The Use of "Visioning" in the Preservation of Small Town Character

by

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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

The unique and attractive character of small towns across the country is being threatened by growth and development that is inconsistent with the existing built environment. Planners in these communities can combat this trend and slow the loss of character by utilizing planning tools that include long-range visioning and creative zoning and permitting techniques that encourage developers to examine and complement the existing formal characteristics.

This thesis will examine the situation of Waconia, Minnesota – a typical rural community facing the pressures of development. It asks the questions "Why does Waconia allow development of a form that appears to be inconsistent with the small town character it wants to preserve?" and "What alternatives should Waconia pursue that might lead to better outcomes?" In order to answer these questions, this thesis will first explore some of the common physical characteristics of American small towns and identify attributes that seem to play an important role in contributing to the atmosphere and quality of these communities. It will also investigate the changes many of these towns are undergoing and will discuss how the forces behind them pose potential threats to their character. A brief history of Waconia will then be examined, highlighting the changes in form it has undergone and how these changes are affecting its small town character. The lack of a greater vision for Waconia's future is one explanation for why the community has allowed these changes to occur.

Inclusive planning processes and carefully crafted land use regulations can combat the deterioration of the physical qualities of these small towns. The visioning process will be held up as a potential tool for incorporating critical formal elements into a greater plan for these growing towns. In order to evaluate how communities might respond to the introduction of a visioning process of this kind, a list of important qualities that affect the outcome will be assembled. Finally, a simulation of a visioning process will show the critical elements and potential advantages of the process for Waconia and other small towns facing growth pressures.

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INTRODUCTION

Across the country, the unique and attractive character of small towns is being threatened. The familiar image of Main Street America, with its café, post office, and hardware store a short walk from quiet neighborhoods of well-kept single-family homes and streets lined with tall, arching shade trees, is giving way to new stretches of sprawling highway strip development and meandering cul-de-sacs that offer visitors monotonous views of garage-dominated facades. These changes are the result of a number of factors, including society's increasing dependence on the automobile, flight from both the perceived urban ills of the nation's larger cities and the “placelessness” of the post-war suburbs, and the lack of preparation by town officials to deal with this continuing migration. Planners in these communities can combat this trend and slow the loss of small town character by utilizing planning tools that include long-range visioning and creative zoning and permitting techniques that encourage developers to examine the characteristics of the existing built environment and to strive to match or complement its form.

This thesis will examine the situation of Waconia, Minnesota – a typical rural community currently facing the pressures of development. It asks the questions “Why does Waconia allow development of a form that appears to be inconsistent with the small town character it wants to preserve?” and “What alternatives should Waconia pursue that might lead to better outcomes?” In order to answer these questions, this thesis will first explore some of the common physical characteristics of American small towns and identify attributes that seem to play an important role in contributing to the preferred atmosphere and quality of these communities. It will also investigate the changes many of these towns are undergoing and will discuss how the forces behind these changes pose potential threats to their character. A brief history of Waconia will
then be examined, highlighting the changes in form it has undergone and how these changes are affecting its small town character. The lack of a greater vision for Waconia's future is one explanation for why the community has allowed these changes to occur.

Inclusive planning processes and carefully crafted land use regulations can combat the deterioration of the physical qualities of these small towns. As a way of more clearly identifying the specific land use policies and regulations that may prove effective, this thesis will examine a number of case studies from small towns that have faced and have attempted to deal with these issues. This investigation will explore the relationships between their planning processes, the contents of their land use regulations, and the resulting urban form, and will highlight those tools and techniques that seem to best maintain important physical qualities and therefore to help preserve the character of these places. The visioning process will be held up as a potential tool for incorporating critical formal elements into a greater plan for these growing towns. In order to evaluate how communities might respond to the introduction of a visioning process, a list of important qualities that influence the outcome will be assembled. One important factor is the level of “social capital” that exists in the community prior to the commencement of the process.

For Waconia, new policies and regulations that may lead to more desirable development that is consistent with the character of the community will be recommended. These suggestions include:

- Undertaking a community visioning process that utilizes several techniques:
  - The creation of a resident task force to guide the planning process;
  - Heavy advertisement through the local media;
  - Broad-based support for finances and other needed resources;
  - Inclusion of a variety of parties and interests;
  - Reliance on a community-wide celebration to generate interest;
  - Use of discovery exercises to help residents understand the elements of character in their own neighborhoods;
  - Production of a summary document that is distributed to residents and focuses future discussions regarding development; and
  - Response to this process with regulatory actions that promote small town character as growth continues to occur.
Preserving Waconia's character in the short-run through immediate actions. Opportunities to accomplish this include:

- Monitoring downtown redevelopment;
- Carefully examining highway development;
- Zoning for neighborhoods; and
- Protecting cultural and rural icons.

Finally, this thesis will "simulate" a visioning process in Waconia to demonstrate how it could be implemented and the potential advantages it could offer. These findings will provide additional insights into the value of the visioning process and help towns considering the use of such a process to evaluate their communities and to anticipate its success.
The country town is one of the great American institutions; perhaps the greatest, in the sense that it has had . . . a greater part than any other in shaping public sentiment and giving character to American culture.

~Thorstein Veblen, The Country Town

**ONE: THE SMALL TOWN**

The romantic image of the American small town, perpetuated in film, print, and narrative, is both widespread and consistent. Most are familiar with the idyllic elements of George Bailey's community of Bedford Falls in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, the frontier town of Missoula, Montana, in the book *A River Runs Through It*, or the exploits of the simple residents of the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, as conveyed by Garrison Keillor in his weekly anecdotes. The shape, scale, and patterns of development represented in these romanticized communities were established early on in the history of their real-life counterparts, and these influences are still evident. Randall Arendt, in describing the principal characteristics of today's traditional small towns in his book *Rural by Design*, includes the following features:

- compactness and tighter form;
- medium density (somewhere in-between that of cities and sprawling postwar suburbs);
- “downtown” centers with street-edge buildings, mixed uses, gathering places, public buildings, parks, and other open spaces;
- commercial premises meeting everyday needs (grocery, newsagent, drugstore, hardware, etc.);
- residential neighborhoods close to the town center, sometimes with house lots abutting commercial properties;
- civic open spaces within, and rural open spaces at edges;
- pedestrian-friendly but also auto-accessible;
- streets scaled for typical uses (rather than being oversized and overengineered to accommodate “worst-case scenarios”); and
- incremental growth outward from core.¹

Taken together, these attributes can be viewed as necessary components that have evolved to form one cohesive urban system. Throughout this paper, *compact form* will be used to loosely describe the pattern of development commonly found in small towns which consists of a commercial center supporting a variety of uses, residential structures on smaller lots surrounding this center, and a very clear transition from “urban” to “rural” space at its periphery. The influence of the concentrated development of these communities can be seen in the rich natural and agricultural open spaces that frequently surround them, as well as the valued social connections that often exist between the residents. The fact that small towns are typically compact relative to their surroundings and to traditional suburban development make them easily distinguishable from the undeveloped farms and woodlands that frame them. Additionally, the density, mix, and arrangement of land uses encourage pedestrian movement and increase social interaction and recognition at everyday locations such as hardware stores, drug stores, and eating establishments.²

All types of urban development are defined by certain common characteristics that are related to their form. This is also true for the small town. The compact form of these communities – the shape, scale, and density of the built environment – results in patterns of development that affect some of the less tangible aspects of everyday life. Whether it is the continuous facade of small specialty stores lining Main Street or front porches shaded by rows of tall street trees, these characteristics contribute to the unique atmosphere or “feel” of small towns. While it would be ignorant to claim that the character of these places is solely a function of their spatial arrangement, at the same time it is difficult to dismiss the role that their form plays, along with many other components, in its realization. This paper argues that this character can be preserved, at least in part, by maintaining the essential formal elements of these small towns.

Although there are a number of characteristics that may stem from the compact form of the traditional small town, four aspects that seem to be in common across many communities will be examined here. Generally, small towns with compact form are *walkable*, they have a *strong town center*, there are high levels of *social interaction*, and there is an important *connection to nature*. Each of these characteristics will now be explored further.

**Walkability**

Towns that are walkable not so large that residents need to get into their cars to complete a majority of their daily activities, but rather they are compact enough to allow individuals to comfortably walk to many of their usual local destinations. Walkability is not only measured by the size of the town, but also by the amenities the town provides for its pedestrians. Sidewalks, shade trees, benches, parks, and public plazas all make the experience of walking about town more enjoyable, and their presence helps encourage residents to take advantage of the outdoors.

The notion of compact form plays a large role in determining the walkability of a community. Michael Southworth, in an article published in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, determined that the actual distance people in the United States will walk to carry out daily activities is fairly limited. One study “found that 70 percent of Americans will walk 500 feet for daily errands and that 40 percent will walk 1/5 mile; only 10 percent will walk 1/2 mile.”3 A second study confirmed that the distance for typical trips was only between 400 and 1,200 feet – about a five minute walk. To encourage pedestrianism, then, it is important that many services, retail and institutional uses, and even jobs be within walking distance of homes. Many small towns are walkable because they have kept the highest density of residences close to the urban core or because outward growth has been limited, thereby restricting the total size of the community and keeping the essential destinations within walking distance.

The second aspect of walkability is the physical experience, which is influenced by a wide range of factors such as the width of the street, the number of shade trees, the lighting, the presence of trash receptacles, and even the likelihood that there will be interaction with others also out walking. Anton Nelessen has spent years analyzing the design of small communities and has presented his findings regarding the planning of these places in a book entitled *Visions for a New American Dream*. In it, he notes the importance of pedestrianism and includes it in his Ten Basic Design Principles for small communities. Nelessen's work with numerous citizen groups, as well as his personal observations, suggest that towns that have good pedestrian use share common physical characteristics:

- a complete network of pedestrian walkways;
- continuity in tree placement, parkway width, building facades, etc.;
- textured walking surfaces;
- sidewalk widths appropriate for the volume of users;
- good proportion of width to height of the pedestrian realm;

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- a feeling of security from moving traffic;
- carefully defined edges (both along street and along residential/commercial buildings);
- pedestrian scale lighting and street furniture;
- attractive signs; and
- bicycle paths.  

Good “walkable” design provides opportunities for fine-grained, varied, and sociable experiences. Beyond the enjoyment that people seem to get from walking in these pedestrian-friendly environments, there are other benefits that may accrue to walkable communities:

While the automobile confers greater freedom in going longer distances, it isolates people. Walking encourages community involvement and promotes a sense of camaraderie. Furthermore, by enabling residents to walk to some or many of their daily needs, car trips can be greatly reduced within and between communities. This has a significant positive impact on air pollution and on the maintenance of paved surfaces. Additionally, when retail shops and services are located within walking distances of home, the need for parking can be greatly reduced. 

**Strong Town Center**

A second characteristic of towns with compact form is the presence of a strong town center. Physically, the centers of many small towns are very similar. Commercial uses are positioned on relatively small lots – deeper than they are wide. The absence of large parking lots in front of these stores allows for an unbroken facade along the street, often built right up to the sidewalk or separated from it only with some decorative landscaping. A mixture of uses in the town center has the benefit of drawing to it many different people looking for a variety of experiences. Some are attracted to food, either in grocery stores or in restaurants and cafés; some to entertainment; some visit the town center to patronize small businesses such as hardware stores and pharmacies; some to make use of the professional offices of lawyers or dentists. Providing further activity throughout the day are housing units sitting above the stores, as well as single-family homes surrounding the town center, both of which contribute to the vitality of the town center as the residents pass through the downtown as they come and go.

Again, there are a number of design factors that have played a crucial role in shaping these town centers. For many small towns, the downtown provides a central place in the community through which much of the local activity flows. This is a result of the physical reality of being a focal point (i.e., a square, green, plaza, or crossroads) and because of the wide variety

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5 Nelessen, 156.
in the uses that are located there (including retail, service, civic, social, office, and open space). The design of the traditional downtown has evolved to reflect this. Parking located on-street or in the rear encourages pedestrian activity. Older architectural details—large display windows, awnings, street furniture, hanging signs, and more—preserve the traditional Main Street look. Buildings here are built at a larger scale and with a higher density; there is a continuous frontage of shops and windows facing the street, and entrances open up directly onto the sidewalk. These buildings also represent the heritage of the community. Being some of the oldest buildings in town, the structures in the downtown often hold a significance to the public that extends beyond their physical presence and that adds to the image of the town.

**Social Interaction**

Equally, if not more important for those seeking to move to small towns are the social connections and the sense of community perceived to exist in these settings. Although sometimes resented for the nosy and gossip-oriented image it conjures up, the relationships within these close-knit neighborhoods are evident from familiar greetings on the street, high levels of participation in church-sponsored activities or other civic groups, and displays of financial and emotional support when bad luck strikes a member of the community. Many observers have hypothesized that these social characteristics are partially the result of the greater amount of pedestrian traffic stemming from a combination of compact development and mixed uses in the downtown area—the elements of walkability and a strong town center already described. Houston notes this phenomenon, and argues that it may hinge on the combination of “good origins and good destinations.” Having a blend of residential and non-residential uses in a downtown core allows residents to walk to work, to the library, to the corner store, and back home. The increased probability of social interaction when traveling on foot, along with the familiarity resulting from repeated visits to local business, allows residents to establish a rapport with others in the community.

The informal public places where these types of social interactions take place have been described as “third places” by sociologist and author Ray Oldenburg—the “first place” is the home and the “second place” is the work setting. The third place is “a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.” Along with the English pub,

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6 Houston, 17.
7 Houston, 21.
the French café, and the classic coffeehouse, Oldenburg includes the stretch of Main Street as an important third place. All of these settings have unique qualities that make them attractive, if not essential, to those who use them. A third place, Oldenburg writes, is neutral ground that allows people to come and go as they please and where nobody is required to play host. It is a leveler; that is, "it is accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion." Conversation serves as the main activity, and a group of regular customers ensures that visitors will be enthusiastically greeted and engaged in this exchange. The fact that third places are both accessible and accommodating gives them an atmosphere of comfort and support that approaches that of a good home.

On Main Street the café, lodge, courthouse square, post office, and drug store—with its magazine and newspaper stand, its ticket office for buses, its soda fountain, and its wide outdoor steps—all have served as legitimate third places in small towns. In fact, this neighborly form of interaction was quite common in the origins of small town society as can be seen in the prevalence of front porches that allowed residents to strike up conversations with people passing by.

Today, these types of places still exist and are highly valued, although the setting may have moved from the old drug store to the new coffee shop. In small towns, the level of social interaction is strengthened by pedestrian-friendly design and strong centers that draw people into one general location and out of their cars. This more intimate setting encourages people to get to know one another. Once a connection is established, residents of these communities enjoy the experience of being able to enter a store and to come upon someone they know or to have the check-out clerk call them by name. It is these sorts of encounters that give small towns their "friendly" reputations.

Connection to Nature

Compact development also affects the form of traditional small towns in more subtle ways. Because smaller residential lots surround the town center, the familiar sprawl associated with the suburbs does not take place. As a result, less land is consumed as the town grows and large tracts of rural open space are preserved at the periphery. These spaces may be used as playing fields, for parks or wildlife reserves, or, more commonly, for agricultural uses. Many communities were founded along important natural resources; lakes, rivers, and woodlands are

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9 Oldenburg, 24.
10 Oldenburg, 22–42.
celebrated with their designation as parks, commons, or other open spaces within the town. These neighborhood open spaces are usually within walking distance of most homes and provide a place for residents to gather to talk, to exercise their pets, or to play with their children.

The rural open spaces surrounding the small town are valued in numerous ways: they provide a clear distinction between city and country, they allow immediate access to nearby natural settings, and they protect important cultural resources. In a guide produced to demonstrate how communities can protect and preserve their rural countryside, Samuel Stokes writes, “The farms and natural areas that traditionally surrounded towns created sharp edges between town and country and enhanced our appreciation of both. The sight of a town’s lights from a nearby field or glimpses of planted fields through a village street not only provide visual links between town and country, but also reinforce the strong social, cultural, and economic ties between a rural settlement and its outlying areas.”12 Perhaps most valuable to the residents of small towns are the presence of rural historic and cultural resources. These structures encompass “farmsteads, mills, one-room schoolhouses, covered bridges, rural churches . . . general stores, Grange halls, the trails used by pioneers, early gas stations, and diners.”13 Elements such as these help create a sense of “place” in small towns, making them attractive to people trying to escape the repetitive landscape of suburban strip development with its identical fast-food restaurants and big box retail. By relocating to a community with a rich and often romanticized history, they feel connected to a “rural way of life” that evokes “familiar and comforting associations of family and community.”14

IMPACTS OF GROWTH

It is these very characteristics, along with other social, environmental, and economic factors, that make small towns so attractive and that have encouraged a new migration to them. A 1987 study by the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University showed that 50% of those surveyed described living in a small town as “very desirable,” compared to 22% who said the same of new suburbs and only 10% who chose the city.15 Polls show that people would prefer to live in small towns over many other locations for reasons that include a proximity to

13 Stokes, 42.
14 Stokes, 42.
15 Houstoun, 15.
nature, freedom from urban problems, stability, and a sense of community. An opportunity to escape from the noise, traffic, crime, and high costs of the city, as well as the perceived monotony of the suburbs, has made rural communities more attractive. As a result, over the past decade two million more people have moved from metropolitan areas to rural communities than have moved from small towns into the big city. New advances in technology, such as the Internet, e-mail, fax machines, and overnight express delivery, have allowed many families to move their jobs, and themselves, to the countryside. Seventy five percent of the nation's rural counties are now growing.

Author Terry Pindell has studied the most recent migration of people from the large cities and suburbs of the United States to the communities he refers to as 'good places to live.' During a three-year exploration of the places that have become popular with this transient population, he observed and documented the characteristics of both the places that people left behind and the locations where they settled. His summary of the four characteristics of the 'good places' might easily describe the small towns discussed above. The first discovery was that today's urban refugees are looking for communities that have good gathering places—the same 'third places' described by Oldenburg. Second, they are attempting to escape from the auto-dominated neighborhoods of today's suburbs and are searching for pedestrian-friendly communities that have housing close to the urban center and allow for a minimum reliance on the car. Third, they appreciate the natural world and value urban areas with rural and wilderness country just beyond the city limits. Finally, this group has rejected the placelessness of the suburbs and is seeking sites that bear “little resemblance to Anyplace, U.S.A. The roots of Someplace, U.S.A., might be local geography, history, politics, economics, or demographics. But its flowering in the face of the national winds of homogenization and thoughtless development depended on a strong community sense of identity and local pride . . .”

Unfortunately, the growth caused by the migration of people drawn to small towns is threatening the very characteristics that helped make these places so attractive initially. The increased populations of these communities necessarily lead to changes in the size and shape of towns through the resulting need for the construction of more homes and, typically, more commercial uses to serve the new residents. If the potential impacts from this growth are not

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18 Pooley, 54.
realized and planned for, the development that occurs will go beyond failing to preserve the character of these communities. It will actually aid in destroying them. Protection of these places can only occur once the qualities that define them are understood and the threats to their character examined.

The most obvious and widespread impact on small towns as they begin to grow is the loss of their peripheral open space as fields previously used for cultivation or for grazing are turned into residential subdivisions. Under much of the current zoning in the United States, homes being constructed in subdivisions are being built upon larger lots, often with minimum lot size requirements of \( \frac{1}{4} \) to one acre, than can be found in the rest of the existing residential areas. These large lots, coupled with rows of similarly styled homes and ringed with new wide streets, consume the open space surrounding the town and create the appearance of the suburban sprawl from which many residents are trying to escape. At the same time, the development of historically “open” space is often accompanied by the loss of icons of rural life, such as farmsteads, barns, stands of trees, and other rustic images. One wry comment on the proliferation of subdivisions circulated in planning circles points out that these developments are often named for the very natural features they replace (e.g., “Pinebrook” or “Aspen Commons”). Stokes discusses the range of important environmental resources that are threatened when rural countryside is over-developed, including water supplies, rivers, wetlands, flood plains, soil, forests, and rangeland, as well as wildlife and endangered species, farming and farmland, and scenic areas.

The land use regulations of these communities are also dictating the types of uses that can be established and where they can be located. In a wide number of towns, zoning districts separate residential and commercial uses and do not allow the two to mix. Accordingly, the pleasing and convenient combinations of residences and small stores often found in the town center cannot be replicated in the newer parts of town. Commercial uses are forced out of zoning districts designed for single-family homes and relegated to the sides of highways or other prominent routes in and out of town away from the town center. Here, these uses become oriented towards the automobile, with large parking lots surrounding the buildings and numerous curb cuts to allow easy access. They lose their walkability. Without sidewalks and the pedestrian-oriented design that makes the town center attractive, people increasingly rely on their cars as part of their daily routine. The result of this dispersion of homes and commercial uses is a decline in activity in the town center and increased expenses associated with the construction and maintenance of utilities for these sprawling developments.
A less tangible impact from this type of new growth, and one that has been debated recently, is the weakening of social connections resulting from many of the physical changes just described. This is the belief shared by many New Urbanists – planners, architects, and other design professionals who appreciate the formal elements of traditional cities and support a return to their incorporation into the design of today's communities. Although this movement in planning is often stereotyped through images of front porches, white picket fences, and gridded street patterns, part of what these traditionalists fault with modern development practice is the lack of connection between residents. In their eyes, the compact form of the small town encourages these types of connections since it provides places for people to gather, attractive outdoor spaces in which people can interact, and a variety of housing types to support many income ranges. The following anecdote of a couple migrating to a growing small town describes the frustration felt by many new residents who move to these places expecting to find a tight-knit community and high levels of social interaction:

Last summer they decided to retreat from Wilmington, buying an acre parcel in Sycamore Glen, a subdivision full of newcomers on what used to be a farm outside town. Mike and Ruth are designing a two-story brick house . . . but they're arguing about whether to put a front porch on the place. Ruth wants one. Mike doesn't, because their new subdivision has no sidewalks or street life.20

In light of these circumstances, what can be done to preserve the character of America's small towns? A guide published by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy suggests that community character is impacted by “the rate, amount, type, or location of growth” and that the deterioration of this character is a result of “the design, scale, and aesthetic quality of new development [that] is incompatible with existing development.”21 While it is impossible, and undesirable, to halt all growth in small towns, strategically crafting land use regulations to combat the threats of sprawling development will aid in the preservation of the character that is valued in traditional small towns. The remaining sections of this paper will explore these ideas by examining the situation of a typical American small town in Minnesota as it faces issues of growth and loss of character.

20 Pooley, 56.
We also observed quite a number of large buildings going up in town, and should judge that Waconia is prospering. Of the beauty of the Lake we can not praise too much, its fame has already gone abroad and any remarks of ours . . . would not do it justice.

~Chaska Valley Herald, September 22, 1866

## TWO: AN EVOLUTION OF FORM

The City of Waconia, Minnesota, is located approximately 30 miles southwest of Minneapolis in Carver County, just beyond the expanding ring of suburban development that has fueled much of the growth in the Twin Cities area [Figure 1]. Waconia, with a 1998 estimated population of 5,030, is surrounded by several small communities ranging in size of population from 525 to 3,343. The City is bounded on the north side by Lake Waconia – a 3,196 acre spring-fed lake that is the second largest in the seven county Twin Cities Metropolitan Area. The downtown commercial area, as well as much of the older housing stock, lies between the lake shore and State Trunk Highway 5, which cuts through the southern portion of the City as it passes through from the northeast to the southwest. County Road 10 approaches Waconia from the west side of the Lake, and exits to the southeast on its way to the County Seat in Chaska. Additionally, County Road 30 skirts the south shore of Lake Waconia. Much of the surrounding area outside of the City limits consists of farmland dotted with small lakes, ponds, and other wetlands. To the south of the city, a large hill is traversed by State Trunk Highway 284 that runs straight south. Waconia is still separated from the growing development of the Twin Cities area by a large tract of mainly agricultural land. The City has its own schools, hospital, public sewer and water, and fire protection.

What began as a traditional small settlement on the southern edge of the Lake grew over time into a tourist destination, a sub-regional center in the western Twin Cities Metropolitan Area, and finally, today, a designated free-standing growth area. Throughout this evolution,

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22 Victoria (population 3,343) to the west, St. Bonifacius (population 1,424) to the northeast, Watertown (population 2,586) and Mayer (population 525) to the northwest, Norwood Young America to the west (population 2,967), and Cologne (population 712) to the south. Twin Cities Metropolitan Council 1996 population estimates.
Figure 1: The Twin Cities Metropolitan Area, with Waconia and its surrounding communities.
Waconia's form has changed dramatically, with each new phase of annexation moving further from the compact form the City once possessed. With the potential for dramatic growth in the near future, the character of Waconia is at risk.

**Urban History**

The village of Waconia was first surveyed and platted in 1857 when a small number of German and Swedish settlers lived in the area. A map from the 1898 Carver County Plat Book shows Waconia was laid out in typical small town fashion [Figure 2]. At that time, the village consisted of slightly more than 40 regular blocks, 330 feet square and intersected by narrow alleys, spread out along the south shore of Clearwater Lake (the original name of Lake Waconia). The north-south streets were named for trees (i.e. Cedar, Maple, Olive, Elm, etc.) while the east-west streets were numbered moving south from the lake beginning with Lake Street, Main Street, and then First, Second, Third, and so on. Lots along Main Street, which ran the entire 10 blocks of the length of the village, were divided into narrow widths of 22 feet. All other lots were 55 feet wide. A park encompassing one whole block bordered Main Street near the center of the community and housed a “Soldiers and Sailors Monument.” Elm and Pine Streets extended further to the south than the rest, and terminated at the depot, warehouse, grain elevator, and other buildings reliant on the Minneapolis and St. Louis Railway which supplied the village with rail access to Minneapolis to the east. By 1898, the map already indicates an addition to the original plat that extended Orange Street to the south in wide, thin lots.23

In 1880, when it was incorporated as a village, Waconia's population numbered 225 persons. Although Main Street proved to have the largest collection of commercial uses in the village – often with individual uses built on two or three lots – additional churches, a school, creameries, and other non-residential buildings were scattered throughout the community. Along Main Street, the usual assortment of shops was augmented by a small number of saloons and hotels. These lodging houses were necessary as the popularity of Waconia's lake and its island caused tourism to boom. This 32 acre island at the southern end of the Lake, officially named “Coney Island of the West,” quickly blossomed into a resort that contributed to the Waconia economy until the 1960s. Purchased by a Minneapolis newspaperman in 1884, a complex of buildings was constructed on the island over the next few years. A hotel, dining hall, dance pavilion, and a number of cottages helped make Coney Island a popular destination for people seeking a relaxing vacation-spot near the Twin Cities. Small steamboats carried passengers back

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23 *Plat Book of Carver County, Minnesota* (Minneapolis: Northwestern Map Publishing Company, 1898).
Figure 2: A plat map of the Village of Waconia reveals the traditional street pattern and lot layout that influenced early development and growth. Note the railway station south of town.
Source: 1898 Plat Book of Carver County, Minnesota.
and forth between a train depot on the north shore of the Lake and a landing on the south shore near the downtown. A decline in tourism, resulting from competition from nearby Lake Minnetonka, as well as vandalism and neglect, eventually led to the abandonment of the island.\textsuperscript{24} The few buildings that remain today are dilapidated and overgrown. While the City has expressed interest in restoring the island in some form to its previous use, the expense of doing so makes this option uncertain.

As Waconia's population grew, so did its boundaries. Over time, the grid system expanded to the south and west with the addition of several more residential blocks, a high school, and the County fairgrounds. Along Highway 5 – which was constructed parallel to, and eventually outlived, the old railroad – various commercial uses sprang up including Ridgeview Hospital, a lumberyard, and a gas station. By the mid-1970s, the City had annexed land on the peninsula to the northwest that had been platted for residential lots [Figure 3]. By the late 1970s, land to the south of Waconia had been annexed for residential units and an industrial park. These two new residential areas varied from the pattern of development established thus far in the center of the City. Rather than the regular blocks and straight streets of the grid, the new lots were clustered around cul-de-sacs and loops. These lots were larger than those found in the downtown area – 80 feet wide rather than 55 feet – and lacked the sidewalks that provided a continuous pedestrian system. Without alleys, cars now entered garages directly off of the street, resulting in more curb cuts and a series of interrupted front lawns.

Over its history, Waconia has produced five Comprehensive Plans: in 1959, 1971, 1981, 1991, 1997, and the 1998 addition currently being prepared and revised. The 1959 Comprehensive Plan indicates that the City intended to continue growing, suggesting that annexation take place to accomplish three goals. The first was to ensure that subdivision and land use decisions in nearby areas would be made under the control of the City, rather than under that of the County. Second, it was recommended that annexation acquire large areas of land so that complete long-range planning could take place. Third, the 1959 Comprehensive Plan warned that rapid annexation would allow sprawling, scattered developments that would add to the cost of city government in the provision of services and maintenance. It is also clear from this plan that Waconia was concerned with the strength of its commercial area. One recommendation suggested that commercial uses be restricted to the 7 block long and 7½ block wide commercial zone in the downtown. In the residential portions of town, permitted uses were

Figure 3: In the 1970's, Waconia annexed the residentially-developed peninsula to the northwest as well as land for an industrial park and additional homes to the south of Highway 5.

limited to farms, nurseries, parks and playgrounds, public buildings, clubs, lodges, and home occupations (although it was recommended these not be allowed in the future to prevent the “undesirable intermixture of land uses”).
In the 1971 Comprehensive Plan, the goals of the City were spelled out in detail. Topping the list was the suggestion that rather than following a pattern of suburban single-family homes with scattered commercial and industrial development, Waconia should retain a unified commercial center and grow as a “complete community.” Growth was still an important part of the plan, but this expansion was not without limitations. Although additional annexation was intended, the plan recommended avoiding dispersed development because of the resulting increase in school, service, and transportation costs. “Strip development” was to be prohibited along major thoroughfares and highways, as well as the development of spot commercial areas at major intersections surrounded by residences. Instead, substantial commercial development was to be concentrated in planned centers, including an expansion of the current Central Business District where all governmental and public agencies would continue to be located. At the same time, the plan advised allowing small, free-standing commercial facilities such as “dairy stores” to locate within neighborhoods to provide local service to the community.

The 1981 and 1991 Comprehensive Plans are similar in their recommendations for continued expansion and growth. Annexation of land to the southwest of town, to the northwest beyond the Lakeview Terrace additions of the 1970s, and to the east were all urged. Plans were made for a third sewage lift station to the east of the City along Highway 5 to increase sewer and water service to a new area roughly double the size of present-day Waconia. Included in these plans were thoughts of rerouting major roads along the southeast corner of the Lake to make space for a regional park. Local rail service ceased in 1980, opening up a corridor along Highway 5 for potential new commercial space. Redevelopment of downtown Waconia occurred throughout the late 1970s and into the early 1990s. Two city blocks in the center of town were converted into a shopping area anchored at each end with locally run businesses – a general variety store and a supermarket – with needed parking space between them. Along Main Street, deteriorating buildings were demolished and a new office/retail complex was constructed. Finally, a vacant lot on First Street was developed into a six screen movie theater owned by a family from a nearby town.

**Waconia Today**

Since the 1991 Comp Plan was written, Waconia has experienced significant growth. Its population has increased from 3,498 in 1990 to an estimated 5,030 in 1997. Current projections have the City’s population rising to 6,092 by the year 2000, and possibly as great as 10,528 by the
year 2020 if growth continues to be high.\textsuperscript{25} Waconia's location – within commuting distance of the Twin Cities, yet far enough away to retain its independence – has helped to fuel this growth. Additionally, the expansion of new employment opportunities into the western suburbs has made daily commutes shorter and allows workers to live further and further away from the traditional job base of Minneapolis and its surrounding communities. Some of Waconia's growth has taken place in the form of a new industrial district on the west side of town, south of Highway 5, but a majority of the new development has been from residential building activity [Figure 4]. The number of residential building permits granted exploded in 1992 and has remained high up through the record number of 186 permits recorded in 1997. Estimates for 1998 are in the range of 160 to 180 new residential permits.\textsuperscript{26}

\textbf{Residential Building Permit Activity}

\textbf{Waconia, MN (1985-97)}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{residential_permits.png}
\caption{Residential Building Permit Activity}
\end{figure}

\textit{Source: City of Waconia 1997 Comprehensive Plan and Land Use Development Summary and Vacant Property Analysis for 1997.}

The form of this new growth has continued to stray from the traditional grid upon which Waconia was founded. A majority of the new development has occurred to the west of town, almost entirely encircling a small lake (Burandt's Lake) and wetland area with single-family homes. Along Highway 5, to the southwest, Waconia constructed a new high school and community athletic park in the early 1990s well outside of the developed portion of the City. Since that time, residential development – both single-family and townhouse – has begun to fill

\textsuperscript{25} City of Waconia, \textit{Comprehensive Plan} (1997), Figure 13.

\textsuperscript{26} City of Waconia, \textit{Land Use Development Summary and Vacant Property Analysis for 1997}. 
in the intervening land. To the south of town, following Highway 284, additional land was annexed that expanded the residential development to the crest of the hill. All of these additions utilized the meandering, curvilinear streets and cul-de-sacs that characterize suburban development [Figure 5]. Without alleys, the streetscape has become dominated by garages and driveways. Few sidewalks were constructed, but a network of pedestrian trails began to take shape that connected these neighborhoods with the downtown.

The removal of the railroad along Highway 5 has allowed numerous commercial businesses to locate there. Over time, Waconia has witnessed the construction or expansion of two fast food restaurants, two car dealerships, three gas stations/convenience stores, a veterinary clinic, a hardware store, two banks, a hotel, a liquor store, two restaurants, a movie rental store, a car wash, and a beauty salon. A majority of these businesses have direct access onto the highway, resulting in increased congestion as cars enter and exit the parking areas [Figure 6].

**THE PLANNING PROCESS**

The planning process in Waconia is similar to that in many other small towns. Proposals for building construction or new development are reviewed by the City Planner and City Engineer and evaluated based on their compliance with zoning regulations, subdivision standards, and the goals and policies outlined in the Comprehensive Plan. These findings are presented to a five member Planning Commission during evening meetings held every other week. The Planning Commission hears the recommendations of the staff and reviews and votes on the proposal before sending it on to the City Council for final approval.

As in many other communities, Waconia has had its share of politically charged planning issues. Local business owners used to enjoy strong influence over City officials, but as the community's demographics have changed this phenomenon has lessened.27 John Norman, who has served on the Planning Commission during two different periods, points out that in a small town such as Waconia many of the planning issues that are debated become very personal to those involved. When parties are offended as a result of disagreements over a proposal, they may avoid speaking to each other for years. An examination of some past planning initiatives indicates that Waconia's track record for undertaking large projects has been fraught with disagreement and controversy, often frustrating attempts by the City to achieve its goals.28

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27 Mike Zender, telephone interview by author, 10 May 1998.
Figure 5: Additional expansion around Burandt's Lake and south of Highway 5 has followed a different pattern of development than that in older Waconia. Source: City of Waconia, Planning Office.

Plans for renewal of Waconia's downtown in the 1970s were heavily debated and at times the disagreements were filled with spite. Due to a large number of deteriorated building and
vacant lots along Main and First Streets, City officials recommended tearing down these structures and constructing a shopping mall to help strengthen commercial activity. This proposal led to disagreements between residents over the merits of the plan and to a series of alternate suggestions. Eventually, the City withdrew its plans and two local businessmen came forth with a proposal that would locate their stores in this area at either end of a large parking lot. This plan was finally constructed and only later was the City able to build a smaller office/retail complex on Main Street. Dan Wilson, who was the Community Development Director for Waconia during this time, cites “a climate of mistrust and misunderstanding” for contributing to the controversy. Residents were unaccustomed to large planning efforts; their hesitation allowed a few influential people to have their way while the rest of the community followed their suggestions.29

Figure 6: Along Highway 5, gas stations, fast food restaurants, and other convenience businesses have begun to create a "strip" environment.

Attempts to establish a regional park on the southeastern shore of Lake Waconia have also been steeped in controversy and faced delays. A push was made in 1979 to transform the existing county park into a regional park that would encompass 176 acres and would necessitate the rerouting of County Road 30. The reception from residents at the public meeting, however,

29 Dan Wilson, telephone interview by author, 11 May 1998.
was overwhelmingly negative and the proposal was rejected by the county board. A second attempt was made in the 1980s to plan for the park, but disagreements between the City and landowners again frustrated the process. Since then, the Planning Commission and the City Council have solidified a plan for a 105 acre park and incorporated it into the Comprehensive Plan. Although no date has been set for its construction, both the County and the Metropolitan Council have indicated their commitment by setting aside money for the project.

In the recent past, the City has focused on three main planning issues. The first is maintaining the vitality of the downtown. In an effort to encourage businesses to locate or to remain downtown, the City has offered financial incentives to businesses to stay in the town center and has attempted to discourage highway developments by rescinding that portion of its Tax Increment Financing program. A second area of concern is the quality of residential developments. Learning from past mistakes, the Planning Commission now requires the construction of playgrounds and walking paths and the preservation of trees and other site amenities in new developments. Although this occasionally creates strife between the Commission and developers, polls have shown that residents support these efforts. Finally, Waconia is careful to monitor how it is developing in relation to other small towns in Carver County. As it has grown into a sub-regional center, other communities have increasingly looked to Waconia to set their own development agendas.

As Waconia prepares its updated 1998 Comprehensive Plan, fast on the heels of its 1997 version, it is faced with the challenge of retaining its unique character while coping with unprecedented levels of growth. A series of Community Goals, spelled out in the 1997 Comprehensive Plan as a result of three community forums, indicate residents' resolve to accomplish this task. These goals read, in part:

- Encourage moderate and well-planned growth that is consistent with the existing character of Waconia.
- Maintain the City's distinctive small-town atmosphere and its free-standing urban center identity.
- Preserve the City's heritage by maintaining and restoring good (not bad) architecture and by encouraging new developments to respect and reflect the scale and character of historic Waconia.

30 Zender, interview.
31 Norman, interview.
32 Zender, interview.
- Protect and improve the quality of unique natural resources (lake, wetlands, woodlands) with special emphasis to be given to improving the water quality of Lake Waconia and recycling.
  
- Improve the City's park system and create a community that is accessible by foot via a trail system that interconnects parks, lakes, schools, and downtown.
  
- Continue to develop downtown Waconia as a unique and viable retail core area that accommodates a mixture of specialty retail, office, eating and drinking, entertainment, high-density residential, institutional, and public uses.
  
- Protect and encourage productive agriculture until such time as urbanization is imminent.  

Figure 7: An example of Waconia's older housing stock on Second Street. A church is in the background, surrounded by residential uses.

As it stands now, Waconia has not lost its small town character to any great extent. The original design of the downtown and its surrounding neighborhoods was extremely walkable, with residences a short distance from many local destinations and with shade trees and sidewalks providing shade and convenience [Figure 7]. Even within the newest subdivisions, an attempt has been made to connect these areas to the city center through a system of trails. The historic downtown, through the efforts of numerous people including the City Council, the Chamber of Commerce, and others, has retained much of its vitality [Figure 8]. In some cases, original

Figure 8: Main Street continues to function as a commercial center with a number of small businesses providing a variety of services.

Figure 9: On First Street, as on Main Street, older buildings have been adapted and reused by a number of different businesses over time.
architecture has been maintained even as older buildings are renovated and reused by new businesses [Figure 9]. Other portions of Main Street that were beyond repair have been demolished and new structures housing offices, retail, and entertainment built in their place. The walkability and strong downtown have helped to keep gathering places that have strong social interaction. New businesses, such as the Frost and Steam coffee shop and ice cream parlor, complement older, established restaurants such as The Main Street Grille [Figure 10]. High levels of membership and activity within the numerous local churches and enthusiastic support for Waconia’s annual Nickle Dickle Days city-wide celebration show that the strong interpersonal ties often associated with small towns still exist. Finally, Waconia is lucky to have a wonderful natural resource in its lake [Figure 11]. The Lake continues to serve as a focal point for recreational activity such as wind surfing in the summer, ice fishing in the winter, and fireworks shot off from the island every Fourth of July. Other open spaces also help define Waconia as a community; City Square Park hosts both Sunday night musical events during the summer and the Christmas Tree lighting ceremony in the winter, and the agricultural fields surrounding Waconia on all sides preserve a connection to the City’s rural history.

While Waconia has been moderately successful, thus far, at maintaining its small town identity, there are signs that it may be drifting further and further away from its traditional development patterns and the qualities associated with the compact form described earlier. The Community Goals of the Comprehensive Plan clearly place a value on these concepts, but increasingly the City’s growth has diluted these features. [Figures 12 and 13] An important stated goal is to encourage “new development to respect and reflect the scale and character of historic Waconia.” Unfortunately, the residential developments in the newest annexations have become more and more suburban in their form, departing drastically from the traditional neighborhood patterns of older Waconia. Instead of front yards kept open by placing access to garages off of an alley in the back, numerous curb cuts along the street allow front yards to be consumed by driveways and projecting garages. Sidewalks have disappeared, and large lots with houses spread out at lower densities have made walking to the downtown difficult and have increased reliance on automobiles.

Development along Highway 5 also poses a potential problem. While the City has been careful to keep much of the commercial focus on the downtown – by restricting the location of office, professional, or governmental/quasi-governmental uses – a wide variety of retail and entertainment uses are still permitted to locate on the highway. In fact, the intent of this zoning district to provide for “businesses that subsist on larger volumes of automobile traffic [and]
Figure 10: The Frost & Steam Coffee Shop, on the right, is a new gathering place that complements the established Main Street Grille, on the left.

Figure 11: Much of the City's history and image has been centered on the Lake and its island.
satisfy the needs of the motoring public" leaves it wide open for development from “big box” retail stores – Target, Wal-Mart, and Home Depot – that have accelerated the commercial strip development being combated in numerous communities. Without carefully designed guidelines and zoning regulations, Highway 5 has the potential to be transformed from a rural highway into an auto-dominated thoroughfare lined with uses that are unaccommodating for pedestrians.

The greatest threat to the character of Waconia and the achievement of these Community Goals is the tremendous growth the town is now facing. Waconia has been classified as a “free-standing growth center” by the Twin Cities Metropolitan Council. Free-standing growth centers are communities physically separated from the larger urban area by undeveloped land, but with a full range of services. As such, they are able to support a wide variety of land uses. The Metropolitan Council views these centers as detached pieces of the Metropolitan Urban Service Area (MUSA) and encourages them to grow and serve as an alternative to urban and suburban environments. By directing growth and development to those areas already serviced by sewers and highways, the council hopes to protect farms and other open space in the Twin Cities area.

Figure 12: An older residential neighborhood on First Street with mature trees, a sidewalk, front porches, and garages with access from the alley . . .

34 City of Waconia Zoning Ordinance (January 1997), 5 - 12.
35 Dan Wascoc, Jr., “Preserving Metro Farms” Minneapolis Star Tribune (29 March 1998), B1, B5.
For Waconia, this designation means the construction of a third sewage lift station along Highway 5 on the east side of town. Once this station and its accompanying forcemain connection to the Metropolitan Sewer System is complete, roughly an additional 2,000 acres will ultimately be able to be serviced by the City as it continues to annex land from Laketown Township\textsuperscript{36} [Figure 14]. Since the total acreage of land within City limits in 1997 was only 1,674 acres, it is evident that the acquisition of this new land will more than double its size and require Waconia to make important decisions regarding how the area will be developed and what uses will be allowed.

Is Waconia adequately prepared to make these decisions? Why does the City appear willing to continue to accept the type of growth that has been occurring when much of this development is inconsistent with the Community Goals aimed at preserving the town's traditional features? Given the patterns of growth Waconia has experienced and expects to face over the coming years, what can the City do to preserve its character? Are there better alternatives to the standards currently in place? These questions will be addressed in the next two sections.

\textbf{Figure 13}: ... and a new residential development on Hilltop Lane whose streetscape is dominated by garages and driveways.

\textsuperscript{36} Comprehensive Plan (1997), 16.
Figure 14: A large section of land to the east of the City (marked by the number 3) indicates the service area of the new lift station that will soon be completed. Additional planned annexations can be seen to the west and south. Source: City of Waconia, 1997 Comprehensive Plan.
One reason that visioning is so effective for communities and organizations is that it creates a powerful framework for both individuals and the whole to make decisions and undertake cooperative action in the face of new opportunities or changing conditions.

~Stokes, *Saving America's Countryside*

**THREE: VISIONS OF THE FUTURE**

Why has the recent development in Waconia become less and less traditional in its form? Although the Comprehensive Plan indicates that maintaining the City's small town atmosphere is important, it is questionable whether the scale and character of its new development is consistent with that of historic Waconia. If these are the goals that represent the desires of the residents, then why does this type of development continue? The answer to this question lies in the approach Waconia has taken towards its future and in the fact that the City does not yet have a vision for accommodating the growth that will soon occur. Although decisions regarding land use, housing, transportation, and other areas are guided by a Comprehensive Plan, the contents of this plan leave the City more likely to react on a parcel-by-parcel basis as requests for annexations come in than to proactively direct development in a way that insists on compliance with a larger concept. With only a general and diffuse view of the future, the City is not prepared to grasp the full potential of what Waconia could become. In this situation, it would be easy to lose sight of both the Community Goals and the small town character Waconia still possesses.

Creating an initial overarching vision is important in guiding development because this image sets the tone for all subsequent proposals. With an “approved” vision already endorsed by the community and codified in its land use regulations, all other proposals are influenced by the ideas already put forth; without it, the vision will be supplied by developers who essentially create a new community bit by bit as parcels are subdivided without being compelled to coordinate these developments with each other or with a greater town plan. What currently serves as Waconia's community vision is laid out in its Comprehensive Plan. This document consists of a review of current demographics and trends, a list of assumptions and projections
regarding the City's growth, plans for a series of smaller components, and an implementation strategy. Although each of the various components – land use, transportation, community facilities and services, and environmental protection – has its own stated objectives and policies, the Plan lacks an overarching description of how these components work together to allow balanced and coherent growth.

Without a good process for the creation of a comprehensive plan, the substance of the document will lack weight. Most conventional plan preparations follow a pattern in which a draft of the plan is created by a hired consultant with minimal input from citizens serving on various volunteer committees. A public hearing, held once the plan has been completed, gives the public a chance to comment on its contents. Although small changes can be made to reflect the concerns of the public voiced at the hearing, the majority of the plan is compiled early on in the process without any public input. As a result, residents are removed from the heart of the plan. Goals and actions outlined in the document may go unfulfilled since the plan does not reflect the true feelings of the public. In the end, the plan is more likely to end up on a shelf in the planning office collecting dust. Waconia has made an effort to receive input from the community. As part of the preparation for the 1991 Comprehensive Plan, the City conducted two community forums to identify the town's assets and liabilities and to address specific issues. A third community meeting was held in 1995 as part of the 1997 Comprehensive Plan update. The result of these discussions was the Community Goals referenced earlier.

Most residents of Waconia are unaware of how future growth and development can be shaped by planning and the regulatory tools that accompany it. During an informal Visual Preference Survey conducted at the community forum in 1995, the approximately sixty residents who attended responded to the exercise in a way that indicated they were able to recognize the form and design components of the traditional small town and preferred them to the more conventional styles of development used today. Unfortunately, the lessons of this community forum have not been translated into changes to the City's regulations (i.e., their Comprehensive Plan or zoning and subdivision ordinances) to encourage, or even to allow, development consistent with small town character to take place. Is it simply not in the town's culture to plan in this fashion? Without significant amounts of growth until recent years, Waconia has not been challenged to deal with this issue and has had the luxury of being able to focus on other priorities. Current conditions, however, leave the City confronting tremendous new growth.

With the effects of this transformation looming on the horizon, Waconia should strongly consider beginning a process for creating this type of vision and implementing it.

VISIONING

The visioning process seeks to encourage citizen participation in the creation of plans. A bottom-up process relying on residents to help create an image of the future of their community, visioning is planning that is done with the public – not to or for the public as is often the case. If citizens play a role in shaping plans, the theory goes, then the plans themselves will stand a better chance of succeeding. Involvement of the community allows residents to feel a sense of ownership over the results and gives them a greater stake in seeing it succeed. This type of consensus building also helps opposing interests work out their differences and reach agreement over the goals and direction of the plan.

This “visioning” style of plan creation takes an approach that is different than the conventional method. Instead of waiting to involve the public until the end of the process, visioning insists on public input up front, before the agenda for the plan is even set. The participants reflect a wide range of interests and are brought together in an attempt to reach agreement over a common vision for the plan. This process is value-laden, with discussion focusing on what elements of the community participants like and want to maintain, and those aspects they dislike and want to improve.38

William Klein, in an article written on citizen participation in planning, has examined this visioning process and has outlined ten points he considers critical to its implementation:

- **Front-end emphasis.** The public involvement takes place at the beginning of the process, before the plan is drafted;
- **One size does not fit all.** The process is modified to fit the size of the community and the political situation;
- **It’s inclusive.** Residents with a variety of different viewpoints and interests are involved;
- **Leadership is impartial.** Professionals are hired to help run the process and offer advice;
- **Attention to detail.** All aspects of the process are carefully planned before it begins;
- **Risks are taken.** Power is temporarily taken out of the hands of the usual players and placed in the hands of a citizen group;
- **Projections are made.** Technology is used to help participants visualize the potential outcomes of the options they are considering;

38 Klein, 4–5.
• **Media attention.** A wide range of media is used to help advertise the process and encourage participation from residents;

• **Long-range thinking.** Projections are made for 20 to 40 years down the road – much further into the future than is customary for most plans; and

• **Results are validated.** A document summarizing the results of the process is endorsed by the group and distributed to the rest of the community.\(^{39}\)

Although this process produces a coherent vision of how the residents would like to see the community evolve, it still leaves the more difficult challenge of transforming the vision into specific actions that will lead to its implementation. While not easy to do, the relationships formed during the visioning process at least help smooth the way for debate over these decisions.\(^{40}\)

A number of towns have faced the challenges associated with growth and development and responded by using the visioning process. The City of Brunswick prepared a comprehensive growth plan in response to Maine's 1988 Growth Management Act. Rather than simply working through the Town Council, the planning director pushed to incorporate the idea of a design charrette into a community-wide process that would reflect the views of a broader range of people and address the issue of future growth. A series of six exercises was designed – accessible to everyone – that would begin with relatively simple personal insights into the community and build to address townwide concerns and issues. The charrette was run over a period of four days, beginning on a weekday night, continuing over the next two working days, and concluding on a Saturday. A town supper kicked off the proceedings, with heavy advertising through posters, flyers, newspaper articles, local cable, and special invitations to key people. Over 300 people attended. As the charrette continued over the next three days, small citizen groups took ownership of the exercises and presented their findings and recommendations to the rest of the community at the closing on Saturday. This feeling of ownership by residents contributed to the success of the charrette, which dealt with many issues of growth (such as the location of a new high school), forced the participants to reflect on their community and how it should grow, and eventually became the foundation for Brunswick's comprehensive plan.

The elements of this charrette were similar to those used in visioning processes in other communities. At the town supper, which was used to draw attention to the planning process, a visual survey was conducted concerning the town's existing built (and unbuilt) environment. Showing slides of a wide range of elements of the community focused attention on what

\(^{39}\) Klein, 5–6.

\(^{40}\) Klein, 6.
residents valued, appreciated, or disliked. In following exercises, they explored in more detail the elements of their own neighborhoods and then examined detailed maps of the city and its surrounding areas to identify possible opportunities and constraints to future development. A critical piece of the process was a session that forced residents to reach a general agreement about what surrounding areas were best suited for growth and which were best kept rural. Once a consensus was reached, strategies for fulfilling these ideas could be discussed as part of the final exercise in which professionals helped transform development and design objectives into zoning requirements and other policies. As a result of this process, the Comprehensive Plan Commission was able to clearly delineate where future development should occur and the zoning map was changed to reflect these preferences. The zoning ordinance in Brunswick was also altered, with small and more neighborhood-specific zoning districts being created to respond to the concerns of the participants. Planner Phil Kerry, who was involved in this process, was skeptical at first, but was eventually convinced of the merits of the charrette when he saw a consensus of almost 95% reached over a vision for the City's future.

For a visioning process aimed at preserving community character, there are two separate but important elements that must be employed. The first, discovery, deals with investigation of the elements that give each small town its unique character. Residents and city officials then quantify these features so that they can be incorporated into written plans and documents. The second category, informed regulation, involves the use of zoning and other regulatory techniques to influence development so that it does not detract from existing community character.

**DISCOVERY**

For any community grappling with threats to its character, an important first step in the visioning process is understanding what elements are already present that make the town unique. Although there are some general qualities that are common across many small towns, such as the elements of compact form described in Section One, each town also has numerous features that are unique. Communities must examine their own neighborhoods and discover these elements for themselves, rather than relying on a standardized list. This discovery process has shown itself to be most successful when it has involved the residents of the community directly (rather than simply relying on planners or other officials), since these individuals are both the ones who have

42 Phil Kerry, Planner, telephone interview by author, 11 May 1998.
the most knowledge about their town – even if they are unaware that they possess this knowledge and need assistance in interpreting their preferences – and are also the ones who will be most affected by the potential changes to their community.

Numerous techniques for uncovering existing community character have been used. Some, like Anton Nelessen's Visual Preference Survey, rely on photos and slides of a variety of residential and commercial developments – some from within the subject community and some from other locations, some showing traditional forms of development and some showing today's more conventional projects. By encouraging residents to rank or score these images, planners can systematically uncover those aspects of form, design, and architecture that are valued by members of the community. Other methods empower residents through surveys and questionnaires, or exercises that raise issues regarding these elements and then send groups out into their neighborhoods to discover the answers for themselves. Both techniques are aided by planners and other designers who can help interpret the results.

William Morrish and Catherine Brown of the University of Minnesota's Design Center for the American Urban Landscape have written a book entitled *Planning to Stay* which outlines a process they developed and tested throughout the Twin Cities area for investigating the physical features of neighborhoods. Although the book is aimed at neighborhoods located within an urban area, its concepts and techniques can easily be translated into a process for evaluating the character of small towns. Morrish and Brown structured their process around a framework of what they call physical features and organizing elements. The physical features are simply categories used to help residents identify and understand the elements of their environment. For their work in the Twin Cities area, the five categories of physical features used were homes and gardens, community streets, neighborhood niches, anchoring institutions, and public gardens. While these terms were designed to fit the existing elements of many Twin Cities neighborhoods, it is important to realize that each community is different and that these terms and categories can be altered to fit any situation. The value in identifying these elements, they write, is that "the quality, accessibility, and convenience of these features establish a neighborhood's image and character. How we maintain and build upon these physical resources determines its livability."43

Along with identifying the existing physical features, evaluating them using the following five organizing themes allows residents to understand how these elements are integrated in their community:

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- **Location.** Where a feature is placed in relation to homes and other physical features, as well as how it is situated on a site;

- **Scale.** Size and proportion of objects to other nearby features;

- **Mix.** Sets of uses and activities that make a neighborhood livable (e.g., transit, housing types, entertainment, recreational activities, essential goods and services);

- **Time.** How the physical structures support day and night routines, adapt to seasonal changes, and provide continuity; and

- **Movement.** Accessibility to physical features within a neighborhood, as well as to amenities within the larger metropolitan area.⁴⁴

Morrish and Brown have developed a series of questions that lead participants through a thought process that allows them to reflect on each physical feature in light of each of the organizing themes (e.g., questions regarding the location, scale, mix, time, and movement for homes and gardens, then for community streets, etc.). After these relationships are understood, residents can begin to discuss which elements of their community they value and which features they would like to change to see discontinued in future developments.

Communities which have completed these types of discovery exercises are better equipped to deal with threats to their character since they can recognize unwanted elements in new developments and take action to preclude them. In Carmel, California, residents were concerned with changes they were facing as new construction within the community began to alter the traditional patterns of development that they felt defined their neighborhoods. To attempt to understand and combat these unwanted changes, they hired a consulting team that worked to help them uncover the design traditions of the community so that they could respond to the current trends affecting them. Through a number of community meetings, the residents began to explore the traditional features of their neighborhoods. These included quantifiable factors such as the number of buildings per block and the size of setbacks as well as more descriptive investigations of housing forms, yards, and other characteristics. In order to understand the existing character, teams of residents were guided through exercises such as taking walks with routes planned to expose them to critical formal elements, mapping their favorite neighborhood features, and examining photographs of buildings and design features from both local and surrounding areas. Through these exercises, they slowly began to understand the elements of streetscapes, architectural styles, and natural features that gave their neighborhoods character. Once this was accomplished, further sessions examined the current

⁴⁴ Morrish and Brown, 27–29.
development trends and began to outline possible tools – such as design standards and reduced allowable floor areas – to manage this change.\textsuperscript{45}

**INFORMED REGULATION**

Once the discovery portion of the visioning process is complete, the knowledge taken away from these exercises should be incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan to help outline the elements residents value and would like to see preserved, as was done in Brunswick. It should then be used as a basis for new or altered regulation that ensures that these concepts are carried out. This step is critical in the successful preservation of town character. If these elements are only recognized, but not codified in the form of zoning, subdivision, or other regulatory documents, there will be little incentive for new development to comply with these ideals. In fact, once current regulations are examined, some communities discover that their zoning or subdivision ordinances unintentionally prohibit many of characteristics they would like to see maintained. Requirements for lot size, frontage, the location and quantity of parking provided, street amenities such as sidewalks and shade trees, and other provisions can be used to influence future growth.

Cranbury, New Jersey, was able to successfully analyze some of the physical elements that helped define its character and to incorporate them into a plan for an expansion of the town. Only ten miles from Princeton and a heavily traveled traffic corridor, the largely agricultural village of Cranbury (population 2,500) faced development pressures from suburban-style subdivisions in the 1980s. Surrounding a small lake, these subdivisions were proposed to contain now familiar ¼ to ½ acre lots, curvilinear streets, and garage-dominated streetscapes. While realizing some growth was most likely unavoidable, both residents and town officials were uneasy about the departure from the image of Cranbury as a compact village – containing a downtown shopping district and an elementary school – surrounded by acres of farmland. Instead of accepting this new style of development, they hired a consulting team to look at the existing town form and create guidelines for future growth that would preserve the character of their community.

The team examined and tried to quantify the unique character of Cranbury by measuring a number of dimensions within the existing village: street width, the length of blocks, front yard setbacks, and the spacing of buildings. For instance, in the village center they discovered that

\textsuperscript{45} Noré Winter and Richard Tooker, “Maintaining Neighborhood Character” (session at American Planning Association National Planning Conference, Boston, 5 April 1998).
buildings were spaced 30 feet from center to center on average, while on the village fringe they were spaced 60 feet apart. Within newer subdivisions, however, the distance increased to 150 feet. Feeling that if this dimension were too small it would encourage privacy and avoidance, but that if it were too large it would discourage casual encounters, the team decided to require a lot width of 60 feet for new residential development. Using a walkable distance to set the boundary of new growth, the team prepared a plan for street extension based on a ½ mile radius from the village center. Although the street pattern consisted of short blocks on a loose grid, the surrounding topography, roads, and wetland areas were used to modify the formula and to provide views of farmland and to fill in the gaps between the existing village and newer subdivisions. By quantifying the formal elements that contributed to the atmosphere of Cranbury, officials were able to incorporate them into regulation governing new development to ensure that they were sustained.46

Many smaller towns in southeastern Pennsylvania, and elsewhere, have used zoning regulations to help maintain their character. In these communities, new zoning districts — often called Village Residential, Village Commercial, or Village Center districts — are created to regulate both the dimensions and uses allowed as part of development within older portions of town as well as in areas of growth. In residential districts, these requirements are softened to allow for a mixture of uses typically found in older traditional town settings but prohibited under today’s zoning regulations. Commercial uses, such as “mom-and-pop” stores, are permitted to locate within predominantly residential areas under certain restrictions that limit the size, scale, and intensity to match surrounding uses. Restrictions on the types of commercial uses, the total square footage of the business, and even requirements of owner-occupancy have been used to mitigate the potential impacts of these uses while still encouraging the convenience they provide for neighborhood residents.47

Traditional features can also be incorporated into uses and types of development that were not present in the original small town. A good example of this can be found in the regulation of highway businesses. Although this type of development within small towns does not historically exist to define traditional elements, ideas found elsewhere in the community can be “borrowed” and applied. The town of Stowe, Vermont, followed this approach to rewrite its zoning regulations after facing a deterioration of the landscape along Route 108. In order to combat the image of the commercial strip, new regulations now require developers to plan for

47 Sutro, 5.
pedestrians, not just automobiles, with the installation of sidewalks, paths, and trees. Building masses are broken-up into smaller portions, while small setbacks, reduced frontage, and smaller lots give pockets of development a village feel. Shared driveways reduce the need for turning lanes, and the amount of parking that can be located in front is limited to bring the building closer to the street. Finally, important views of the countryside have been preserved by concentrating development in selected growth centers and downzoning the land between them. As a result, open space is preserved, commercial areas are more walkable, and the overall development does not detract from Stowe's existing character.48

Other regulatory tools besides zoning can also be used to shape development. Many towns have turned to design guidelines or standards to encourage certain elements, decided on by the community, to be included in the planning of new commercial and residential projects. Design guidelines are voluntary and rely on planning officials or a review board to evaluate plans and to attempt to persuade residents to follow them. Yet these guidelines carry more weight if they are included within the zoning ordinance and used as a partial basis for approval of a project. As standards, developers may be required to provide certain architectural and design elements desired by the community – roof shape, proportion and scale, massing, placement on the lot, materials – that contribute to the traditional character of the town. If drafted correctly, design regulations such as these are extremely useful in encouraging small town elements to be included in future development. The challenge in employing them, however, is the difficulty involved in both identifying the true characteristics and in clearly writing the standards so that little confusion ensues regarding their interpretation.

As encouraging as the visioning process sounds, it does not always result in success when conducted in various communities. How well a visioning process functions depends on a number of variables, but one important aspect that should be examined before initiating the process in any community is the residents' level of awareness about the main issues to be discussed. Communities engaging in visioning processes typically follow one of two scenarios. In the first scenario, a visioning process is initiated as a result of residents' concern over a specific issue or their frustration with local government (in)action. Support for a visioning process in these situations will be high since residents see it as a way to bring about change and will be committed to getting involved. This was the case in Carmel, where citizens were upset

over the changes they saw in their community – properties being purchased and buildings being torn down and replaced with structures that were out of character with the rest of the neighborhood. The residents felt this was detracting from their community and pushed for the City to address the problem. As a result of their support, the visioning process that was conducted was well attended and is leading to concrete changes in the City’s regulations. Examples of successful visioning exercises initiated by concerned residents can be found in a number of other communities.

But what happens if city or town officials are considering conducting a visioning process in the absence of widespread interest or concern voiced by the community? This second scenario arises when cities are mandated to conduct a visioning process as part of a comprehensive plan or growth management act, or when they are simply interested in obtaining citizen input in the face of pending change or as part of their regular planning process. In many communities, the average resident is not involved in the city's planning efforts or aware of the role they play in shaping development. This apathy may indicate that residents are content with their present situation because they truly are satisfied, or it may mask a level of discontent that is obscured by a perceived inability to rectify the situation or by a lack of better options. In situations like these, can visioning be used to help plan for the future of the community if there does not seem to be an interest – or a demand – for change by residents? Application of the visioning process in a number of communities and in a variety of situations indicates that this may not only be possible, but that under the right circumstances the process may flourish. An important factor that may determine its potential for success is the level of active citizen groups and social connections – sometimes referred to as social capital – already present in the community.

Robert Putnam made popular the term “social capital” in his piece *Bowling Alone*, which suggested that the presence of this immaterial resource was declining in America. He used the term to describe a range of social connections, networks, and other features of civic life that are evidenced by the formation and participation of citizens in various voluntary organizations: professional associations, veteran's groups, political parties, and even bowling leagues. If high levels of social capital exist within a given community, visioning often proves to be successful. Why? – these groups have no apparent connection to planning. It may be that individuals living in places with high levels of social capital have a greater investment in their community and therefore are willing to work to ensure a brighter future. Or it may be that these connections

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leave residents more prepared to work together to address common problems, even if they are posed by a separate organization (i.e., the city's planning department). Whatever the motivation, communities with social capital have proven successful at organizing and implementing visioning processes. Brunswick has high levels of civic engagement and citizen involvement, which Kerry credits for the enthusiastic support of their charrette and the success it achieved. He is quick to point out that this does not mean everyone shared similar views. In Brunswick some residents were anti-planning and some were pro-planning, but because they were engaged and worked together they were able to reach a consensus.\(^{51}\) This does not rule out productive visioning processes in towns without good social capital, but it does suggest that they face a greater challenge.

If a visioning process is utilized within a community and has the support of residents, what other factors influence the outcome? Are there important elements of the process that must be considered and incorporated into the exercises in order to achieve results? A range of planners, planning bodies, and communities familiar with the visioning process were contacted as part of this thesis and they voiced similar thoughts about the important pieces involved in producing a successful visioning process.

**Links to Action:** One of the most critical elements of any visioning process is the transition from ideas to action that must be made at its conclusion. Cities and towns must commit up-front to taking seriously the ideas generated and to making changes within the structure of the local government if necessary. Without a link to additional action, the vision created by the participants will get no further than the statement or document produced and will soon die. In many successful visioning processes, the final session involves the creation of a strategy for implementation that might include the appointment of task forces to investigate additional issues such as costs of implementation and possible funding sources, agreement on dates for future meetings, and a timetable for the completion of these goals. For communities working to preserve character, this action often takes the form of changes to zoning and design regulations.

At the same time, it is important that the resulting goals are realistic. While an integral part of the process is to encourage participants to be creative and original with their ideas, the vision they produce should not be beyond the reach of the community. The inability to fulfill overly-broad goals such as "revitalizing the downtown" or "ridding the community of discrimination" leaves participants feeling alienated and disillusioned with the visioning process and may hamper future attempts to solicit resident input. One aspect of this issue is the long

\(^{51}\) Kerry, interview.
timeframe over which the results will appear. It is important that participants be warned so they are not discouraged when large changes are not immediately apparent. Julia Trevarthen, a planner with the South Florida Regional Planning Council (SFRPC), points to a number of “10 to 15 year overnight success stories” in Florida – communities that conducted visioning processes years ago and are only now seeing dramatic results.\footnote{Julia Trevarthen, telephone interview by author, 8 May 1998.} In order to combat this, visioning veterans like Michael Stepner of the Newschool of Architecture in San Diego stress the importance of actions that are “immediate and concrete, not symbolic and down-the-road.”\footnote{Jonathan Walters, “Cities and the Vision Thing,” \textit{Governing} (May 1998), 36.}

**Mix of Participants:** A second important element of a successful visioning process is involving the right mix of people. In order for the goals that are eventually reached to represent the viewpoints of the entire community, representatives of all interest groups must be present and active in the process. This mix not only includes the traditional power players such as political figures, members of the local chamber of commerce, and developers, but also representatives from various neighborhood groups. The assortment of residents involved should represent both ends of the spectrum: long term and new, old and young, pro-growth and no growth, a range of income and education levels, and a variety of ethnicities and cultures. Participants from local businesses should represent small, corporate, and industrial interests. Out of this mix of participants, it is common for one or two individuals to emerge as strong leaders or champions of the process.

It is the job of those organizing the visioning process to interact with a wide range of people to ensure no interest is left out. While this may seem time-consuming, tedious, and even counterproductive in that it invites intense debate over important issues, it is a critical step. In order to build a consensus about the future of the community, all viewpoints must be incorporated. Overlooking one party during the visioning process may disrupt proceedings further down the road when the larger group is looking for acceptance from the community. This held true for the Town of Cranbury, which ultimately found its new regulations rejected because farmers on the outskirts of town felt parts of the plan were unfair. If they had been included in the discussions from the beginning, a solution acceptable to all interests might have been reached.\footnote{Sutro, 28.}

**Neutrality in Organization:** In order for the participants to believe in the visioning process and to trust that their concerns and ideas are being taken seriously, it is important that the entire process appear unbiased to those involved. Appointing a citizen-run group to manage the
process is critical. Although city staff should be involved and available to answer questions and provide data and analysis for the group, residents tend to become suspicious of a predetermined agenda if the process is run exclusively by city officials. Phil Herr points out that even letting participants determine little things like where meetings are held, who takes the minutes, and how the results should be presented can give residents a sense of proprietorship over what is happening.55

The visioning process should also strive for broad-based financial support. The SFRPC stresses the importance of having groups other than the city help fund the process. This monetary or in-kind support (such as catering, the use of facilities, or advertising) not only involves other organizations and businesses, but also gives them a stake in the outcome.56

**Political Support:** One final factor that helps determine the success of a visioning process is the presence of political support. Although the movement may start with the residents, city officials must be involved since they will be the ones administering what comes out of the process on a day-to-day basis. Without their compliance, the momentum generated by the visioning process may be lost. In fact, the consensus reached during the process may help City Council members and other officials make the tough choices asked of them by residents. In Delray Beach, Florida, the momentum generated by a visioning process was great enough to sweep three new City Council members who supported the process into office to stir up a group that had historically proven ineffective.57 Staff involvement is also important, since these are the professionals that have the knowledge and expertise to take the results and incorporate them into the city's regulations.

55 Herr, telephone interview by author, 8 May 1998.
56 Trevarthen, interview.
The visioning process has been used in many communities and has shown its usefulness in contributing to plans that are able to shape development outcomes. Both the discovery and the informed regulation pieces of this process are important – the first helps determine the formal elements that maintain the character of the community, the second communicates these characteristics to others. In Waconia, development needs more guidance since current regulations do not go far enough in ensuring compatibility with the existing form that is valued in the older portions of town. Section Four will examine if such a process could succeed in Waconia, how it might be carried out, and how it could affect the form of new growth.
If we can design small communities which allow people home ownership and a private yard... that are located within a short commute of places of employment thus allowing more leisure time, and that provide the ability to walk and interact with their neighborhood and the community, then we will do something fantastic.

~Nelessen, Visions for a New American Dream

FOUR: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

Waconia is standing at a crossroads. With the completion of the third sewage lift station expected in the next year, the City is facing opportunities for growth that would dwarf even the residential boom of recent years. What will Waconia look like once this development occurs? Will it be able to maintain the crucial small town elements that it possesses today? How can it use its planning tools – its Comprehensive Plan and its Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances – to tackle the challenges of this new growth? The lessons learned in Section Three are useful for directing the attention of both residents and City officials in Waconia to opportunities for intervention that could help preserve the community’s small town character.

The consequences of Waconia continuing down its current development path can be seen in the nearby city of Chaska, Minnesota. Chaska is an example of a community that has grown dramatically in size over the past twenty years, beginning as a small traditional town along the Minnesota River and expanding to the sprawling city it is today. Waconia and Chaska share many similarities in their evolution. Both cities were originally platted in the compact form of the traditional small town; Chaska also has a commercial center, complete with a community park, and neighborhoods of single family homes lining the grid of streets in its “old town” [Figure 15]. Both cities are roughly the same distance from the Twin Cities, are cut by a busy highway, and have been designated “free-standing growth centers” by the Metropolitan Council. A major difference between the two communities is that Chaska began its period of growth in the 1960s, foreshadowing Waconia's own population boom nearly twenty years later.
Figure 15: This park in the center of Chaska's downtown, used for both passive recreation and planned City activities, is similar to City Square Park in Waconia.

Figure 16: Chaska's new subdivisions resemble the suburbs more than the traditional small town out of which they grew.
Chaska’s expansion occurred with commercial development along Highway 212 and with residential development across the highway. Accumulation of large pieces of land to the north of Chaska was fueled by the failure of Jonathan New Town – one of twelve new towns funded by the federal government in the 1970s. The addition of this “pre-serviced” land (with sewer, water, and other infrastructure) encouraged growth and the construction of numerous residential developments. Since then, Chaska has continued to experience rapid residential and industrial growth as it has annexed almost 1,000 acres in the 1980s and planned to annex 860 more by the year 2000. The new residential developments built between the old town and Jonathan have been almost exclusively suburban in their style [Figure 16]. With numerous cul-de-sacs, winding roads, and large lots spread out over the countryside, Chaska has lost the compact form it once maintained in its downtown. Although the City has stated in the Comprehensive Plan its desire to preserve its small town character, this atmosphere dissipated as the City grew beyond the town center. Waconia is now in a position similar to that Chaska once held. With the operation of the third lift station, the City will be able to service large areas of new undeveloped land. Like Chaska’s acquisition of Jonathan’s pre-serviced land, Waconia faces the potential for rapid growth that may outpace the City’s ability to control it.

LONG-RANGE PLANNING

Would Waconia benefit from conducting a visioning process that addressed issues of town character and examined ways to incorporate elements of this character into new developments as it grew? Results from other communities tackling these sorts of problems indicate that visioning processes, if administered correctly, can have a significant impact in shaping future growth. These types of community efforts are especially important for communities dealing with change. Planners and other city officials can attempt to shape development, but only the residents – those who live and interact with each other immersed in the physical features of the town – are able to identify what elements contribute to its small town character. Therefore, citizens must be involved in the visioning process and have a voice in guiding the City’s evolution.

If used, this type of community-based visioning process could increase the chance that a long-range plan would succeed in shaping Waconia’s future development. Past planning initiatives in the City have resulted in disagreements between residents and delays in their implementation. The focus on consensus underpinning a visioning process would establish a

stronger base of support and, while not removing all potential conflict from the planning process, would help to hold parties accountable to the vision they would create through modifications to land use policies and regulations. The emphasis on resident participation and the incorporation of citizens' ideas is also consistent with the community involvement and interaction often heralded as an important element of small town character.

Even if Waconia would benefit from a visioning process in terms of its future development, are there indications that such a process would succeed? Is this a worthy pursuit for City officials? It is clear that residents of Waconia are not up-in-arms over the most recent growth along the edges of the City. While some individuals may have concerns about the rate and manner in which Waconia is developing, there is no ground swell of discontent that is sometimes the mark of strong support for a community-based visioning process. Without this pressure from residents, an important check for evaluating the likelihood of success of a visioning process is the level of engagement and social capital in Waconia. One advantage of the recent growth in the City is the increase in the diversity of interests and the proliferation of citizens’ groups. Besides its traditional organizations – the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, V.F.W., the American Legion, the Jaycees, and an assortment of religious groups – Waconia has also developed a full spectrum of other groups such as the Lake Waconia Association, the Waconia Heritage Association, the Friends of the Library, Studio 56 (which hosts music, design, and dance activities), boosters for high school athletic teams and musical groups, three different book clubs, and community theaters for adults and children. This increase in social capital suggests residents may be prepared to engage in a community-wide effort to plan for the City's future. In addition, the power structure that often frustrated or impeded the planning process in the past has changed. The migration of new families into Waconia has also removed some of the influence wielded by local business owners and the City stands better equipped to tackle large scale issues.

If Waconia is to conduct a visioning process, preparations must begin now. With the imminent completion of the third sewage lift station foreshadowing a new phase of development, the City should prepare a long-range plan for this area before it is faced with proposals for development and must react to them. By putting forth a vision sooner rather than later, the City (and its residents) can take the lead in setting the standard for what new additions to Waconia will look like. All other proposals must compete with a plan that already has the weight of the community behind it. The City should work to determine what urban elements, and what rural elements, should be incorporated into new development in Waconia, and then modify its Comprehensive Plan, zoning requirements, and subdivision standards to reflect this vision.
Any such process should be carefully prepared and should utilize some important techniques. These be separated into two pieces: those used prior to the commencement of the visioning process and those incorporated into its operation.

Before the visioning process begins Waconia should:

- Create a resident *task force* to guide the planning process. Although this group should work closely with the City Planner and other officials, participants will feel a greater connection to the concerns raised, be more engaged in the process, and acquire a sense of ownership over the results if there are residents involved in its organization.

- Take advantage of *media resources* – articles in the local newspaper, announcements on local cable TV, fliers, posters, etc. – to advertise the process, generate high levels of exposure, and attract potential participants.

- Lobby for *broad-based support* for the process. Encourage businesses and organizations to contribute financially and in-kind so that the visioning process is not viewed as a “City Hall project,” but as a “community project.”

- Make an effort to *bring all interests to the table*. A key to generating a viable consensus that holds up when presented to the larger community is to involve representatives with a variety of perspectives. In addition to local residents and business owners, Waconia should include individuals from the neighboring townships, the county, the Metropolitan Council, and other organizations that will be affected by the City's pattern of growth.

- Rely on a *community-wide celebration* or event to kick-off the proceedings. With the end of the millennium approaching, focusing on the year 2000 could provide an opportunity for reflection on how Waconia has developed over the past century and how it will continue to develop as it grows. Alternatively, the year 2005 will be the 125th anniversary of Waconia's incorporation as a village. Either date could be used to mark an important point in the City's chronology and fuel interest in its future.

As part of the visioning process Waconia should:

- Use *discovery exercises* to assist residents in recognizing the form and design features of their own neighborhoods. Following concepts similar to those applied in Carmel or in the Twin Cities (by Morrish and Brown), participants should be encouraged to work together in teams to sort out the characteristics of the community that are valued and those that are undesirable.
Mandate that design professionals utilize charrettes and other exercises to help participants *generate a vision* of what they would like the City to become. Once the desired elements of Waconia's unique character have been identified, they should be incorporated into plans for future development through a consensus-building process.

Produce a *summary document* that captures the main points of the visioning process, distribute it to area residents, and use it to focus future discussions regarding development.

Commit to *further action* by discussing possible regulatory tools for achieving these goals. The biggest challenge in this process is the creation of the policies, whether through zoning and subdivision requirements or other programs, that will eventually achieve the desired outcomes envisioned by the community. A sample of these policies is listed below.

As a result of this recommended community visioning process, Waconia will be faced with a wide range of possible actions it might take in order to preserve its character as it grows. These options differ in their ease of implementation and their potential impact on development; a sample of tools for promoting small town character that have been used elsewhere are listed below.

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<tr>
<th>Actions Promoting Small Town Character</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Create new “traditional” zoning district(s)</td>
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<td>Modify standards of current zoning district(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Designate areas as rural reserves</td>
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<tr>
<td>Draft design standards</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adopt development incentives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Draft design guidelines</td>
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<td>Write a Community Vision Statement</td>
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One of the actions with the greatest potential impact would be the creation of one or more *new zoning districts* with dimensional standards and other requirements designed to achieve the “traditional” patterns of development seen in small towns. These standards might include components such as reduced minimum lot area, decreased minimum lot width, and build-to lines instead of front setbacks. To encourage a mix of commercial and residential uses, one district could allow an increase in the variety of uses permitted within it. Alternatively, two new districts – one commercial and one residential – could be created and located near each other to allow residents easy pedestrian access to corner stores and other retail uses. While the creation of a
new district requires a large amount of work, the impact on the resulting form of the built environment would be high.

An alternative to creating a new “traditional” zoning district is the modification of existing zoning districts in an attempt to fulfill many of the same goals. Within Waconia's primary residential zoning district (R-1), for example, changes to the minimum lot area, setbacks, etc. could accomplish many of the same objectives as creating a new district. Additionally, subdivision standards could be modified to require traditional features, to reduce the width of roads, to specify a certain street pattern, etc. If concerns were to be raised regarding making changes to the R-1 district, the City could give developers the option of including these types of traditional elements by incorporating them into the existing Planned Unit Development zoning district. The advantage of this route is that it would not apply to all new residential developments, but would allow developers to test the concept through “demonstration projects.” This approach was taken by the City of Brunswick which made changes to some of its zoning districts in response to feedback from neighborhood groups.

Another way for Waconia to preserve some of its rural character is to establish new rural reserves within the portions of Laketown Township soon to be annexed. By limiting the amount and types of development allowed to those compatible with traditional rural/agricultural uses, the City would preserve a connection to its agriculturally-based heritage [Figure 17]. This option is not without its challenges. Attempting to determine which parcels will be allowed to be developed and which parcels must remain rural is sure to raise questions of fairness and equity from landowners. Programs that work to compensate these individuals, either through transfers of money or land swaps, have been tried in other communities. The visioning process can be used to help identify those rural areas that residents value most and allow the City to focus its efforts on the preservation of these natural resources.

An action that results in a more moderate impact than formulating changes to zoning districts is the addition of design guidelines or standards in the City’s land use regulations. While design standards require certain features to be incorporated into all construction (the inclusion of front porches, for example, on all single-family homes), design guidelines are used to suggest to both developers and permitting bodies the kinds of architectural and design features that are valued and desired by the community. Clearly the requirements associated with design standards result in a greater impact on development, but the greater level of complexity in drafting and interpreting these standards make them more difficult to implement. In some cases, development incentives such as increases in density are granted in return for implementation of
voluntary design guidelines to act as a “carrot” rather than the “stick” associated with the obligations of design standards. Carmel is considering strengthening its current design guidelines by transforming them into design standards which would be required to be incorporated into all new construction.

Finally, a simple way to convey the desires of the town is to include a Community Vision Statement in the Comprehensive Plan which clearly describes the type of development the City would like to see as it continues to grow. Although by itself this statement would carry very little weight in terms of influencing development decisions, it would embody the results of the visioning process.

While many of these regulatory actions could be undertaken by the City without first conducting a visioning process, what is then lost is the input of the residents. This community feedback is used to inform officials crafting these new regulations about the aspects of Waconia that the residents appreciate and how they would like to see their town develop. Without this interaction, City officials run the risk of unknowingly discontinuing features that are valued, or even encouraging features that are disliked.
SHORT-RUN OPPORTUNITIES

The actions outlined above are dependent on the community being able to identify some of the characteristics unique to Waconia and to incorporate them into a vision for what they would like their city to become. Even if that process is not undertaken, however, there are more immediate goals that the City can pursue to preserve and enhance some basic elements of its small town character as it continues to grow and change. These objectives are based on the four qualities often associated with small towns, as described in Section One – walkability, a strong town center, high levels of social interaction, and a connection to nature.

Monitor Downtown Redevelopment: The greatest opportunity to strengthen Waconia’s downtown is the result of the local Ford dealership relocating to Highway 5. Its departure from Main Street has left an important intersection open and ripe for redevelopment. While work within the former Ford garage building has already begun, the other three corners that once served as show lots for new cars have been left vacant [Figure 18]. Rather than allowing these lots to sit empty for an extended period of time, the City should encourage redevelopment that complements the other downtown structures and uses. Options such as designing a pocket park...
on one of the three corners to provide green space and an anchor for the west end of Main Street should be considered, as well as new buildings constructed in architectural styles similar to those used on neighboring businesses.

In general, Waconia should continue its efforts to keep office and governmental uses downtown and off of the highway. The two business districts in the downtown are currently free from the standards often required of modern commercial development since they are exempt from most lot requirements. Yet this freedom also leaves open the possibility that a developer might choose to pursue a site design that is detrimental to the atmosphere of the downtown. The City should draft lot requirements insisting that buildings be constructed up to the front lot line to continue the street facade, that they be built to a height that is consistent with neighboring buildings, that architectural styles and design details are examined through a design review process, and that on-site parking areas are relegated to the side or rear of the lot and do not dominate the streetscape. Recent efforts to unify the image of downtown through the phasing-in of consistent sidewalk patterns and period lampposts have helped to preserve the character of the downtown. If people enjoy walking and shopping along Main and First Streets, this area will continue to be a focal point for community interaction.

**Carefully Examine Highway Development:** With the construction of the new high school, an anchor point for future commercial development along the western portion of Highway 5 has been established. If this growth is not carefully regulated, strip development is likely to fill this segment of the road between the school and the existing commercial businesses near the intersection with Highway 284. Waconia has the opportunity to learn from the experience of Stowe, Vermont, and to revise its zoning code for the B-1 (Highway Business) district to achieve some of the same goals pursued there. In addition to adjusting the zoning to better regulate both the size of lots and the location of structures on them, architectural guidelines and/or design review should be used to improve the image of businesses along the highway and to discourage “big box” retail in its typical form. By reducing the scale of development and installing sidewalks and shade trees, the walkability of these commercial areas would increase and contribute to Waconia's character.

**Zone for Neighborhoods:** The proliferation of residential subdivisions in Waconia, as in other small towns, has left many residents living too far from the downtown area to comfortably walk there and use its commercial services. Without the compact form of the traditional small town, more and more trips are made with the automobile, reducing street interactions and causing congestion and parking problems in the downtown. By zoning key locations within walking
Figure 19: A barn near Waconia's new high school stands in contrast to the construction of townhouses next door.

Figure 20: This barn and silo were preserved, structurally restored, and incorporated into the design of a new high-end subdivision.
distance of residential neighborhoods for retail use, many day-to-day purchases can be obtained conveniently. Chaska, like a number of small communities in southeastern Pennsylvania, has established a Neighborhood Service zoning district. It allows uses such as grocery, drug store, hardware, laundry pick-up, barber and beauty shops, clinics, and finance, insurance and real estate services to locate near residential neighborhoods, but limits the total combined gross floor area of all buildings. By doing this, community-wide or regional “shopping center” development is prevented and the impacts of commercial uses near, or within, residential areas are minimized. Concerns about competition with downtown businesses may limit the usefulness of this type of zoning now, but as Waconia continues to grow, the far-flung residential areas will be able to support additional retail without reducing the vitality of the downtown. In addition, neighborhood-oriented retail provides increased opportunities for social interaction.

Protect Cultural and Rural Icons: The annexation of land outside of Waconia’s city limits will continue to displace rural uses that once played an important role in the City’s economy [Figure 19]. As icons of rural life – country homes, barns, silos, sheds, and other farm buildings – are removed and the landscape altered to support the construction of new homes, the City should acquire or support the preservation of prominent structures to maintain a sense of community heritage. Other developments, such as the one shown in Figure 20 just outside of Excelsior, Minnesota, have saved and renovated barns as landmarks to preserve the area’s history. Projects like this might be accomplished by working with the developer when significant structures are being threatened, or by including incentives in the zoning or subdivision ordinances to encourage such preservation.

Waconia’s current Subdivision Ordinance places value on the preservation of existing natural features and site amenities “such as trees, . . . watercourses and falls, beaches, historic spots, and similar irreplaceable assets,” and requires that these features be preserved in the design of subdivisions.59 Since much of the newly annexed land in the City was previously used for crop production, the lack of mature trees in new developments makes this an important goal. The difference between a development where mature trees were preserved and one where there were no trees is striking [Figures 21 and 22].

59 City of Waconia, Subdivision Ordinance, 26.
Figure 21: A large number of trees in this Sugarbush development were preserved . . .

Figure 22: . . . but the homes in this Pheasant Ridge development, built on corn fields, lack the same amenities.
We, the citizens, have been given a great physical legacy. The gift of our city has been built block by block, layer by layer, for more than one hundred years by those who came before us. Spreading outward from our downtown core—and helping to sustain it—are homes, infrastructures, services, and the diverse social fabric, which is our commonwealth. . . . Let our acts not diminish this gift, but leave it greater, better, and more beautiful than it was given to us.

~Morrish and Brown, Planning to Stay

**Conclusion**

The long-range planning techniques outlined in Section Four are general enough to be applied to a number of possible situations in Waconia or in other small towns. Rather than preparing a vision for the entire city, for example, a visioning process following these principles could be used to target only one issue or only one part of the community. In order to construct a more detailed demonstration of how a visioning process might be conducted, and what sorts of results might be expected, a useful exercise is the performance of a “simulation.” In a simulation, these principles of visioning are applied to a situation so that interested parties are able to speculate on the process and compare its hypothetical results to a known outcome. For Waconia, a situation ripe for performing this type of simulation is the redevelopment of two blocks of the downtown that occurred in the 1970s—i.e., the community-wide debate that took place regarding the City's plans to construct a shopping mall and the subsequent proposal put forth by local businessmen as outlined in Section Two. What if this second proposal had also been withdrawn and a visioning process had been used instead to help City officials, residents, and business owners to reach a general consensus over how the downtown should be redeveloped? How might the results have been different? Imagine that the following events had taken place . . .

Following the withdrawal of the proposal to redevelop the blocks between Main and First Streets with two anchor stores and a large parking area, much of Waconia becomes frustrated and loses interest in strengthening the downtown. For a number of years the vacant lots continue to grow weeds and the deteriorating buildings continue to sit empty with only minor attempts at
maintenance. The City Planner, still harboring some hopes for action, continues to look for opportunities to redevelop this site. After reading a number of articles in planning journals describing a new technique for community-based consensus building called a visioning process, she becomes intrigued. Wondering if Waconia could benefit from such a process, she begins to discuss with other City officials the idea of using this technique to develop a vision for the downtown – in particular the two blocks that were the focus of the previous attempts at redevelopment.

Members of the City Council are skeptical at first. They are unconvinced that a large group of participants representing many differing viewpoints could reach a consensus on how the downtown should develop. Additionally, they are unwilling to devote City funds to such a process without more evidence of its potential success. The City Planner contacts other communities that have used the visioning process and collects testimony from planners, city officials, and residents of these communities, as well as documentation of the proceedings, the summary documents produced, and photographs showing some of the resulting development. A few members of the Planning Commission express curiosity and they pressure the City Council to appoint a task force to look into the idea and feel out the level of community interest. The Council agrees, but warns it will not authorize any more funding for the process unless there is additional support from local businesses and other organizations in the City.

A small article is placed in the following week's edition of the *Waconia Patriot*, asking for residents willing to contribute their time to a group being formed to address the future of Waconia's downtown. Six people contact the Planning Department and are interested in serving on the task force. Two members of the Planning Commission and a lone member of the City Council also volunteer their services. Together with the City Planner, this ten person group meets for the first time a week later at City Hall to hear a presentation by the City Planner on the visioning process and how it has worked in other communities. They are generally supportive of the idea, but agree that it will require some groundwork on the part of the task force if it is to succeed, since much of the community has come to accept the state of the downtown and does not seem eager to tackle the issue.

Over the next few months, the task force continues to meet and work towards obtaining support for the visioning process. The Chamber of Commerce is contacted and helps secure pledges of support from a handful of local business if the process goes forward. Members of the task force discuss the idea with their friends and neighbors. They report back that although the current state of the downtown does not seem to be high on their agendas, those they talk with
tend to agree that creating a vision could help guide development. Some indicate they would be interested in attending a meeting to address the problem. The task force also agrees that while there are individuals within the community with design experience who would be useful in running a visioning process, hiring an outside consulting team to organize the exercises involved would avoid questions of bias. The City Planner contacts a number of firms that have conducted visioning processes and obtains estimates for the costs involved. Armed with all of this information, the task force reports back to the City Council and recommends committing to a visioning process that would focus on Waconia's downtown and create a general consensus about how it should develop. The Chamber of Commerce is also represented at the meeting, and with this show of support the City Council agrees to fund a portion of the costs and gives the task force a green light to proceed with preparations.

The task force now moves into a higher gear. In a series of meetings held every two weeks, they set a date for the visioning process— it will take place in the spring in conjunction with Waconia's annual Business Exposition. Using the Saturday event which highlights the various businesses in Waconia to kick-off the process, a series of exercises will take place over the next week leading up to a concluding session on the following Saturday. The task force reviews a handful of proposals and selects a consulting firm from the Twin Cities to begin designing the exercises that will make up the process. The task force decides that there are two parts involved in creating this vision. The first will be examining what has already been built in the downtown and finding out from the participants what they value and what uses and design features they would like to see incorporated into any new development. The second will be translating these ideas into recommendations to the City Council for regulations that will carry weight with potential developers.

In order to “prep” residents and get them thinking about the downtown, two members of the task force work with the Waconia Heritage Association and a reporter from the Patriot to draft a series of articles telling the story of Waconia's downtown and how it has evolved. The series will run the weeks before the visioning process begins and will culminate in two additional pieces. One will highlight the past proposals for the two block site on Main Street and their current state. The second will introduce the visioning process and point to its use by Morrise and Brown in Twin Cities neighborhoods. This piece will also encourage residents to attend Waconia's visioning process and give their input into what should be done with the downtown. A short segment is produced for the local cable station with help from students in the high school's video production class. This segment uses video clips to contrast Waconia's downtown
with thriving commercial areas in Excelsior, Mound, and other nearby cities, and points to the upcoming visioning process as one way residents can help shape the future of their community.

The task force is also aware of the need to involve the important players in the community and its members go out of their way to encourage them to take part in the visioning process. Special invitations are printed and sent to the Mayor, members of the City Council and the Planning Commission, other City officials, the owners of the parcels within the two block site, the Chamber of Commerce, businesses in the downtown and on the highway, representatives from the City's banks, local developers who have expressed interest in the site, and residents living within 300 feet of these two blocks. Other residents are notified through posters advertising the event posted throughout town as the date approaches, flyers distributed on the day of the Business Expo, and word of mouth spread by task force members to friends and organizations in which they are involved.

While this is going on, the consulting team makes a series of visits to Waconia to familiarize themselves with the community. They take photos of the downtown – both of the two block site and other buildings and businesses – and conduct informal surveys and interviews with residents. The team also visits neighboring communities and collects photos for use in the visioning exercises. On the Thursday before the Business Expo, task force members write editorial letters in the *Patriot* stressing the importance of citizen participation. Advertisements for the Expo include references to the visioning process, which has been entitled "Main Street Visions."

On the Saturday of the Business Expo, held at the high school, the consulting team sets up in the auditorium. At three points during the day – 12:00, 2:00, and 4:00 – they conduct a Visual Preference Survey tailored towards Waconia's downtown and the two blocks targeted for redevelopment. Attendees are shown a series of projected slides of various aspects of downtown commercial areas and asked to rate them according to their appeal. The slides depict a wide variety of building facades of differing architectural styles, street furniture such as lampposts and benches, street trees and flower boxes, small public plazas, parking lots in various locations and configurations, historic structures, and modern commercial buildings. At 6:00, once the Business Expo has concluded, 85 people gather in the common area for a dinner provided by a local Italian restaurant. A number of business owners stay and join the residents who have come for the kick-off of the visioning process. During dessert, a member of the task force welcomes the group and introduces the consulting team. One of the consultants gives a brief presentation, explaining to the crowd how the visioning process works and summarizing some of the comments and
concerns expressed about the downtown by residents while the consulting team was in Waconia over the past few months. The viewpoints of these residents cover a wide range, and touch on issues such as the desire for commercial activity to compete with surrounding towns, concerns over the loss of historic buildings, the perception of a parking shortage, and the need for a unified downtown image. The evening ends with a second slide show that uses “before” and “after” images to present some of the success stories of communities in which the consulting team has worked. They have also used a computer program to “doctor” slides they have taken of the two block site in order to help those in attendance realize the potential of the visioning process in Waconia.

Over the next two days, clips from videos taken during Saturday's event are compiled and a new segment focusing on the activities of the first meeting and a reminder of the second meeting is run on the local cable station. On Tuesday, task force members place phone calls to those who signed-in during the Visual Preference Survey or who attended the dinner and remind them of the next meeting that night. In addition, fliers are placed on cars in the downtown during the day. At 7:00 that night, the second session begins in the choir room at the middle school — only a few blocks from the site on Main Street. Coffee is provided by the local coffee shop and popcorn by the local movie theater. The session begins with the consulting team revealing the scores of the images from Visual Preference Survey from Saturday and helping to interpret the results. By revisiting the slides that were used, the consultants point out the design features that Waconia residents appreciate and explain some basic planning and design principles to show how these features influence their perception of the downtown. The session then breaks up and the 60 participants reassemble in small groups in classrooms, each with a member of the consulting team or another volunteer and a large pad of paper. Over the next hour, these small groups brainstorm and compile a list of ideas for how the two block site in Waconia's downtown could be redeveloped. Once the participants regroup in the choir room, the pieces of paper with their ideas are hung in the front and common themes are identified.

Before the next meeting on Thursday, the items on these lists are included as part of a second cable television segment that keeps residents informed of the group's progress. An article is run in Thursday's *Patriot* that summarizes the results of the visioning process thus far and encourages more people to attend the session that evening. Again held at the middle school, the third meeting begins with a quick review of the lists that were created on Tuesday night. Representatives from each group are asked to explain the items on their list and the rest of those in attendance are encouraged to raise questions. Through the moderation of the consultants, the interests behind these concepts are revealed. For example, one group has suggested the
construction of a small public plaza with tables and chairs on part of the site. With further probing from the consulting team, the participants learn that the real desire is to have a place where employees from downtown businesses can eat outdoors during the summer. This interest is matched by owners from two restaurants who have been looking to increase their lunchtime crowds. Talking through a number of these issues, participants begin to see the emergence of a shared vision for what the site in downtown Waconia could contain. Some issues, however, cannot be resolved. Many residents value the historic buildings that are now in poor condition and want to see them preserved. Local developers, on the other hand, argue that the costs of renovating these structures are too high and that the buildings need to be torn down to make way for new construction.

As a vision for the downtown begins to emerge, two members of the consulting team who are experts in land use regulation work with the group to point out opportunities to codify some of the areas of agreement so that future development complies with these ideas. Many participants concede that parking spaces in the downtown are lacking, but a large number are uncomfortable with images of individual parking lots separating the front doors of stores from the street. The consultants suggest regulations that prohibit parking on the front half of lots but encourage shared parking in the rear with access off of the alley or through a drive located between two buildings. Other possibilities are raised, including design review for new construction, tax breaks for developments that provide certain public amenities, and increases in allowed floor area for projects that incorporate residential apartments over commercial uses. When the participants head home at the end of the meeting, there appears to be a general consensus about how the residents of Waconia would like the two block site, and other portions of the downtown, to develop.

The task force has sent out a second set of invitations to the important players in Waconia's downtown development and has encouraged their attendance at a meeting on Saturday morning. At this final meeting, the participants of the visioning process will present their ideas to City officials and to the public. Contributions of bagels and pastries greet participants at 9:00 as they assemble in the auditorium at the high school. They begin by reviewing a draft of a summary document, prepared on Friday by the consulting team in cooperation with the task force, that attempts to outline the issues that were discussed during the process and the areas of agreement. For problems that could not be resolved, such as the issue of historic preservation, the views of both sides are expressed. City officials, including the Planning Commission, the City Council, and the Mayor, arrive at 11:00 along with other members of the public. The participants in the visioning process share their ideas with these newcomers and look for
feedback from the City. Discussion continues informally over lunch (catered by another local restaurant), and after the meal the group reassembles one last time to plan for how their suggestions can be addressed and to whom responsibility of coordinating follow-up should be left. At this point the burden shifts to the City, whose staff accept the challenge of investigating the feasibility of much of the vision. The City Planner and the Planning Commission agree to consider changes to the zoning ordinance, and the City Council promises to rely on the principles of the vision to help set the agenda when working with future downtown developers. To ensure that residents remain a part of the process, the task force agrees to continue meeting at regular intervals to check on the City's progress. Some current members of the task force retire, but new members, excited by the results of the visioning process, ask to join.

This revamped task force goes on to incorporate the revisions and the action plan into the summary document. When it is complete, it spells out a vision for the two block site and expresses the consensus reached regarding the elements that contribute to making Waconia's downtown a special place and how new developments can enhance this character. The action plan lists the goals the group reached during its final meeting and how the task force and the City will work together to address these issues. Once the document is complete, it is printed and a copy is sent to all Waconia residents. Other copies are placed in the library, set out at the Planning Office in City Hall, and given to developers who express an interest in the site. Both the Patriot and the local cable station do follow-up stories on the visioning process and point to the summary document as the product of a true community-based planning effort.

The usefulness in conducting a simulation exercise is the opportunity it gives the observer to see the general principles of a visioning process put into practice. From an exercise such as the one above, interested parties can speculate on the potential results of the process and recognize the important elements that determined its success (or failure). The simulation of the process used to plan for redevelopment in downtown Waconia can be divided into four stages, each with its own set of key steps that read like a check-list for other small towns undertaking a visioning process.

**Initiation**
- Isolate the problem or issue that needs to be addressed.
- Create a task force or committee to organize the process.
- Gather evidence of success from other communities.
- Seek support from residents, businesses, and City officials.
Preparation
- Conduct a carefully planned media blitz.
- Put pressure on key players to attend.
- Collect “good” and “bad” images to illustrate the opportunities.

Activities
- Plan a kick-off event to attract participants.
- Use images to get the attention of participants and show them the possibilities.
- Examine the existing features of the community.
- Draw out the interests behind the ideas.
- Strive to reach a consensus.
- Present the findings to the policy makers.

Outcomes
- Write a summary document or vision statement.
- Share the results with a wide audience.
- Make plans for additional action.

Although the visioning process itself concludes once the exercises are finished and the summary document is written, there are still important pieces that must fall into place in order for the recommendations put forth by the participants to reach fruition. For any visioning process, the momentum of the event must be sustained – albeit typically at a lower level of intensity – if changes are to be made in the community. In situations like the fictional story of Waconia described above and in other towns, the formation of a permanent task force or steering committee to revisit the issue from time to time can help ensure that the summary document is not put on a shelf in City Hall and forgotten. Members of this group can act as watch-dogs, attending city meetings and generating citizen turn-out when there are critical votes to be made in order to ensure that the city follows the vision that has been created.

For the residents of Waconia, the success of the visioning process in this simulation was dependent on the group of dedicated people who were willing to serve on the task force. These individuals were critical in organizing the support necessary to convince the City Council to fund the event, preparing the media campaign to attract potential participants, and involving the important players. This broad base of involvement from a variety of interests allowed the group to reach a meaningful consensus. Clearly the existing social capital contributed to the success of the process. But even this hard work does not guarantee that the final goals will be achieved. Without the follow-up of City officials to act on the recommendations of the task force or the right economic conditions to promote (re)development, the apparent success of the visioning process will not translate into real changes.
The consensus reached through this visioning process not only benefits residents, but it also helps City officials in Waconia by giving members of the Planning Commission and City Council the backing they need to work with developers and to ask for proposals that are consistent with the community vision. At the same time, it is worth noting that the important aspects of the visioning process in this simulation vary slightly from the more general list of techniques recommended for creating Waconia's long-range plans. This simulation reveals the added importance of finding a handful of dedicated people within the community to help promote the process, as well as the realization that media spots should contain more than just advertising for the event, but should be used to show residents the range of possibilities that could be attained.

If conducted correctly, the visioning process can be a meaningful way to involve residents in shaping the future of a community. Many small towns have unique characteristics, but they also share some common elements of compact form: walkability, strong downtowns, high levels of social interaction, and a connection to nature. New forms of development often work to dilute these characteristics and their effects must be carefully monitored. For small towns that are being threatened with a loss of community character due to an influx of new people, the visioning process accomplishes two things: it allows residents to work with city officials to create a common vision for how the town will grow and for what it will look like.

Waconia, Minnesota, faces problems similar to many other small towns across the country – how do you maintain the unique character of a community as it experiences large and sometimes rapid change? Over its history, Waconia's form has evolved and has begun to move away from its traditional patterns of development. Other towns facing similar problems have attempted to address them by conducting exercises that allow residents to explore and understand the characteristics of their neighborhoods, and then to incorporate these features into regulations that encourage them to included in future redevelopment and in new construction. A visioning process that includes elements of discovery and informed regulation has shown to be an effective avenue for carrying out these exercises.

Although the residents of Waconia are not clamoring for local government action to address this issue, the high levels of social capital and the impending additional growth in the community indicate a visioning process that examines the character of the town may be useful and successful. Past planning initiatives in Waconia have resulted in extensive debate and disagreement; the consensus building focus of a visioning process would help to unify public opinion rather than to disperse it. Once the City sets things in motion, either through its own
actions or through those of a task force, long-range visioning and the accompanying regulatory changes can help shape future development and preserve the character of the community.
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