

Program Excellence Award for Citizen Involvement

POPULATIONS OF 50,000 AND GREATER

Hamilton County, Ohio

The 2004 Program Excellence Award for Citizen Involvement in the 50,000-and-greater population category goes Hamilton County, Ohio, and County Administrator David J. Krings for the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission Community COMPASS visioning process.



DAVID J. KRINGS

For decades, planning in Hamilton County, Ohio (pop. 845,268) has been sporadic and parochial, with a small number of jurisdictions adopting local

plans irrespective of their neighbors or the county as a whole. But with 49 governments and 49 local planning commissions, the county needed to find a way to build consensus for a collective unified vision.

Because such a visioning effort required an organizational structure and community culture to sustain it, the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission (HCRPC) reorganized itself with a new charter and established a jointly funded, collaborative, long-range planning committee called the Planning Partnership (now a permanent advisory board working to plan for the county's future). These two entities designed the Community COMPASS (Comprehensive Master Plan and Strategies) visioning process, enabling the county's diverse citizenry to come together with their ideas and aspirations (historically conflicting and contentious) in the spirit of cooperation and consensus.

The Community COMPASS visioning process began in October 2001, when a groundbreaking alliance of public and private organizations and individuals solicited input from citizens through 12 community forums, including one for youth and one online. For the first time, criti-

cal multijurisdictional issues (e.g., stormwater management, transportation, septic failures, population loss, etc.) were discussed and resolved. HCRPC also mailed a community values survey to 4,500 households, and the findings resulted in a draft vision for 12 community systems. These include: civic engagement and social capital, community services, culture and recreation, economy and labor market, education, environment, environmental and social justice, governance, health and human services, housing, land use and development framework, and mobility.

In January 2002, more than 1,300 people attended the first countywide town meeting, where new wireless technology was used to solicit real-time feedback from each group and individual. Participants developed a vision for the county that centered around four core goals: building collaborative decision making, ensuring economic prosperity, embracing diversity and equity, and balancing development and the environment.

Several aspects of this endeavor were especially gratifying. First, the people who attended nearly matched the demographic content of the county by race and gender. Second, hundreds more participants showed up than expected, proving that citizens want a voice in governance and don't mind committing to an eight-hour meeting to have it. Third, many decision makers (elected and appointed) also attended the all-day forums and town meeting; for those who didn't participate, special



Hamilton County residents participate in countywide COMPASS visioning process.

forums were held periodically. This extra effort to facilitate dialogue with government officials was essential to achieving a shared understanding of divergent views. Before the meeting, 64 percent of the participants expressed confidence in their ability to influence the future; by the end of the meeting, that number had risen to 86 percent!

Since the town meeting, COMPASS action teams and community leaders from the county's local governments and planning commissions have refined the objectives that correlate with the countywide goals. Throughout the spring of 2002, HCRPC approved 30 major initiatives and more than a hundred strategies for achieving them; strategic plans for several of the initiatives are now being launched by public and private sector volunteers. A "results accountability process," which was critical to the plan's funding, defines success in measurable terms using results indicators. And public participation—the heart and soul of the countywide town meeting and the entire COMPASS visioning process—created the foundation for sustaining the initiative.

The countywide town meeting resulted from merging two planning techniques—community brainstorming

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and the electronic town meeting—into a seamless process for developing a common vision. The extensive and innovative use of multiple technologies facilitates a more thorough discussion of tough issues, heightens the effectiveness of public involvement, and produces high-quality citizen input and direction from one large meeting, which is more cost- and time-effective than holding many smaller meetings with less feedback. The uniqueness of this visioning process and its results has set a new standard for communities seeking a citizen-based approach for planning and implementation. ■