

Annual and Strategic Planning Yes, You Can!

The Latin phrase *quo vadimus* is loosely translated as “where are we going?” It is a question that local officials often ask themselves, but because of the day-to-day demands of running a city or a town, those same local officials rarely get a chance to spend a lot of time thinking about the answer.

Strategic planning is one method that some municipal officials have used in Vermont and nationally to answer *quo vadimus* and, more importantly, improve the level of service they offer their citizens. It is a way for a municipality to look at its present and future through the wide-angled lenses of analysis, goal-setting, and discussion.

“It’s a chance to answer the questions of where are we going and how do we get there?” said Dominic Cloud, director of VLCT’s Municipal Assistance Center.

Generally, strategic plans are written to cover a five-year span. It is also common for the strategic plan to undergo an annual review, allowing the municipality to make any necessary modifications, deletions, or additions. Annual plans can then be culled from the strategic plan to reflect the goals and action items needed in the current year to achieve the strategic plan’s long-term goals and objectives.

A strategic plan serves as an umbrella under which the myriad planning efforts a municipality already engages in (the town plan, land-use planning, capital budgeting, highway maintenance plans, and so on) can be unified into a single concerted effort used to guide policy and spending decisions.

If the process sounds familiar, it is because it is analogous to the capital planning and budgeting process that many municipalities already engage in – the capital improvement program (CIP) is created with a five-year period as its focus, and the capital budget is then drawn annually from the CIP.

How to Develop a Strategic Plan

While the final document is important, the process involved to create a strategic plan is equally as important, if not more so. The planning process is a valuable tool that provides an opportunity for elected officials, staff, citizens, and other stakeholders to engage in open conversations about what is working, what is not, and what is next.

When first looking to develop a strategic plan, many municipalities start with a tool called the “SWOT” analysis. SWOT is an acronym for “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.” Focusing on each of those four categories, participants name a variety of things about the municipality that fit within them. For example, a community’s rural nature and scenic beauty may be listed as both a strength and an opportunity.

When VLCT's Municipal Assistance Center helped the Morrisville Water and Light Department create its strategic plan, the process utilized the SWOT analysis to establish the goals and action items that eventually became the guts of the plan. All analysis is contingent upon discussion, and, as such, it provides a forum where those involved can talk about their versions of and visions for the town or city (past, present, and future) in an attempt to reach consensus on that final set of goals that will become the strategic plan.

The Morrisville Water and Light Department's strategic plan describes the goals contained within as, "broad, long-term directives that establish the overall direction of the organization; goals establish what we will pursue." In total, the strategic plan sets out seven goals (and the corresponding objectives and strategies for each) for the period spanning 2005 through 2010. One example is: "Continually upgrade the infrastructure of all systems in order to maintain the value of our assets and ensure the safety of the public and employees."

The action items or objectives (i.e., the ways the goal may be achieved) that follow include the development and implementation of capital plan documents, utilization of those capital plans when preparing budgets, and developing a database to use for mapping and reporting data on outages.

Morrisville Water and Light's strategic plan – from conception to completion – took nearly a year and involved multiple three-hour work sessions to come up with the raw material that eventually became the plan. To review this plan in its entirety, visit the Morrisville Water and Light Department's Web site at: <http://www.mwlv.com/>.

Step-by-Step Guide

A municipality looking to create and implement its own strategic plan may follow a sample process that includes the following steps:

1) Organization. This is where the strategic planning process begins. A municipality may start by focusing on smaller goals and objectives and annual plans before diving into a strategic planning process that looks at five years at a time. The legislative body should also establish some of the mechanics of how the process will work: an estimated schedule, whether or not they will seek the help of an outside professional, identifying and inviting citizens and other stakeholders (non-profit or local advocacy organizations, for example) to participate, and so on. Opening up the process to include all interested participants is a great way to coalesce community support for the plan and the goals established in it.

2) Analysis. The municipality may choose to start with a preliminary survey, the purpose of which is to set the stage for the kind of critical thinking that will be employed later on, and to get those involved thinking about the outcomes of this process. A sample survey question could be: "What is the mission of local government in your town?" The SWOT analysis may also be employed during this phase to determine where the parties involved

feel the municipality stands, where it needs to go, and what resources may be available to help.

3) Goal Setting. The byproducts of the analysis and discussions can then be distilled into a set of broad goals. For example: “Goal #1 – Maintain and improve the level of service provided to citizens in an efficient and fiscally responsible manner.”

4) Strategies/Action Items. The goals are then further refined to come up with more specific tasks or directions needed to achieve the plan’s goals. Using the goal from number three above, an action item might be: “Establish a five-year highway maintenance program for use in the budget process each year.”

5) Written Plan. Everything is put into writing, reviewed again, and then adopted by the legislative body. Though the adoption of the plan is largely ceremonial, it signals the municipality’s commitment to it.

6) Annual review. Each year the plan is updated, edited, and amended to reflect changing goals, development patterns, representation, economic realities, and so on.

The value of strategic planning is that it allows a municipality not only the opportunity to establish a vision for its future, but also to map the course it will take to get there.

If you would like to explore strategic planning in more detail or are seeking assistance with your plan, contact Dominic Cloud at VLCT’s Municipal Assistance Center at 800/649-7915 or dcloud@vlct.org.

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