

Building a Culture of Planning in Your Small Town

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City of Washington, Iowa (Pop. 7,266)

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Thoughts on Planning

- “In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.”
– Dwight D. Eisenhower
- “Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.”
– Abraham Lincoln
- “Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes, but no plans.” – Peter Drucker

City of Washington, Iowa

- County Seat exurban/rural community of 7,266, included in Iowa City-Cedar Rapids CSA
- Mayor and six-member City Council
- 48 full-time employees, annual operating budget of \$9 million
- Very moderately growing tax base
- At 6/30/2011, numerous funds in deficit and a huge backlog of capital projects
- I started with the City in October 2011.

Washington's Elected Official Turnover

- Since I arrived in late 2011, all six Council positions have changed over, and two of them have changed over twice (and the Mayor and one Councilor are not running this fall)
- The composition of the Council went from being nearly all retired people to mostly Gen X or Millennials.
- Planning processes have helped to keep everyone on the same page, even as some priorities have shifted.

Washington's Elected Official Turnover

- Planning is vital in the face of elected official turnover because:
 - New elected officials may give the vision of their predecessors more weight if it is well articulated
 - Well-written plans help new officials understand the circumstances surrounding the decisions made in the past, and help to get them up to speed more quickly
 - Even if the new officials have different priorities, they are channeled toward trying to incorporate those into existing plans, and continuity prevails in many cases

Selected Planning Processes

- Comprehensive land use plan updates: galvanizing process for public input & involvement and discussion of improvements needed to improve the town
- Financial planning process with City Council, culminating in remedial action in FY11 budget and ambitious FY12 budget

Selected Planning Processes

- Five-year Capital Improvements Plan process, with annual updates (first did this following budget process, now do it prior to budget process).
- Annual goal-setting, now done jointly with CIP update. Focus groups involving various members of the public are a common feature.
- One of most important processes: extensive new councilor orientation

Selected Planning Processes

- Debt forecasting/modeling: While City's financial advisor does this whenever major debt issuances are needed, we have developed our own in-house process to monitor and project debt on an ongoing basis.
 - We have also needed significant water and sewer rate increases to deal with widespread issues in those systems; we update water and sewer cash flow documents at least annually.

Accomplishments since 2011

- \$35 million in projects completed:
 - New wastewater plant & west side interceptor sewer
 - Business park
 - New north water tower and new ground storage reservoir
 - 5 street reconstruction projects
 - Numerous smaller projects
- Tax rate held stable since FY2013
- Fund Balances replenished: GF +\$1.4M, Water Fund + \$1.3M

What lies ahead

- Fire Station (FY18 & 19) and City Hall/Police (FY20 & 21) projects: \$4.2 million
- “Wellness Park” (FY18 & 19): \$2.5 million
- Water Plant expansion/RO conversion (FY18): \$5.5 million

Questions?

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