

## Putting Vision into Action: An Oregon Community Makes Change Happen

By Steven Ames and Erik Jensen

In the 1990s the community visioning process came into its own in the U.S., offering local jurisdictions a new way to think about and plan for the long-term future. Visioning quickly caught on around the country, especially in communities experiencing rapid growth and development. Through visioning, many communities were able to identify and articulate shared values, understand external forces of change, and envision preferred futures for the first time. As an adjunct to traditional planning approaches, visioning helped provide a stronger sense of direction and deepen citizen involvement. It also gave many communities a greater sense of control over their destinies.

Despite such positive attributes, the community visioning process has not been without its critics. For some, visioning has an inherent Achilles' heel in its tendency to focus on the "big picture," often at the expense of follow-up actions or tangible results. Such criticisms are not unfounded. Often, nothing much happens as the result of a visioning process. To counter this tendency, some communities have incorporated action planning or benchmarking systems into their visioning efforts. Still, if there has been a missing link, it's implementation—actually making the envisioned future happen.

### Breaking New Ground in Community Visioning

"Nothing much" was one result the city of Hillsboro, Oregon, was not interested in as it launched its first comprehensive visioning effort. A one-time agricultural community on the western edge of the Portland metropolitan area, Hillsboro in the 1990s had burgeoned into a full-service city. It was experiencing the kind of rapid growth that called for a strategic vision. At the same time, Hillsboro was still "small town" enough that people would know if its visioning efforts came up empty-handed. So the organizers of Hillsboro 2020, the city's community-based visioning process, made a commitment to ensure real results. Moreover, even in a state known for its local planning innovation, Hillsboro 2020 broke new ground in the way it engaged the community in implementing its vision. As a result, it took visioning further than any Oregon city before it.

Today, only two years after adoption of the community's Vision and Action Plan, a host of vision-friendly initiatives and projects are moving forward—and more are on the way. From a major new downtown public square, to planning for bicycle and pedestrian trails, to a new community day care facility, the people of Hillsboro are methodically bringing their vision to life. Hillsboro has been honored for its accomplishments, winning major awards from the League of Oregon Cities and the International Association for Public Participation. More importantly, it has pioneered new approaches and techniques that may help other communities make similar strides.

### A City in Search of Identity

When the city launched its visioning process in 1997, it was no stranger to change. Between 1970 and 1990, it had grown at an average rate of 8 percent annually (see Hillsboro 2020 vision index sidebar). Since the 1970s, Hillsboro had more than doubled in size through annexation, attracted dozens of new high technology companies, including Intel, seen the construction of new housing subdivisions and major new commercial developments, and hosted the construction of the Portland region's Westside MAX light rail line. For the most part, this growth occurred in a well-planned, orderly fashion. In retrospect, however, that may have been the easy part.

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What was not so easy was integrating Hillsboro's spectacular growth into a cohesive community. By 1997, the "old" Hillsboro was part of a much larger city, one that was struggling with its identity. There were waves of new people and new neighborhoods. Some newcomers were well-educated workers from other countries attracted by Hillsboro's high-tech jobs; others were former migrant workers looking to sink roots and raise families. There were residents of transit-oriented communities who saw themselves as pioneers of new urban lifestyles, and residents of large, new apartment complexes who did not even know they lived in Hillsboro. None of these pieces connected very well, socially or physically. The challenge facing Hillsboro's visioning process was to help bring it all together.

There were other, more tangible challenges: The visioning process had been initiated as part of the city's comprehensive plan update activities, and needed to address specific planning requirements; it had to actively include a rapidly growing Hispanic population in any public dialogue; and it had to



respond to a degree of citizen skepticism as to whether an official vision for the city would truly reflect the community's aspirations—or if it would ever be implemented. The city was determined to meet all of these challenges.

### **Laying a Foundation for the Visioning Process**

Hillsboro commenced its visioning activities as many communities do: by taking stock. During the early project phases in 1997, the city conducted a scientific poll of the community and held focus groups for community leaders. Then it developed a comprehensive community profile, which involved compiling demographic data, examining emerging trends and issues, and exploring core community values. This information helped establish a common knowledge base that would inform the entire process.

Next, the city began to prepare for the planning phases of the process. The overriding goal was to develop a community-based vision and action plan, but the city also hoped to address multiple community concerns, tackle the “identity question,” and engage Hillsboro’s newest residents. With the hiring of a consultant team, a formal design was developed, detailing how the project would be organized, how it would involve the community, and what types of issues would be discussed. Based on the city’s earlier research, six major public discussion “focus areas” were identified:

- strengthening and sustaining community;
- preserving the environment;
- enhancing neighborhoods and districts;
- expanding educational and cultural horizons;
- promoting health and safety; and
- creating economic opportunity.

The broad-ranging nature of these focus areas called for a diverse group of community stakeholders from the public, private, civic, and nonprofit sectors to be involved. The city employed several tactics to bring all these stakeholders into the discussion: local corporations and businesses were asked to serve as process sponsors and contributors; citizen committees and work groups were structured to represent the community’s many diverse interests and organizations; and community partners were solicited during the planning process to help develop and implement the plan once it was completed.

### **Charting the Course for the Future**

In fall 1998, Hillsboro 2020 launched its most ambitious phase, creating a vision. Engaging an entire community in developing a vision can be a complex undertaking. To make the task more manageable, Hillsboro 2020 employed a two-track approach: at the community level, the general public was involved in

identifying community values, as well as vision ideas and priorities; meanwhile, in a parallel process, a citizen Vision Task Force organized, filtered, and refined public input into a final vision statement. These two tracks were closely linked, constantly feeding information and ideas back and forth throughout the visioning phase.

The public involvement effort left no stone unturned. More traditional activities included community forums, workshops, and special interest focus groups. The public outreach campaign also included a newsletter, *The Horizon*, distributed to every household in Hillsboro, a professionally produced video, and a volunteer speakers’ bureau, as well as a webpage, phone-in hotline, and direct mailings. Project branding, including a logo and graphic icons, gave all public materials a consistent, professional look and feel.

There were also more novel outreach activities. For example, the Hillsboro 2020 Vision Fair kicked off the primary public involvement phase. Piggybacking on a popular farmers and crafts market in downtown Hillsboro, a vision fair tent staffed by city employees and volunteers drew shoppers with interactive displays, fact sheets, and a raffle. The deputy city manager even got in on the act and coaxed passers by to talk about their visions for the community in front of a video camera. Not surprisingly, they had lots of opinions and some very good ideas.

Honoring the objective to engage Hillsboro’s Hispanic population, all major public involvement and outreach activities were replicated in Spanish, including the workshops and forums, focus groups, the newsletter (*El Horizonte*), the project video, direct mailings, and the hotline. While this commitment to a bilingual process increased project costs, it paid back many times over in new links forged with the Hispanic community. As a result, their perspective was fully incorporated into the broader community vision.

Working with all of this input was the Hillsboro 2020 Vision Task Force, a 27-member citizen advisory group appointed by city council and structured to reflect the broad diversity of the community. The task force was charged with developing the project’s two major products: a broad vision statement of the community in 2020, and an action plan for getting there. As part of its activities, task force members gathered ideas and input through public involvement activities, and also worked in small groups to craft the actual vision. Task force meetings were recorded for local cablecast, and the public was welcome to attend meetings and share their comments.

By early 1999, the task force’s initial work was complete, and Hillsboro had a comprehensive community vision. The vision statement included an overarching “umbrella” vision and six component visions, one for each focus area. The new vision spoke to issues consistently raised by citizens during the process, such as preserving Hillsboro’s “hometown” qualities for multiple generations, promoting greater community cohesiveness, building stronger physical and social connections, and enhancing community livability.

The Hillsboro 2020 Vision Statement was approved by city council in June 1999. The degree of citizen support shown for the new vision was impressive, including praise from some quarters of the community that in the past had been critical of the city’s public involvement efforts. One long-time community activist and a sometime critic of city policies summed up many people’s sentiments: “I have been involved in citizen involvement ...quite a while,” he said,

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“... and I have to say that this process that we just went through is without a doubt, the best citizen involvement process I have ever been involved in.”

### **Translating Vision into Strategies and Actions**

Riding on the momentum of its successful visioning effort, the Hillsboro 2020 process turned to the next question of how to bring this vision to life. The task at hand was to develop a series of actions designed to achieve the vision over the next 20 years. The task force took on the second part of its charge—developing the vision action plan. In addition, the city continued its public participation during this phase by establishing six working Vision Action Teams charged with developing and recommending action plans for each of the six focus areas.

The action teams had a unique “tripartite” membership structure: roughly one-third of each team was drawn from the task force, promoting consistency of the plan with the vision; another third represented new faces who brought special expertise, experience or community connections to the table; a final third were city employees from various departments who served as technical resource people. Each team had a dual leadership structure: a professional facilitator who organized and conducted meetings and a designated chair who guided team deliberations and decisions. Before the action teams commenced their work, all members participated in a training session, where they were brought up to speed on the visioning process and learned the basics of strategic planning.

With six focus areas, 81 team members, and a long list of starter ideas developed during the visioning phase, the action planning process was a highly complex undertaking working with a huge volume of information. This posed the distinct possibility of becoming bogged down in details or falling behind schedule. To reduce that chance, the project team developed a uniform meeting schedule, as well as common meeting agendas, action plan “specifications,” and product deadlines. The overall process was highly structured, but this regimentation kept things on time and on track. Meanwhile, the task force continued to meet, refining and reconciling the work of the action teams in order to produce the overall plan.

A sophisticated “matrix planning” system was also used to organize and manage plan development. The matrix included a hierarchy of strategies and actions organized by a series of action plan elements (i.e., lead role, potential partners, cost range/sources, timeline, etc.). As consulting team member Jason Robertson of Barney and Worth, Inc., recalls, there were two reasons for using this system: “One was to manage and track the development of over a hundred action items...and the other was to keep our sanity.” The beauty of the system, he adds, was its ability to function as a clearinghouse, wherein information developed by individual teams could be collected, edited, updated, and redistributed to the whole group.

Given the community-based nature of Hillsboro 2020, one of the most innovative aspects of the action planning process was the inclusion of potential plan implementors, or “community lead partners,” in its development. In addition to the city, these organizations included a broad range of local entities, such as the Chamber of Commerce, the local hospital, community nonprofit groups, and other public agencies. Some lead partners were already represented on the action teams, but others were not, and there was a need to ascertain their willingness to take on a lead role in implementing specific

## **A HILLSBORO 2020 VISION INDEX**

- Population of Hillsboro, 1980: **28,000**
- Population of Hillsboro, 2000: **70,000**
- Population increase in 20 years: **150%**
- Physical area of Hillsboro, 1980: **6,660 acres**
- Physical area of Hillsboro, 2000: **13,760 acres**
- Physical area increase in 20 years: **107%**
- Percentage of Hillsboro’s population that is Hispanic, 1980: **4.7%**
- Percentage of Hillsboro’s population that is Hispanic, 2000: **19%**
- Largest employer in Hillsboro: **Intel Corporation**
- Number of Intel employees in Hillsboro, 2002: **14,500**
- Number of visioning planning process business sponsors: **9**
- Number of years to conduct the visioning planning phase: **3**
- Copies of visioning process newsletter distributed per printing: **30,000**
- Number of citizens directly involved in the visioning planning phase: **1,500+**
- Number of community workshops and forums during visioning planning phase: **6**
- Number of languages used in visioning process: **2**
- Total number of meetings related to Hillsboro 2020, to date: **153**
- Number of task force, action team, and implementation committee meetings, to date: **79**
- Number of Speakers’ Bureau presentations: **35**
- Number of community meetings and workshops: **29**
- Number of citizens serving on the Vision Task Force: **27**
- Number of citizens serving on the Vision Action Teams: **81**
- Number of citizens serving on the Vision Implementation Committee: **20**
- Number of Hillsboro 2020 community partners working on vision implementation: **18**
- Number of Vision Action Plan strategies: **46**
- Number of Vision Action Plan actions: **114**
- Number of vision actions undertaken or completed since 2000: **70**
- Number of vision actions to be implemented by City of Hillsboro: **62**
- Value of city-implemented vision actions this fiscal year: **\$2.5 million**
- Fewest number of actions to be implemented by a community partner: **1**





## A VISION ACTION SUCCESS STORY

One of the most popular strategies that emerged from the Hillsboro 2020 vision process was to establish an integrated system of sidewalks and bike paths throughout Hillsboro. To this end, a public/private Bicycle and Pedestrian Task Force was formed in 2000 to help guide this strategy. Within the last two years, the task force has identified priority bicycle/pedestrian projects, held transportation funding workshops, obtained grant money for the first project, and began developing a public bike route map. In the coming years, the task force will develop a 20-year master plan providing a comprehensive approach for bicycle and pedestrian pathways citywide. By enhancing the bicycle and pedestrian environment in Hillsboro, this committee is helping to make the Hillsboro 2020 vision a reality.

actions. Thus, the task force held a special meeting with these groups to solicit their commitment. This approach proved to be highly successful, providing an essential "reality check" for the process and helping build community ownership for proposed actions to ensure their eventual implementation.

The city council reviewed and adopted the final *Hillsboro 2020 Vision and Action Plan* in May 2000. With its bright green and white cover and sunburst logo, the final report quickly became a familiar item in the hands of citizens at various meetings of city council, the planning commission, and other public bodies. Upon adoption of the plan, the process was officially completed. At the same time, a successor phase to Hillsboro 2020 was already being readied, as the community prepared to take the process of envisioning its future one step further.

### Bringing Planned Change to Life

With three years of intensive vision planning under its belt and a plan in hand, it might have been tempting for Hillsboro to rest on its laurels. Instead, it opted to push its visioning process forward into uncharted territory. Prior to Hillsboro 2020, few Oregon communities had been very deliberate in implementing a vision, and none had developed a framework that others might replicate.

In September the city acted on one of the task force's recommendations, establishing a committee charged with monitoring and facilitating vision implementation. A new, 20-member Vision Implementation Committee was formed with a representative membership, including community partners, other key community interests, and the public-at-large. The committee decided early on that its approach would be "friendly persuasion," supporting and encouraging lead partners to keep the community's vision on the front burner.

As a key tool in achieving its charge, the committee developed an annual survey for the plan's lead partners with questions concerning how they were doing in implementing their designated actions, what kind of information or assistance they might require, and how the committee might help. As community leaders, committee members were ready to back up that offer with calls and visits. During the first two years of implementation, most of the surveyed partners responded quickly and positively. With the information that was collected, the committee established a rolling database of implementation activities and achievements. The survey allowed the committee to track and monitor vision progress, and provided a platform for the eventual refinement and update of the action plan.

A specific part of the committee's charge had been to host an annual Vision Town Hall meeting, establishing a regular community event that might serve as a milestone and beacon of the community's progress. After much planning and marketing, the first town hall meeting was held in the spring of 2001. With visual reports on implementation "success stories," community partner displays, and open discussion and feedback, the town hall meeting offered diverse ways for citizens to take stock of and celebrate the community's progress. Attendance was strong, and the feedback was uniformly positive. Unlike many public meetings, Hillsboro 2020's Vision Town Hall was a bonafide hit.

Another part of the committee's charge focused on keeping the plan vital, a "living" document. To this end, the committee has the ability to recommend minor revisions to the action plan. Thus, if there is a need to change a designated lead partner or make a minor modification in the language of an action to effectively implement it, such flexibility is available. This latitude has enabled the plan to remain a current and viable document.

Today, the Hillsboro 2020 vision is coming to life. The collective actions in the plan represent a virtual compendium of the community's vision for a preferred future. At the end of the second year of implementation activities, more than 70 of 114 actions are under way or have already been completed. While some actions are projects and programs that pre-date Hillsboro 2020, they have been given a new sense of priority through the visioning process. Other actions are new, emerging from the community's wellspring of vision ideas. Regardless of their origins, each action has benefitted from a new spirit of community collaboration and forward direction forged by the process. Hillsboro, as its vision tagline proclaims, is well on its way to becoming a "Hometown for the Future."

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