

Community Matters Now



A monthly publication for Iowa leaders from Extension and Outreach Community and Economic Development

VISIONING PROGRAM PRACTICES VIRTUAL AND SOCIALLY-DISTANCED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

By Sandra Oberbroeckling | Extension Program Specialist

Is public participation possible during a pandemic?

That was the question facing Iowa's Living Roadways Community Visioning program staff in mid-March, when Iowa State University canceled all in-state travel for employees.

Julia Badenhope, ISU professor and visioning program director, decided to use COVID-19 as an opportunity to explore innovative ways to engage the public without compromising the safety of staff, students, and community members.

The result has been a hybrid of virtual meetings and socially-distanced, in-person gatherings held outdoors when possible. At in-person gatherings, masks and hand sanitizer are available for all participants.

A key component of the visioning process is the design workshop, a public meeting at which, under normal circumstances, residents gather to provide input on transportation enhancements proposed by a design team consisting of a landscape architect and student intern(s). Engaging

the public in a similar manner during a pandemic posed a unique challenge.

To compensate for the inability to hold large gatherings, visioning program staff and private-sector design consultants created installations highlighting design proposals, installing the displays throughout the communities and soliciting feedback through online surveys, interactive window displays, community websites, and social media. Because design proposals are on display for several days—either as physical installations or online—rather than during a one-day workshop, residents had more flexibility to offer input.

“Creating more dynamic engagement within communities through social media and installations has led to not only a safer process during this pandemic, but also a more inclusive and public process,” said Badenhope.

Going forward, the program will continue to employ a variety of engagement techniques and offer virtual options for meetings to improve the ability of program staff and participants adapt to unexpected situations.



In Elkader, residents offered feedback to design consultants at an outdoor venue.

“The investment of time and design thinking of the landscape architects and interns and the willingness to experiment in communities are ingredients that made the program a success,” said Badenhope.

The Community Visioning Program is sponsored by the Iowa Department of Transportation in partnership with ISU Extension and Outreach and Trees Forever. More information is available on the program [website](http://www.communityvisioning.org) (www.communityvisioning.org).



The design team for Wellsburg created an interactive window display where residents could vote for their favorite designs using stickers.

ONLINE RESOURCES

[APPLICATION FOR 2021 COMMUNITY VISIONING PROGRAM \(DUE OCT. 15\)](#)

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[BUILDING TEAM CAPACITY DURING COVID-19](#)

[REGISTRATION FOR VIRTUAL IOWA LEAGUE OF CITIES ANNUAL CONFERENCE](#)

[COVID-19 FEDERAL RURAL RESOURCE GUIDE](#)

EXTENSION CED HELPS IOWANS MAINTAIN A SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

Merriam-Webster defines “community” as “a unified body of individuals, such as people with common interests living in a particular area, or a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living within a larger society.” In community development we identify “communities of place” as being defined by geography (a city, a county, a region) and “communities of interest” being defined by shared missions, interests, or values (clubs, professional organizations, mission-defined nonprofits). Merriam-Webster captures both of these concepts.

A key attribute of a successful community group is its ability to function well *in a group*—to come together in a room to discuss goals and aspirations, identify and overcome challenges, or simply to strengthen the personal relationships that add meaning to their endeavors by sharing a meal or enjoying an event. It is easy to

see how, in a pandemic world, the sense of community can suffer. Personal isolation can make us as individuals feel cut off from our communities. The work of building toward common goals slows. Not being able to look our friends in the eyes for months at a time frays our bonds. It’s one thing to say “let’s Zoom”; it’s quite another to have something of *meaning* come from these virtual interactions.

We in CED have spent a lot of time since March thinking about this challenge. How do we help groups maintain relationships, progress toward goals and their sense of purpose in our current world of two-dimensional communications? We have investigated the latest tools and best practices of virtual collaborations. We have redesigned, experimented, and refined our approaches to online education and group processes such as strategic planning and

goal setting. We’ve had successes—a few failures (we apologize for those)—and we are putting to use what we’ve learned. In this issue we highlight a few examples of how we have helped groups come together to continue to carry out their missions. It can be done successfully, and even enjoyably! While the medium is virtual, the results are real.

Contact us. We want to help your community continue on its path to building a better future



Gary Taylor
Program Director, Iowa State University
Extension and Outreach Community and
Economic Development

EXTENSION CED OFFERS VIRTUAL MISSION-STATEMENT WORKSHOPS FOR NONPROFITS

By Lynn Adams | Community Development Specialist

Many nonprofit boards are feeling the effects of how COVID-19 is changing things for them operationally to fulfill their mission and are making plans to engage in strategic planning. That’s a good thing. However, the pandemic has hindered board members’ ability to meet in person. That’s a bad thing.

Since the pandemic started, the Community and Economic Development CED program in Iowa State University Extension and Outreach had been quite proactive in developing and delivering virtual programming, and mission-statement workshops are no exception. CED specialists recently facilitated a virtual workshop with the board of directors of the American Poultry Association in which it updated its mission statement

in preparation for strategic planning. The updated version will serve them well as the organization moves forward to establish its priorities and goals for the future.

An up-to-date mission statement is critical for that planning process because it states more than just what a nonprofit does. It also communicates why, where, when, for whom, and how the organization does its work. If the organization’s vision states the ultimate change to occur through time, the mission statement is the working map to achieve the overall goal. COVID-19 may very well cause nonprofit boards to make adaptations or changes that their current mission statements do not reflect.

Mission statements can clarify for staff and volunteers what directions to take as

they make decisions about the best use of resources for activities, programs, and services to achieve the vision. It has the external purpose of engaging the public for volunteerism, advocacy, donations, and use of its services and programs. It accomplishes so much if it effectively communicates what people need to know to work within or engage with the organization. For example, staff may decline a grant opportunity, or a volunteer may decide it is possible to interact with activities based on the service area defined in the mission statement.

CED offers both virtual and in-person options for a facilitated mission-statement workshop. Interested organizations can contact Lynn Adams, at adamsml@iastate.edu.

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PALO ALTO CO. SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETES VIRTUAL GOAL SETTING

By Julie Aberg Robison | Project Manager, Institute for Design Research and Outreach

Goal setting is an activity that is hard to imagine doing virtually, yet community members in Palo Alto County met up recently for a Virtual Goal Workshop facilitated by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Community and Economic Development (CED) to focus on Local Economic Development and COVID-19 Transition and Recovery.

Two sessions brought together local and county government leaders, economic development organizations, and business and nonprofit partners with the goal of considering current impacts of the pandemic and immediate response, ongoing commitments, and emerging priorities while keeping in mind long-term strategic goals.

Workshop attendees discussed how the closures associated with the pandemic impacted local businesses and families. Discussion focused on immediate actions to strengthen downtown businesses and the retail and restaurant environment. Specific actions identified focused on downtown beautification and ongoing goals such as installing planters, increasing outdoor eating and seating options to bring more people back downtown, and improving networking and cross-promotion of local businesses. One long-term goal was developing a downtown strategic plan with short-term

implementation phases to keep everyone engaged.

Engaging the community through partnerships was an important topic. An effort to help nonprofits and service organizations with response efforts during the pandemic was a top priority, including finding more activities for children and virtual programming for individuals shuttered in assisted living and group homes. Numerous actions were identified to engage volunteers to meet more community needs.

To participate, attendees needed to have a computer with stable internet connection and devote a total of four hours to the process. The facilitation team used a combination of Zoom, Google Docs, and Miro (a collaboration tool) to engage attendees in an interactive manner. The team facilitated small-group discussions using the breakout room feature in Zoom. Facilitators helped the groups focus on developing specific action plans using the Issues to Action and Action Plan planning templates, tools based on ToP (Technology of Participation) facilitation methods.



The closing activity asked the question, "What will people (in our community) experience as a result of our actions?" Images were layered over a downtown streetscape (see graphic above) and selected by participants at end of workshop, after having completed the Issues to Action and Action Plan frameworks. Attendees were encouraged by their collective commitment to engage everyone in the community in the path forward.

The workshop was sponsored by the Palo Alto County Extension Office and is the first of three virtual goal-setting workshops that will be offered to local government, economic development partners, and nonprofit organizations over the coming months in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For more information, please contact Julie Robison at jrobison@iastate.edu.

STRATEGIC GOAL SETTING—EVEN DONE VIRTUALLY—IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

By Eric Christianson | Community Development Specialist

An important driver of success in communities is the ability of leaders to act strategically. Especially in city government, it can be easy for the day-to-day work of running a city to dominate the council's time. Some councils go years without ever really sitting down and thinking broadly together about common priorities. This can lead feeling like the city is jumping from issue to issue without making meaningful progress on the things that are most important to the community.

Fortunately, there is a simple solution. Even one goal-setting session a year can do wonders for your community. The process is fairly simple. We first use a consensus-based process to determine top priorities for the next year. We then consider ongoing commitments and the strengths and weaknesses of your community. Then we focus on the specific actions that need to take place and who is responsible for getting it done. Ideally this session is

made up of the full council, the mayor, key staff, and even community partners. The goals should be important, realistic, and actionable.

Goal setting has many benefits, and communities that make this an annual or even biennial tradition experience significant changes. The goal-setting document presents clear instructions to staff about what council is dedicated to achieving over the coming year. It keeps the focus on the issues that are most important to progress in the community. The process also helps maintain the council's focus. By beginning with common goals, valuable time is saved as the focus is immediately on those issues that have majority support.

The goal-setting document is also excellent as an evaluation tool. At the end of the year, the council can look back their goals and evaluate their success in achieving them. Putting goals down on paper creates the

opportunity for frank conversations among staff, council, and the community about what got done, what did not, and why.

Due to the exceptional circumstances, this year's goal-setting documents will most likely not reflect what communities did in the last even months. That is OK! These are meant to be short-term, living documents. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach has developed a process for fully digital goal-setting meetings that preserve the interaction and collaboration of our in-person meetings. In times like these when it can feel like every day brings new challenges and opportunities, taking the time to consider your overall goals and objectives is more important than ever.

If your city or other organization would like to discuss options for goal setting this fall, contact Eric Christianson at 515-231-6513 or ejchr@iastate.edu.

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