

Sustainable Rural Development: The Role of Strategic Visioning, MAPPING the Future of Your Community Program

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Rapid and widespread change in the world around us is affecting rural communities in dramatic and often unexpected ways. Leaders and residents of rural communities are continually challenged by the questions of how to nurture their communities through increasingly complex twenty-first century issues, how to lead change that produces the quality of life desired, and how to sustain the effort over time. No longer can rural communities expect that government agencies will provide for their needs, but instead, must look to the people and resources within their communities from which to build their future.

MAPPING the Future of Your Community, a program of the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, offers communities an innovative approach to enable positive change and meet these new challenges. The strategic visioning process enables the community to see beyond what exists now to describe its vision for the future, and bring that vision to reality. Through collaboration and consensus building, diverse sectors of the community are brought together to determine what they want the community to be in the future, and by their active participation in the decision-making process, people become empowered and thereby become more able to proactively respond to change.

The MAPPING (Management and Planning Programs Involving Nonmetropolitan Groups) program is a strategic visioning and planning process whereby rural community residents and leaders come together to create a long-range vision for the development of their community and a plan of action for achieving it. The core of the MAPPING program is a series of four visioning sessions. Each session is organized around a central theme: "Where are we now?", "Where do we want to be?", "How are we going to get there?", and "Making it happen and keeping it going!" During the course of this process, participants identify a shared vision of a desirable future, build consensus for high-priority goals for their community,

develop a workable action plan, and become organized to address these issues in a town meeting. The town meeting serves to further broaden public participation and input on an evolving plan of action, as well as to mobilize community residents to embrace positive change and become actively involved in the implementation of the action plan.

Created in 1991 with support from the Governors Rural Affairs Council, MAPPING has been supported by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity since 1995. MAPPING programs have been conducted in 90 communities in 47 counties throughout rural Illinois. Participating communities have ranged in size from as small as ~300 to as large as ~18,000 residents, with the average size MAPPING community of approximately 3,000 residents. MAPPING is conducted either on a community, county, or community-cluster basis.

In the 14 years since the inception of the MAPPING program, we've come to recognize that two elements of the community strategic visioning process are essential to promoting sustainable economic development in rural communities and contribute to community success. These are:

- Building an inclusive leadership coalition among community leaders and residents; and
- Obtaining local commitment and empowering the community to work together effectively across diverse interests, cultures, and socioeconomic classes.

Building a Leadership Coalition

Canton, IL (population: 15,288)

Following their MAPPING the Future program in 1998, the Canton MAPPING participants formed an informal organization, the Canton Community Resources (CCR) Board to implement the MAPPING action plan.

This grassroots coalition began with 16 Board members representing a diverse cross-section of the Canton community. From this broad group of dedicated community residents several sub-committees were formed to tackle goals identified during MAPPING. Since 1998, specific outcomes include: the renovation of a historic opera house, the creation of the Canton Leadership Academy, significant progress in developing a four-lane highway in collaboration with Illinois Department of Transportation, the construction and rehabilitation of several homes, and the formation of the Central Illinois Ag Coalition – a group that has just broken ground for the construction of their new ethanol plant.

Obtaining Local “Buy-in” and Empowering the Community to Work Together

Elkhart, IL (population: 443)

The Village of Elkhart recognized a need for an overarching plan to guide its future growth and development. Inadequate infrastructure had limited growth in both residential and business sectors. The downtown was badly in need of revitalization and the elementary school was at risk for consolidation. However, preliminary discussions of zoning changes and potential annexations resulted in the community becoming fragmented regarding growth opportunities. Divisions among community residents between the “founding families” and the “newcomer” families further paralyzed progress. By the end of the intensive MAPPING curriculum, the diverse group of community participants had indeed come to agree on a shared direction for their future with action teams formed around identified high-priority goals. Since then, the village has moved ahead aggressively on community development efforts. Several results have been achieved: all downtown storefronts have been filled, including one by an archaeologist who opened a museum, “Under the Prairie,” and a bakery/coffee shop that created several jobs; a zoning officer was hired; a new housing subdivision ordinance was developed; and several houses have been built and occupied with new families.

Results from MAPPING community visioning and planning projects during the past decade have been impressive, spanning the scope of economic and community development initiatives. During the fiscal year 2004, an extensive telephone survey was conducted in order to assess the outcomes and impact on rural communities of the MAPPING the Future Program over the past decade. Sixty-four communities participated in the survey. Table 1 presents aggregate results.

In the aggregate, creating jobs was achieved in 77 percent of all MAPPING communities surveyed. Although the approximate number of jobs created as reported by this group of community informants exceeded 4,000, time and

Table 1: Percentage of MAPPING Communities Demonstrating Achieved Outcomes* (n=64)

| Jobs Created | Beautification Projects | Parks & Recreation | Improved Infrastructure | New Housing | Education Projects | New Festivals/ Events |
|--------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|-------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 77% | 75% | 58% | 58% | 54% | 47% | 38% |

*Communities were included in this summary if they achieved measurable outcome in the specified domain; projects in progress were not included.

resource constraints prevented additional verification of this result.

In addition to aggregate data illustrating long-term end outcomes to which the MAPPING program has contributed, the following example demonstrates the kind of specific community and economic development outcomes that have occurred following the MAPPING program.

Mendota (population: 7,272), LaSalle County

Mendota is one of many communities in which the MAPPING program had demonstrable impact. Key “intermediate outcomes,” which local informants attribute directly to their 1998 MAPPING program, have truly set the stage for the achievement of the longer-term outcomes. First, after MAPPING, the city government created a local “Office of Community and Economic Development,” and hosted an IIRA Peace Corps Fellow as its first manager. The initial scope of work for this city department consisted of the high-priority goals and strategies from the MAPPING action plan. This action plan was later incorporated into a comprehensive City plan, which forms the core of the current full-time economic development director’s focus. Ad hoc MAPPING committees remain involved in community and economic development initiatives in the city.

Additional outcomes since the 1998 MAPPING:

- \$1.3 million federal and state funding resulting in the purchase of land and extensive infrastructure improvements to create a local industrial park. The park is almost entirely filled.
- One major industrial employer moved into the city bringing 100 jobs; another significant business expansion is projected to create 125 new jobs.
- Several tax increment financing districts have been created that have successfully sparked development efforts in nine areas of the city. Four entrepreneurs have started businesses creating approximately 15 jobs.
- Strong marketing efforts, including direct mailings, attending targeted conventions, and advertising in site selection magazines have brought new dollars.

- In the near future, Mendota will begin a \$1.25 million sewer upgrade to increase the loading capacity, in addition to the \$2.5 million water system upgrade currently underway to address high radium content. Another \$100,000 water project will connect an industrial user to city water. Finally, a state road construction project will help with traffic flow, adding a traffic light, turning lanes, and widening the road.
- A new housing subdivision has been developed, adding 12-15 homes in the past year. Previous years showed an annual average of about six new homes.
- A new high school opened in January 2004, with an increase in capacity of 200 students.

The MAPPING program helps to provide pertinent data, to create opportunities for public dialogue resulting in enhanced local decision-making, and to build capacities. Clearly, economic development in some areas may have occurred with or without outside intervention. Nevertheless, in the years following MAPPING programs, we have documented numerous businesses that have been started, new homes that have been built, additional children enrolled in rural schools, parks and green spaces that have been created, services for seniors that have improved, industry that has been retained or expanded, new commercial districts that have been formed, and health clinics that have opened. We are continually inspired by the many rural leaders and citizen volunteers who have come together across the state of Illinois to take responsibility for the future of their communities.

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