The skills and energy of their diplomatic corps is renowned. Their diplomacy relied on the threat of armed intervention; a threat that was rarely used. Diplomacy also promoted trade and created the magnetic system for Rome to ingest the world's riches.
- **Direct Force** – Armed intervention was always an option. By occasionally demonstrating its power, armed intervention was not often needed.
- **Roads** – Roman roads are legendary. The Army could rapidly travel far and wide and demonstrate the presence of force without its actual engagement. The road network also facilitated trade and cultural integration which greatly ameliorated discontent and potential uprisings.
- **Fixed Infrastructure and Forts** – The system of fortifications, roads and walls established the permanent presence of Rome and the Roman Legions throughout the Empire. It also kept the Army occupied and reduced the discontent that springs from idleness.

Source: *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third*, Edward N. Luttwak, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976.

"Having lost sight of our objective, we re-doubled our efforts" Anonymous

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ANALYTICAL TOOLS.

Environmental or Community Scan.

Before problems can be addressed, they must be understood. Time spent plumbing the depths of community issues and capacities will enable a better understanding of the needs to be addressed through strategic and action plans.

- **The Scan.** A city must understand its residents, its businesses, their need for public goods and services and their capacity to support responsive community programs. A city must also understand its business model; management needs to know where the money comes from and what influences its growth.
 - More and more households have either single heads of the household, or they are singles. The city's housing stock and business model must get beyond the nuclear family prototype.
 - Gas tax rates are fixed, consumption is declining; where will future revenues come from for transportation?
 - Environmental and health issues are growing in importance.
 - Economic constraints persist as family incomes continue to stagnate.
 - Public goods and services are increasingly needed by people less willing or able to pay for them.
- **Breadth and Depth.** Strategies are comprehensive, long-range and forward-thinking; they consider the full range of internal and external factors that influence and affect the enterprise. The key is to deeply understand the range of issues facing the city, its residents and businesses; then to design an effective strategy.
- **Strategic Objectives.** Strategic objectives add depth and focus to the strategy with specific areas of interest; but they are still ideas, they cannot be directly implemented. Strategic objectives help articulate broad strategies and translate the strategy into actions.
- **Examples.**
 - A city government may want to be "green". It might decide to bring all departments along at the same pace, or to first target a few departments for complete conversion.
 - To increase community prosperity, the city may want to recruit new industry, help existing businesses expand or foster new business start-ups; or all of the above, resources willing.
- **"All of the above"** may be the desired choice; however, actions are usually limited by resources. Strategy is an organized, vision-driven process for allocating limited resources. The benefit of a strategy, especially one that has broad support, is that it serves as a framework for choosing the "best" path, measuring the results and continuing to move ahead.
- **The Test.** A good strategy considers all the important issues, internal and external, and finds action plans designed to achieve the established vision. The performance measurement system, designed at the outset, is the test to use to evaluate the effectiveness of the action in achieving the vision. If the action plan outcomes cannot be directly connected to the vision, something is wrong.

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SWOT Analysis.

There are many ways to develop a strategy for an enterprise, be it a business, municipality or institution. The “SWOT” analysis of analyzing Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats is a useful tool for strategic planning. Strengths and weaknesses form the internal evaluation part of the analysis. Opportunities and threats look outside the enterprise to examine the eco-system within which the enterprise operates.

A SWOT Analysis can help answer important questions that will lead to an approach that includes a vision-driven strategy and then a strategic-driven action plan.

- **Example** – If the consensus vision is to be a larger city, should the territory be enlarged through annexation or should the current boundaries be intensified with quality enhancements to the current city? Or both?
- **Example** – If one’s vision is to work on interesting assignments in your area of expertise, is it more effective to be in a small, boutique specialty practice or to be a subject-matter specialist within a large, multi-disciplinary firm?
- **Example** – To fund the services and facilities the city residents want in their park system, should revenues come from general taxation or user fees?
- **Example** – To be a pleasant and prosperous place to live, should a city pursue an economic development approach to attract large businesses from outside the city or support smaller local businesses to improve their growth opportunities?

Example – An economic development strategy for a city to realize its vision of being a sustainable place that is pleasant and prosperous could include three strategic objectives with supporting action plans:

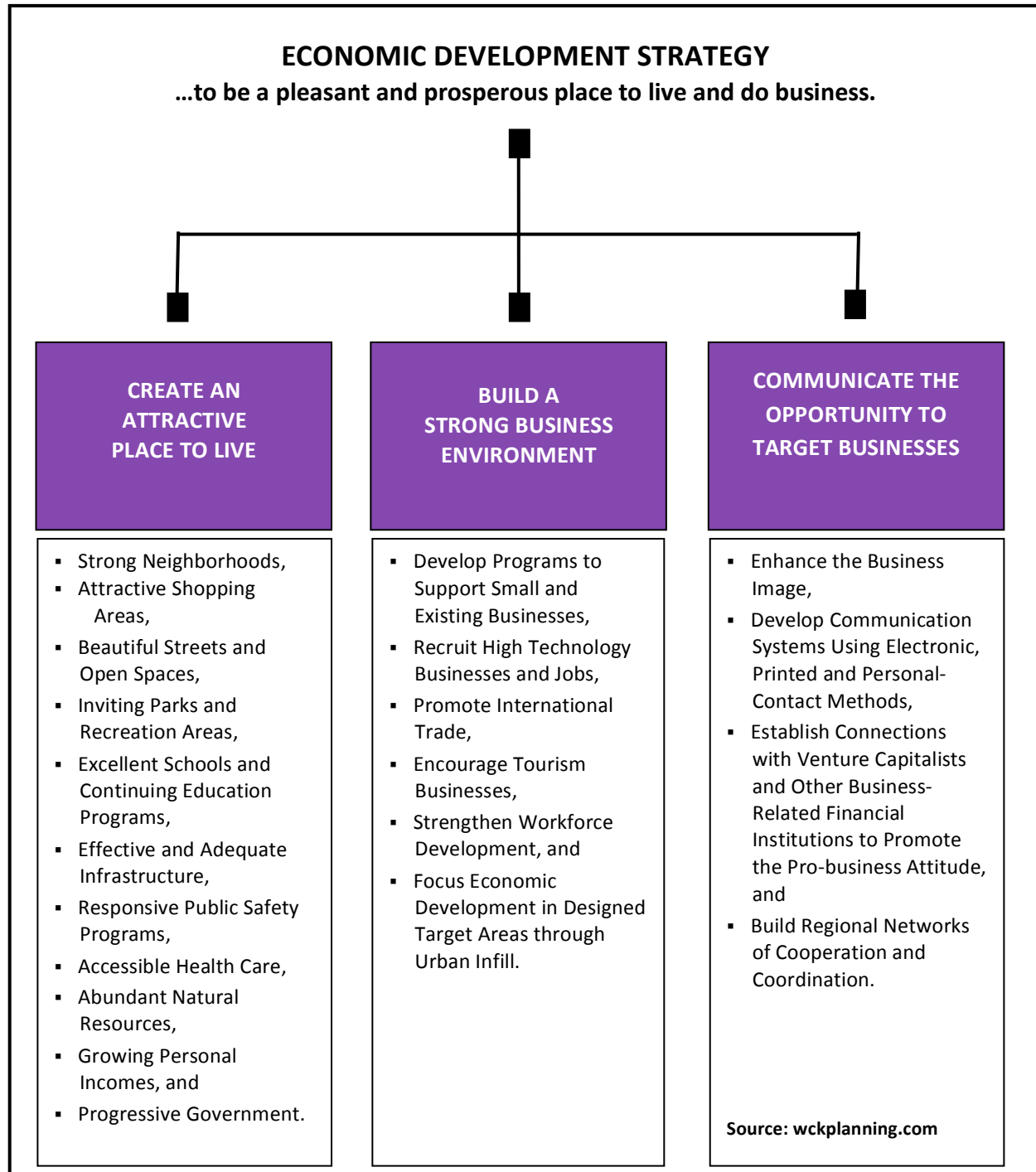
- Create an attractive place for people to live as an asset for executives to re-locate their businesses and recruit talented employees.
- Build a strong business environment that values businesses and helps them thrive.
- Communicate the opportunity for business success offered by the town to existing and new businesses.

Reverse Engineering.

Reverse engineering can be viewed as the “contrarians’ approach to strategic planning. Reverse engineering is an instructive exercise to determine if the action plans are linked to the vision, linked forward or backward. It enables entering the system at any point.

- For example, start with an action plan, any plan, and work backward to see if its outcome advances the desired vision. If not, question the action plan, make changes accordingly.
- The process can start at the end, with the performance measurement system. What do you want to use as a measure of success? Family incomes? Starting at this outcome, what determines family incomes? Where does that trail of thought lead? At the end of the trail must be jobs, business recruitment and building a strong, attractive city. Follow the thread backwards.

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A HYPOTHETICAL STRATEGY TO CREATE A CHARACTER TOWN.

Vision. The city's vision, hypothetically, is to be a pleasant and prosperous place to live and do business.

Strategy. The overall strategy is to direct all economic, social and physical forces and assets of the city to drive prosperity and pleasantness. The city's overall strategy includes five Strategic Objectives:

- Promote pleasantness by using physical assets and civic attitudes to create social capital.
- Pursuit of prosperity by being a pleasant place for employers to live, grow their business, retain and recruit talent.
- Provision of physical infrastructure to enhance social capital and support economic development.
- Preservation of natural resources and amenities to create a pleasant and efficient living environment.
- Plan all actions to drive programs, policies, budgets and all activities to enhance the city's vision.

Action Plans. Initiate studies, plans, programs and budgets to:

- **First, build strong neighborhoods.** The places where people live form the foundational element of the community. Neighborhoods throughout the city must have a good mix of housing types and prices with safe and convenient access to neighborhood shopping, schools and parks. The old axiom is true - the city is no stronger than its weakest neighborhood.

- **Second, focus on education.** Quality schools in every neighborhood are the starting point. Libraries, museums, galleries and recreation areas are important educational assets.
- **Third, acknowledge and enhance mixed-use centers of activity, "main streets" and village centers.** Successful downtowns and village centers have a healthy mix of integrated uses, including residences, a good building stock with two to four story buildings, multi-modes of mobility and amenities that facilitate formal and informal community gatherings. A successful downtown becomes an important element in the city's financial model.
- **Fourth, energize multi-use development corridors.** Development corridors, blighted or not, are economic engines that create sales and property tax revenues for the city, as well as jobs and family incomes.
 - Maximize their economic productivity by helping commercial strips transform themselves into vibrant urban corridors.
 - Whether individual sites are used for commercial, office, residential or civic along a busy corridor doesn't matter if properly buffered, connected and served through proper infrastructure and development standards. Like downtowns, successful development corridors create jobs, personal income, property taxes and user fees that support the city.
 - Enable intensification with master parking and stormwater systems that enable infill and redevelopment.

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- ***Fifth, solidify, modernize and maintain urban infrastructure.*** Infrastructure includes the systems that support residential and economic life in the city. Physical improvements, social services and economic development are essential infrastructure. Services like utilities, access, stormwater, law enforcement, health care, social services, education and recreation are necessary to make collective living in an urban environment work. Comprehensive, long-range financial planning is the process to best direct the sources and uses of funds.
- ***Sixth, systematize the city's open spaces.*** Organize and connect upland and wetland preservation areas, school grounds, parks, stormwater ponds and waterways, lakefronts, streets and parking lots with trails and pathways. Every piece of the urban open space system should be an active or passive recreation area, a visual amenity and a functional piece of the city's open space system.
- ***Seventh, simplify the entitlement system and demand more from development with vision-driven standards.***
 - Zoning deals with use.
 - The use in neighborhoods is straight-forward. There are only two or three categories needed.
 - Downtowns and other centers of activity have a mix of uses; development corridor property owners should be entitled to multiple uses. Only one zoning category is necessary with the emphasis on intensified mixed-use infill and redevelopment.
 - Development Standards provide density, intensity, buffer, setback, parking and stormwater standards sensitive to on-site functions and the impacts on adjacent properties.
 - Design Guidelines reflect the city's values regarding acceptable aesthetics, tastes and styles in development.
- ***Eighth, institutionalize a system for transparently measuring performance.***
 - Evaluating and measuring performance against vision-driven strategic objectives is the surest way to progress. The goal is timely feedback and critique that rises above punishment to the loftier, more effective purposes that foster education and innovation. The sooner problems or disturbing trends are discovered, the sooner they can be fixed; the sooner good news is known, the sooner opportunities can be leverage.
 - Performance evaluations used strictly for punitive purposes are short-sighted beyond comprehension. Evaluations that lead to learning, improvements and innovation are the foundation of a successful metric system for the enterprise.
- ***Ninth, diversify all aspects of community life.*** A wide variety of housing types, a multiplicity of travel modes, a diversity of landscapes and plants, multiple sources of energy and water, beauty in all things and an economic base with several strong industries creates a sustainable and interesting social, economic and physical setting for the city.

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Vision-Driven Actions. Connections and paths are important. Small decisions need to be visibly linked to broader strategies. Make it easy for everyone in the organization and the community to understand the rationale behind decisions through open discussions and stated connections between the community-driven vision, the vision-driven strategy and the strategy-driven action plans.

CONCLUSIONS.

The structure of a collaborative vision-driven strategic planning process could unfold as follows:

- **Vision.** Your vision is [your dream of what you want the organization or the city to be](#). The vision is further articulated through the enterprise's mission and values. The Vision-Driven Strategic Plan, with the starkness of a simple direct strategy supported by strategic objectives, forms the foundation for the long-range, comprehensive plan that will help make the dream happen.
 - **Mission**, articulated by a mission statement, serves as the stake in the ground defining what "assignment" the enterprise has accepted in order to achieve the vision.
- **Values** are trickier and overlay all aspects of the enterprise from Vision and Mission through Strategy to Actions. Values guide organizational behavior and the actions acceptable to be used to achieve the vision. Values must permeate the enterprise to ensure that everyone has the same civic value system, effectively supported and encouraged by ownership and management.
- **Strategy.** Essentially, **strategy** is the "thinking" aspect of planning a change, organizing a plan or planning an attack. Strategy responds to the aspirations of the vision with a path that connects the vision to the many actions, plans, budgets and regulations of the city. Strategy can be a simple statement or a complex multi-layered plan; but, at the end of the day, it needs to turn vision into action.
- **Strategic Objectives** provide focus for the strategy. These objectives provide a more tangible idea about what needs to be done; they simplify the structure of the plan, always a virtue. Objectives can be issue-based, geographically-based or program-based. In each case, Strategic Objectives drive the Action Plans.
- **Action Plans.** [Every action, or tactic, must suit the strategy and the strategic objective.](#) Strategy is the connection between an action and the established vision. If the connection cannot be seen, then the connection needs to be better established; or the action may not be appropriate or necessary and, therefore, needs to be rethought.
- **Metrics** are an essential part of the learning process. They may also cause a re-evaluation of vision, strategy or action plans. Evaluation systems can be abused and become punitive; but the useful systems of successful cities are learning oriented feedback processes that enable people to learn, grow and feel free to innovate.

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Bill Kercher, AICP, LEED®AP, Orlando,
 Editor, TheAmericanCity.org
www.wckplanning.com

AFTER NOTE: DEFINITIONS

A word about language; much time is wasted defining and debating terms like aspiration, goals, objectives, strategy, mission, vision, values, tactics, actions and metrics. At the end of the day, what matters is that there are three kinds of words: 1) those that define the aspiration; 2) those that reflect the strategy to achieve the aspiration; and 3) those that connote actions to implement the strategy. Every group working on strategy just needs to decide what their words mean and move on. A set of words has been chosen for this discussion: vision, strategies and actions; pick your own and stick to them. Consistency rather than Etymological purity is what matters when communicating within and outside city hall.