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Case Study Submittal
City of Kent Ohio, Bicentennial Plan

Sustainable Comprehensive Planning: An Asset-Based Approach

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Title of Presentation: Sustainable Comprehensive Planning: An Asset-Based Approach

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Synopsis

In 2002, City Council directed the city administration to proceed with a community-wide comprehensive planning process. The City of Kent Community Development Department was given the responsibility to administer the planning process based on the framework of sustainability principles, consistent with the City of Kent adopted *Goals for Sustainable Development*. The Ohio State University (OSU) Sustainable Communities program manager was contacted and they were thrilled to be involved. OSU agreed to provide their services free of charge to provide a pilot project because this would be the first known comprehensive plan based upon sustainability principles in the State of Ohio. The Ohio State team provided the following guidelines for sustainability:

- Long-term focus
- Balance of economy, environment and society
- Inclusionary
- Multi-dimensional indicators

Together, the OSU team and the Community Development Department planned the process to comply with these guidelines. For inclusionary concerns, a Steering Committee of forty-eight community members was established and these committee members were trained in facilitation. Forty-five public meetings were scheduled throughout the community to allow for as many people to participate as possible. The Steering Committee facilitated the meetings to help make the residents feel more comfortable about participating. As for the long-term focus, the first round of meetings consisted of the facilitator asking the following questions: What do you value about Kent? What would you like Kent to be for your grandchildren and great-grandchildren?. This process allowed for a more asset-based public input session in which residents were asked for solutions and goals for the future instead of an emphasis on complaints and arguments about the past.

At the second round of meetings, all of the statements from the first round were divided into what became known as the Three Columns of Sustainability: Environment, Economy and Social. A nominal group technique was utilized, allowing residents to prioritize their statements according to the three columns. This process ensured the balance between the three aspects of sustainability. During the last round of meetings, the city presented the draft plan that included multidimensional indicators based on the priorities stated in the second round of meetings. Focus groups were then used to determine if the finished product reflected what the residents stated they valued in the first round.

At the completion of the third round of meetings, over 450 people from various neighborhoods and interests had participated. In November 2004, the plan was approved by Kent City Council. The implementation of the plan began in early 2005 and will continue for the near future.

Innovation/Creativity

The innovative elements of this project were three-fold. First, the plan is based on sustainability principles as stated above. Secondly, an asset-based model for public participation was a crucial aspect. Thirdly, the use of regular citizens as facilitators was unique and very successful. The plan became a product of the values and aspirations of the citizens and will have a significant impact on the health of the city for many decades to come.

Quality Management

Many different management techniques were utilized to ensure the success of this project. For the citizen participation, direct mailings were sent to each residence and business inviting them to participate in the process. This letter was mailed for each of the four phases of the project. An asset-based brain storming session was utilized for the first phase. Residents were asked to state what they valued about the city and what they hoped for the future of the city. This technique allowed for an emphasis on the potential positive changes that could be made rather than the complaints and bickering about the past. Another management tool was utilized in the second round. Residents were given the opportunity, through the use of nominal group technique, to prioritize the goals for the city. During the last round of meetings, focus groups consisting of a diverse group of citizens were empowered to review the draft plan and discuss the impact it could have on the community.

Value Proposition

The entire process and the written plan that followed were based on the very first round of meetings in which the residents stated what they valued (or wanted preserved) and what they hoped for (or wanted to implement) to improve the quality of life in Kent. The forty-five public meetings were held in various locations throughout the city to allow for residents to be in a comfortable setting that allowed for more participation. Many of the residents who participated had never attended a public hearing at Council Chambers and probably would not have contributed if not for the opportunity to meet in their neighborhoods. In addition, the health of the community was improved in a very interesting way. The citizens who attended were from many diverse backgrounds. The opportunity to gather these diverse groups together to discuss the future of Kent bridged a gap in the community that will have a positive impact on the community for the future.

Building Organizational Capacity

At the beginning of the project, there was some initial negative feedback as to relevancy of this process. The staff believes these concerns were based on the

fact that this was a new approach to comprehensive planning. It was not just about land use, and demographic statistics. It was an attempt to pull together diverse groups of people to talk about the future of Kent. The staff worked through these issues by just continuing on with the project based on our belief that the final plan would illustrate the value of this innovative method. The final plan convinced most of the nay-sayers that their concerns were unwarranted. The organization, backed by the participation of the citizens, is now much more open and committed to sustainability due to a better understanding of the concept.

Management Philosophy and Culture

The main philosophy that influenced this project was the concept of sustainability. The City of Kent is blessed to have a very progressive citizenry that had encouraged the use of sustainability in planning since the late 1990's. However, the regular citizen was unable to relate to sustainability including the many definitions and to internalize how this vision could affect their everyday lives. Through the process of this project, citizens were shown how the basic ideas of sustainability could improve their quality of life. This plan gave the residents a 'real-world' scenario in which to utilize the tenants of sustainability.

Integrated Processes

The Ohio State Sustainable Communities team volunteered their time to assist in this project as a pilot program for the various cities throughout Ohio. The Ohio State team was the impetus behind the main philosophy and approach to this project. In addition to training the city staff and City Council on the basic concepts of sustainability, the Ohio State volunteers provided facilitation training for the citizen volunteers who lead the meetings in each of the neighborhoods.

Results/Real World Advice

A crucial element of the final plan is the multidimensional indicators. These measurements will be utilized to assess the progress of the plan. A yearly report card will be completed to report the success of the implementation of the plan. The lesson learned from this project is that gaining citizen participation is not easy – it takes much hard work and encouragement. However, the ending result in improving the quality of life is well worth the extra work.

This Bicentennial Comprehensive Plan, based on the residents' wishes, will have a tremendous positive impact on the community for many years to come. The effort to complete a plan based on sustainability principles is a new and innovative approach to comprehensive planning and should be considered by other small cities throughout the United States. The City of Kent is proud to announce that the International City Manager's Association (ICMA) has recognized this project for an award for Citizen Participation and city officials will

be traveling to Minneapolis in September to accept this award. The full report can be found on the City of Kent's web site: www.kentohio.org.