

Tyler 21: The People's Plan

Problem Assessment

The City of Tyler is a vibrant community whose resident population of 108,000 swells to more than 250,000 each day with people from surrounding communities coming to Tyler to shop, work, dine, seek medical care, attend college and recreate. Tyler has a market area of over 600,000 in the larger Northeast Texas region. As the economic hub of East Texas, Tyler must provide services and infrastructure for a community of more than double its *actual* size.

Tyler has experienced tremendous growth. Development has pushed City limits to the south, moving away from the downtown and older areas of the community. Balancing the needs of booming development along with maintaining and revitalizing older areas of the community is an ongoing challenge. Tyler's growth has also raised questions of long-term planning for water, landfills, jobs, neighborhood preservation, downtown revitalization, traffic, and many other issues facing a growing community.

In 1997, Tyler adopted the Tyler Blueprint. The Blueprint represents the City's core value for operational best practices and outlines an organizational culture committed to competitive contractual service delivery. While the Blueprint defines an operational expectation, it does not direct the strategic direction or actions the City should take as it continues to grow. Basically, Tyler had a plan for HOW to operate, but not WHAT needed to be addressed for the City's long term future.

Program Implementation and Costs

To address this much-needed strategic planning, the City of Tyler launched a comprehensive 18-month planning process that would define consensus goals for an ideal future for Tyler and the next generation of Tylerites. Comprehensive plans are not uncommon; They

are a generally accepted method of defining future activities for a municipality. So what differentiates the Tyler 21 Plan from others? First and foremost, the Tyler 21 planning process was uniquely citizen-driven.

More than 1,000 citizens directly participated in the development of the Tyler 21 Plan, and a scientific survey of 5,000 residents was also used to identify community priorities. Not only did citizens provide invaluable input that defined goals and action items, but 21 citizens plus the entire City Council comprised the Tyler 21 Steering Committee responsible for overseeing the implementation of the planning process and development of the final plan. To ensure an exhaustive representation of ideas, a myriad of tactics were employed to gather community input. Varying methods were utilized so that irrespective of education, culture, socioeconomic status, or any other demographic characterization, a vehicle to provide input would be accessible.

Tactics utilized included:

- A Tyler 21 **website** was launched (www.Tyler21.org) to not only provide information to citizens about the status of the planning process, but also as a means of capturing input.
- A **community survey** was conducted and 5,000 Tylerites participated.
- **Focus groups** and **personal interviews** were conducted with key groups and constituencies in the community.
- **Neighborhood meetings** provided citizens an opportunity to give input from their own neighborhoods.
- A day-long **community visioning retreat** was held on June 17, 2006 and nearly 200 attendees defined the Tyler 21 vision. A map of Tyler was displayed at the event and participants placed a star to represent the area of the City they were from. The entire community was represented at the retreat.

- Once the vision was drafted, public **displays were placed in five community sites** including the Library, a neighborhood recreation center, the mall, a local grocery store and a popular bank. The locations for the displays were geographically dispersed and were places that people went in their everyday lives. Citizens were able to share their reactions to the vision and the comments were captured and used to continue the development of the Plan.

Once the Tyler 21 vision and the major challenges were established, work began in earnest to develop the Plan. However, the citizen involvement didn't stop there. Seven citizen-led Working Groups were established to tackle the major issues identified in the input-gathering phase. The Working Groups included Congestion Mitigation & Transportation, Downtown Revitalization, Historic Preservation, Parks and Open Spaces, North End Revitalization, Housing and Community Identity, and Public Facilities and Services. Outcomes from these Working Groups ultimately resulted in the chapters contained in the final Plan.

Once the Tyler 21 Plan was drafted, the community was once again engaged in providing input into the process. A final draft review was presented at a **public forum, neighborhood open houses**, on the **website** and at the **public Library** so that residents could provide feedback that ultimately shaped the final Plan.

To ensure citizens were informed about the planning process and opportunities to participate, a strategic communications strategy was employed. Communication activities included the development of a vibrant, interactive Plan **website** (www.Tyler21.org) that contained the latest information about the Plan and explained how citizens could get involved. A series of **newsletters** were developed and disseminated via the local newspaper as well as handed out at community locations and events. Former Tyler Mayor Joey Seeber also played an important role

in educating the community about the Plan at each and every **community speaking engagement** he had. A series of **press releases and media placements**, along with **interviews**, were utilized to leverage unpaid promotion of the planning process. **Flyers** promoting Tyler 21 events were disseminated in the community in both Spanish and English to describe the process and opportunities to participate. A **full page ad** in the local newspaper was placed to promote the community visioning retreat. An “I Want You” strategy was used for the ad to truly reach out to individuals. The City’s **cable television** station advertised opportunities to participate and provide input and articles in local magazines were submitted to reach the broadest audience possible. By ensuring the Plan was citizen-driven, grass roots word of mouth communication was the most important tactic used to get the word out. As each citizen participated on a Working Group, or attended an event, or heard something about the Plan, a groundswell of excitement and interest grew in the community.

Tangible results or measureable outcomes of the program

The outcome of this 18-month citizen-driven planning process is a comprehensive plan that the community owns. The buy-in from the community has been unprecedented. Citizens really know what Tyler 21 is; it is often cited in comments by citizens when addressing the City Council and is consistently referenced by the local media. Developers, local businesses, and community leaders are utilizing the Plan to guide their efforts so that the community is working in tandem with the City to drive initiatives and ensure the Plan’s success.

The nearly 500-page Plan is a very specific roadmap that addresses the issues identified as most important to Tylerites and positions the City to realize its vision for future generations. Goals, policies and actions are thoroughly defined and reflect Tyler’s community identity and

specific needs. Chapters drill down to the core of the major challenges Tyler is facing and provide tangible actions to maximize Tyler's strengths.

However, ultimately a Plan is only as good as its implementation. Although the final Plan was only complete in Nov. 2007, implementation is in *full swing*. To ensure accurate tracking of Plan activities, a redevelopment specialist has been hired and tasked with tracking the implementation of the Plan. On each Council agenda, icons representing the Tyler 21 Plan chapters are placed next to each agenda item that moves forward a Plan goal. Early successes include a new tree planting program; the City issuing the final payment on its general obligation debt; Council adoption of a plan to implement a Tax Increment Financing district for Downtown Tyler; the purchase of a vacant downtown theatre for renovation in partnership with symphony; opening of an arts center downtown; and Council approval for the expansion of infrastructure extension into North Tyler to spur development; a new draft unified development Code, among many others.

Lessons learned during planning, implementation and analysis

The major lesson learned during the planning process is that the value of a citizen-driven planning process can not be underestimated. City leadership recognized that a comprehensive plan could have been developed for half the cost and in half the time, had only a perfunctory effort to get citizen input been made. However, the City made a true commitment to involving the community in the Plan so that it was not reflective of an individual Mayor or City Manager's viewpoint; but rather, it is reflective of the true values and beliefs held by the citizens of Tyler. This value of the investment has paid off immeasurably. As the City presents new programs and actions to move forward with implementation, the community, Council and media is fully supportive because it is THEIR plan.