

# “But We Just Did a Strategic Plan...”

## *A Checklist to Evaluate Your Community’s Strategic Plan*

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*A strategic vision and action plan that is bold, compelling and embraced by the entire community is one of the most powerful engines to move a community toward its desired future.*

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**Scenario:** You are in a meeting in your community at which the topic of strategic planning comes up. Although your community completed a strategic plan three or four years ago, there is interest in doing another plan. The group is divided between those who favor staying with the existing plan, those who want to undertake a new plan and those who think it is all a waste of time. How can you sort through this issue and make the best decision for your community and its future?

**Response:** Many communities that have gone through some kind of strategic planning process in recent years ask the question – should we redo our strategic plan, stay with it as it is or just start over? The following questions are designed to help you understand the value of your existing plan and what direction you should take in planning for your future, based on five key factors:

- 1) the status of your current plan,
- 2) usage of your current plan,
- 3) relevance of your current plan,
- 4) substance of your current plan and
- 5) implementation of your current plan.

For a community to take maximum advantage of strategic visioning and planning, it needs to initiate a complete strategic vision and action plan every three to five years, and update the plan once a year.

### Status of Your Current Plan



- 1) Does your community have a strategic plan?  
 Yes. Would you like to see a copy?  
 We were part way through the planning process, but became bogged down.  
 No  
 I know we have one around here somewhere; maybe they have a copy at city hall.

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**PRINCIPLE #1:** A strategic plan does not exist if nobody knows it is there.

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- 2) If you are part way through the planning process, how much do you already have done?  
 Phase I. Strategic Thinking – looking at your community from an overall perspective – what has taken place in your community’s past, assessing your current strengths and weaknesses and describing what is going on in the world and your region.  
 Phase II. Visioning – involving your community in describing its desired future and identifying critical issues that must be addressed to realize that future.

- \_\_\_ Phase III. Development of a Draft Strategic Plan – developed by Study Action Teams to address these issues.
- \_\_\_ Phase IV. Gaining Feedback and Commitment – seeking final input and commitment from organizations, leaders and interested citizens, announcing that the plan is complete and celebrating this victory.
- \_\_\_ Phase V. Implementation of Your Plan – organizations, study action teams and individuals implement the plan.

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**PRINCIPLE #2:** The wheel has already been invented once.

**COROLLARY:** Always build on what has been done in your community. All phases that were completed in the last six months or so, have not been subject to major changes in the community and are supported by the leadership of your community do not need to be redone.

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## Usage of Your Current Plan



- 3) Does the leadership of your community refer to your strategic plan and use it as a blueprint for action?
  - \_\_\_ Yes
  - \_\_\_ No. We have had a lot of turnover since the plan was developed.
  - \_\_\_ Some do, some don't.
  - \_\_\_ What strategic plan?
  - \_\_\_ Are you kidding? You obviously have never been to our community.

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**PRINCIPLE #3:** A rock is just as useful as a strategic plan that just sits on the shelf.

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- 4) Are the citizens in your community knowledgeable about your strategic plan?
  - \_\_\_ Yes
  - \_\_\_ Some are, some aren't.
  - \_\_\_ No
  - \_\_\_ No, and they don't care either, so there.

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**PRINCIPLE #4:** It is hard to support something you don't know anything about.

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- 5) Were the citizens of your community involved in the development of your strategic plan?
  - \_\_\_ Yes
  - \_\_\_ Some were
  - \_\_\_ No

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**PRINCIPLE #5:** It is hard to support a plan for your future if you had no voice in it.

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## Relevance of Your Current Plan

- 6) For what geographic boundaries was it developed?
  - \_\_\_ Our city limits
  - \_\_\_ Our community's trade area
  - \_\_\_ Our county
  - \_\_\_ A region, including parts of other counties as well.
  - \_\_\_ Community is not a matter of geography – it is a feeling, an emotion.
  - \_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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**PRINCIPLE #6:** Boundaries help us to know who is in, who is out and who is on the fence.

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- 7) Are these the same boundaries as those for which you want a strategic plan now?
  - \_\_\_ Yes
  - \_\_\_ Pretty close
  - \_\_\_ Not by a country mile




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**PRINCIPLE #7:** If the plan was developed for someone else, it is not your plan.

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- 8) When was the plan completed?
  - \_\_\_ Within the last three years
  - \_\_\_ More than three years ago, and some of it is out of date.
  - \_\_\_ We are still working on it, and at this rate the future will have come and gone before we get it done.

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**PRINCIPLE #8:** Strategic plans grow stale and out of date within three to five years.

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- 9) Why did your community develop a strategic plan?
  - \_\_\_ To plan for the future of the whole community
  - \_\_\_ To receive ACE certification from the Arkansas Department of Economic Development

- To apply for funds from the federal EC-EZ initiative
- To stimulate economic development
- I really don't know, and I haven't found anyone else who knows either.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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**PRINCIPLE #9:** A plan developed for one purpose may not fit your purposes today.

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## Substance of Your Strategic Plan

- 10) Is your strategic plan really strategic?
- Yes. It describes the most important actions we can take at this time, building on the unique strengths and assets of our community and our understanding of the emerging environment in the region, the state and the world.
  - No. It looks like any other community's plan (perhaps because we borrowed most of it from another community).
  - Half way in the middle between these two positions.

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**PRINCIPLE #10:** Strategic plans that are not strategic should be called something else.

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- 11) Is your strategic plan really a plan?
- Yes. It is a blueprint for the future, including actions and projects to be undertaken, when they are to be completed, by whom and with what resources.
  - No. But it is a good list of things that just ought to be done. Somebody should get folks together and start to work on this list, but they just won't do it.
  - Halfway between these two perspectives.

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**PRINCIPLE #11:** Strategic plans that are really lists of things to do should be called lists.

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- 12) Does your strategic plan describe a vision of your community's desired future?
- Yes
  - I am sure vision is in there somewhere – you just have to look for it.
  - No. We prefer to describe a vision after it has all been accomplished. It's much more accurate that way.




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**PRINCIPLE #12:** If your community does not have a vision of your desired future, how will you know when you get there?

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- 13) Was your strategic plan developed with an understanding of the New Economy – the Information Age in a global economy, and the real opportunities and threats that this new era presents to your community?
- Yes
  - No
  - Nah – the New Economy is just a hoax.
  - It will happen, but it won't affect our community – we believe in self-sufficiency.

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**PRINCIPLE #13:** Technology is like a steamroller – you are either riding on the steamroller or you end up as part of the road.

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## Implementation of Your Current Plan



- 14) How much of your strategic plan has been implemented?
- Most all of it
  - Some parts of it
  - None so far
  - You mean that our plan is supposed to be implemented?

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**PRINCIPLE #14:** If your strategic plan has already been implemented, you need a new plan that describes priorities and an action plan to achieve those priorities.

**COROLLARY:** A good strategic plan should be implemented; but only once.

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- 15) Is your strategic plan in the process of being implemented?
- Yes
  - Some parts of it
  - No. We have lost our momentum.
  - No. We are waiting for funding.
  - No. We need technical assistance with some of our projects.
  - No. But I can't think of a good excuse right at the moment.

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**PRINCIPLE #15:** Followers settle for excuses; leaders settle only for results.

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16) Do you have a broad-based organization established to oversee implementation and funding of the plan beyond the initial planning process?

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ We are now in the process of putting that together.

\_\_\_ You were doing fine until you mentioned funding.

\_\_\_ No. But it sounds good to me.

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**PRINCIPLE #16: Everybody's dog is nobody's dog.**

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## Summary

If your strategic vision and action plan was developed within the last year or two, was developed with broad-based community involvement, is supported by and used by the leadership of the community, and still represents the most important priorities and major projects of your community, you may just need to update the plan, based on the elements discussed above.

However, if your strategic plan is three years old or older, is no longer being used by the leadership and citizens of your community, most of it is obsolete or already accomplished, you will need to initiate a new strategic visioning and planning process.

*Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans, aim high in hope and work. Remember that our sons and grandsons [and daughters and granddaughters] are going to do things that would stagger us.*

– Daniel Hudson Burnham, Architect who designed Union Station, Washington, D.C.