

Strategic Community Development

Growing Prosperous Rural Communities

Don Macke (don@e2mail.org)

Strategic Defined	Development Defined
(adjective) Relating to the identification of long-term or overall aims and interests, and the means of achieving them.	(noun) The process of developing or being developed. In our context, the development of the community over time and on a sustainable basis.
Community Defined	
We are defining community as a “community of place” – a town, city, county or region. These are places for which residents have an affinity – their hometowns. In strategic community development, we may define community as a smaller place within a larger socio-economic area.	

What Strategic Community Development Is NOT!

Let’s begin with **what is not strategic community development**. Most typical community-based strategic planning processes have a maximum three to five year time horizon. These plans tend to focus on immediate needs and opportunities – for example, the need for affordable housing, a new addition to the community center, upgrading the city pool and other infrastructure improvements. Often the process for developing these plans involves residents through surveys and focus groups, crafting a hit list of possible development items and a process for weaving them into a short-term plan. Often this kind of visioning and planning, while important and valuable, lacks a long-term, research-based and deeper exploration of the community’s demography, economic opportunity and quality of life place making. These processes are often characterized by a lack of community consensus about what kind of community they want to be over time.

The Challenge of Being Strategic

Our days are full. There are a million things on our punch list. We all have too much to do and too little time to make it happen. Our days are consumed with the priorities of the “here and now.” Finding time to slow down, be more reflective, contemplate big picture things and become more intentional or strategic feels like a luxury we cannot afford. However, with such a near-term focus, we can miss the big stuff that really matters. Making a quality commitment to deeper and longer-term visioning and strategic community development can create a road map to a better future.

Attributes of Strategic Community Development

Strategic Focus on Prosperity. Strategic community development is focused on increasing and sustaining generational prosperity. In plainer words, what investments of time, talent and treasure do we need to make to ensure that our community is vibrant, successful, thriving – a great place to live and work – in a generation (about 25 years); the kind of place our children and grandchildren can uncompromisingly call home.

Local Responsibility for Community Development. The U.S. is unique compared to other mature industrialized countries in that the primary responsibility for development rests with local communities and not with federal or state governments or the private sector. When a community practices strategic community development, leaders and residents understand and accept the responsibility for their own development and future.

Long-term Time Horizon. Strategic community development focuses on a longer time horizon than most strategic planning processes – at least 25 years. Year-to-year changes can sometimes mask shifts in a community's underlying trend lines that can impact community vitality – hiring by an employer may hide a long-term increase in unemployment; stable school enrollment one year may hide a long-term trend of population decline. By using research and analysis to look further down the road, it is possible to better understand and address the relationships between demographic changes, economic transitions and quality of life amenities.

Three Essentials for Community Success. Every community, regardless of size, location or situation, can only achieve sustained and long-term success by understanding and addressing three essentials – demographic renewal, creating rooted economic opportunities and quality of life place making. While each community will have its own unique assessment of these essentials, creating a development vision and strategy that addresses all three is paramount.

Research-Based Assessment. Strategic community development requires a community to have a deep and objective view of their historical development and projected trend lines with respect to demography, economy and competitiveness of place. It is essential that communities use robust research and analysis as they craft a solid community vision and development strategy.

The Center for Rural Entrepreneurship's mission is to help community leaders build a prosperous future by supporting and empowering business, social and civic entrepreneurs. With our roots and hearts in rural America, we help communities of all sizes and interests find their own answers to the economic development challenges and opportunities they face. Our solutions include time-tested [Entrepreneurial Communities framework and tools](#); [Community Development Philanthropy engagement and research including Transfer of Wealth™ analysis](#) and [LOCUS Impact Investing](#), a social enterprise that empowers place-focused foundations to invest their capital locally to build prosperous, vibrant communities.

To learn more about the Center and our solutions, visit www.energizingentrepreneurs.org.