

Getting Started

Before beginning the planning process for your neighborhood, first assess whether your neighborhood is ready for such a large undertaking. A significant amount of time from many people is required for the planning to be successful. Answers to these five questions will help the Board of Directors of your neighborhood association decide whether your organization will be able to complete this successfully.

Is Your Neighborhood Ready?

- 1) Is **interest** in neighborhood planning widespread throughout the neighborhood?
- 2) Is your neighborhood being bombarded with so many pressing issues/problems that there is not enough **energy** left to do planning?
- 3) Does your neighborhood association have the **capacity** to bring a representative group of neighborhood stakeholders together to do neighborhood planning?
- 4) Does your neighborhood have the **resources** needed to do neighborhood planning – from organizing a Leadership Team to holding a Neighborhood Summit to implementing an Action Plan?
- 5) Are there **additional factors/circumstances** that should be considered?

Your association needs to have a frank discussion on the above questions. Neighborhood planning requires a huge time commitment from staff members, the Board and other neighborhood volunteers. It will cost money. Your planning effort will be undermined from the start if you do not take the time to make sure your association is ready for this huge undertaking.

Once the Board determines that your neighborhood is ready to do a planning project, we recommend that you proceed by organizing a Leadership/Planning Team. This group of volunteers perhaps with staff assistance, will be responsible for leading the planning process. The success of your neighborhood planning will be directly related to how well the Leadership Team does its job.

Your neighborhood must have enough of four basic ingredients to begin a neighborhood planning process: capacity, energy, interest and resources. Also consider other factors that could interfere. Don't undermine the process by failing to address these issues!

Organizing the Leadership Team

Identify Residents and Other Neighborhood Stakeholders for the Team

The Leadership Team should consist of 10 to 12 people who are as representative of the neighborhood as possible. Remember that several members will naturally drop off during the planning process. Residents should be geographically, ethnically and economically diverse while also representing both men and women from various age groups. Include business, church and school representatives from the neighborhood as appropriate. Recruit people who have a sincere desire to see the neighborhood improve and have the time to commit to making it happen. It will help communication if at least two of the Team members are Board members of the neighborhood association.



Decide on the Role of the Staff

If your neighborhood association has a staff, the Board should decide what role staff members will take in the planning process. If this is added to a staff member's job description, remember that some other duties should then be reassigned. Staff members can play an important role in the planning process by providing technical and other assistance to the Leadership Team. The assistance of an outside consultant may also be considered. It will be difficult for Team members to facilitate the planning steps while also participating in them, so consider such arrangements carefully.

Call the First Meeting of the Leadership Team

Finding a time when all members of the Team can make a meeting will be a challenge. Try to meet at a convenient location within the neighborhood. Decide beforehand who will chair the meeting. The agenda should include welcome, introductions, explanation of the neighborhood planning process to be undertaken, a meeting schedule and initial discussion on a timeline for the project. Whether the planning process should culminate in a Neighborhood Summit should also be considered. Make sure Team members know what will be required of them.

Develop a Project Timeline

Your neighborhood planning process should last no longer than a year (excluding the implementation of the Action Plan). The Leadership Team should go through the planning steps outlined in the following Chapters as quickly as possible to keep momentum going and interest focused, using a project timeline to keep on track. A draft timeline should be presented and adopted at the Leadership Team's second meeting. A regular item on each month's agenda should be checking to make sure the timelines are being met. (Appendix C is a sample timeline.)

Hold Productive Meetings

The Leadership Team should meet at least monthly. Develop and follow an agenda for each meeting. Take minutes and distribute them to Team members. Members will feel the meetings are productive if decisions are made, action follows and progress is measured.

Subcommittees can handle some of the Leadership Team's work outside of monthly meetings. Subcommittees should consist of Team members as well as others so that additional people can be involved in the process, although on a more limited basis. (Appendix D gives sample subcommittees and their duties.)

Identify Outcomes and Benchmarks

At its second or third meeting, the Leadership Team should develop a list of benchmarks or outcomes by which the success of this project will be measured. These criteria will help the Leadership Team evaluate the planning process after the Neighborhood Summit.

When brainstorming benchmarks or evaluation criteria, focus on the question "When you look back at this planning process, what will make you say it has been successful and it was worth my time?" Possible benchmarks/evaluation criteria may include:

- 100 people attended the Neighborhood Summit.
- A core group of six to eight remained active on the Leadership Team throughout the planning process.
- Input was received from all segments of the neighborhood during the planning process.
- Consensus was reached on a Vision for the redevelopment of the neighborhood.
- An Action Plan with concrete steps was developed to begin achieving the Vision.
- Each Action Team has at least 10 people who have committed to working on the Team to implement the Action Plan.
- New volunteers have been recruited during the planning process.
- Residents feel empowered.
- The neighborhood association has gained credibility in the community by successfully undertaking this planning project.
- I learned a lot.

The list you develop can become a guide as you proceed through the planning process - it should clearly state what the Leadership Team is intending to accomplish. As ideas for new activities that could be pursued by the Leadership Team arise, they can be judged against this list. Does the proposed activity help you accomplish one or more of these benchmarks? If not, the activity probably should not be pursued. The Leadership Team should refocus on its agreed upon purposes.

Develop Leadership Skills

A good neighborhood planning project will give everyone involved an opportunity to try and learn new things. This is an important aspect of the capacity building that will be occurring. It is important to allow Leadership Team members the chance to learn new skills and improve current skills (public speaking, chairing a committee, decision making, etc.). This also holds true for neighborhood association staff members involved in the planning.

Leadership Team members will probably develop close friendships as the planning process unfolds – a dynamic common in small-group processes. Much learning will occur and leadership skills will be developed. Team members will be exposed to new experiences. All of this is to be savored as the rich experience of neighborhood planning unfolds for the participants.

All of the background preparation has been done. Your Leadership Team has been recruited and held its first meeting. Now you are ready to begin the neighborhood planning process. Remember the advice to have fun!



LAND MINE: If there is great difficulty in recruiting members for the Leadership Team, more time must be spent communicating to the neighborhood about why planning is needed and what the benefits will be. Reexamine the section “Is Your Neighborhood Ready?” to see if you have missed something. Proceed only when you have a solid Team in place.

Resources/References

“A Guide to Community Visioning.”

Jones, “Neighborhood Planning: A Guide for Citizens and Planners.”

Conducting a SWOT Analysis

To conduct neighborhood planning effectively, you must have an accurate picture of your neighborhood. If Leadership Team members are not familiar with the demographics, zoning and other relevant factual information on your neighborhood, it is important that you spend time researching and then understanding this information. This is the first step in developing a neighborhood profile or “picture.”

After you have a factual profile of your neighborhood, you will want to list the perceptions of your area. This is best done through an analysis of your neighborhood’s Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats – a SWOT Analysis.

Neighborhood Profile

- **Data**
- **SWOT Analysis**
 - Strengths
 - Weaknesses
 - Opportunities
 - Threats

The SWOT Analysis, developed by the Harvard Business School, is an **environmental scan** of your neighborhood. [Picture yourself on a bluff overlooking your neighborhood, your hand shielding your eyes from the sun as you observe the goings-on in this little settlement.] *Your SWOT Analysis will form the basis for other parts of the planning process, so this is a critical piece that must be given due attention.*



The SWOT Analysis can be done with just the Leadership Team, or it can involve many people from the neighborhood. The following steps would be used in either case, though they are written as if just the Leadership Team is doing the analysis.

Planning for the SWOT

A SWOT Analysis is a process of brainstorming that will list both positive and negative perceptions of your neighborhood. It can be conducted during a regular monthly meeting of the Leadership Team. Allot 3 to 4 hours for this important planning step.

A facilitator is needed to conduct the brainstorming session. You will need a flip chart and markers to write the ideas that come out of the brainstorming. Dots or some other self-adhering objects for voting are also needed. Copies of “Rules for Brainstorming” (Appendix E) should be distributed to and reviewed by Team members.

Conducting the SWOT Analysis

The facilitator should first review with the Leadership Team what a SWOT Analysis is and why it is needed. The facilitator should then review the rules of brainstorming, emphasizing that this is the time to generate ideas and not to critically discuss those ideas.

The facilitator should begin the brainstorming by asking people to name the **strengths** that they feel are present within the neighborhood. Go around the table with each person naming one strength, making sure that everyone has an equal chance to participate. **Strengths** are defined as assets or positive aspects currently present within the neighborhood or what people may like about the neighborhood. There are no right or wrong answers - each Team member is giving his/her own opinions. **Make sure that everyone's ideas and comments are recorded on the flip chart.** Continue going around the table until all ideas have been exhausted. Be aware of the time, however, because roughly the same amount of time should be spent on each of the four categories.



Being able to identify many neighborhood strengths can be very encouraging and powerful to the Leadership Team. It can help set the tone for a positive planning perspective. It can create “buy-in” from Team members because it describes many of the good things that should be preserved in the neighborhood. Can you take time to celebrate what a great neighborhood you have?

Once the group is finished with the strengths, repeat this process with the weaknesses. **Weaknesses** are identified as characteristics within the neighborhood that negatively affect the area or are what people don't like about the neighborhood. Weaknesses can also be defined as deficits. One person may view something as a positive; another person identifies that as a negative – so *the same item may be both a strength and a weakness.* **Make sure to write down everyone's ideas on the flip chart.**



Strengths and weaknesses have focused on the internal and present conditions of your neighborhood. Now a shift in thinking is required as we look at trends and conditions from outside that may affect the neighborhood in the future. This is more difficult.

Repeat the brainstorming process with opportunities. **Opportunities** are defined as influences or characteristics that may positively affect the neighborhood in the future or may benefit the neighborhood. Again, **make sure to write down everyone's ideas.**

Finally, the last category to brainstorm is threats. **Threats** are defined as influences or characteristics that may negatively affect the neighborhood in the future or can harm the neighborhood. (These can also be described as fears.) **Everyone's ideas should be written down.**

Consolidating Ideas

You should now have a good list for each of the four SWOT categories. Since the SWOT session will usually take an entire meeting's time, you may want to appoint a subcommittee to cluster the brainstormed ideas within each category to consolidate similar items. Try to match like ideas - for example, under "Strengths", close to downtown and easy access to freeways can be combined into "good location". Do not change the meaning of any ideas. Do not try to put all ideas into just a few general themes just for the sake of consolidation. What you are trying to accomplish here is reducing the list of like ideas within a specific category. **This is still not the time to evaluate these ideas.**

Gaining Consensus – Dot Voting

At the next Leadership Team meeting, the subcommittee should report. Team members should be given the chance to disagree with the proposed clustering. Then it is time for the group to evaluate the ideas that have been brainstormed through an individual process of voting.

Each Leadership Team member is given a number of dots (usually three to five dots per category). Each member is to put his/her allotted dots on the ideas with which he/she most agrees. Dots can be voted in any combination within a category (e.g. all three dots on one idea or one dot per idea, etc.). Appendix F further explains dot voting.

The goal is to reach consensus on three or four strong ideas in each of the categories. Dot voting helps to obtain agreement on major issues within the neighborhood by identifying what Team members believe to be the most important – *building common ground*. The process of dot voting eliminates the destructive and unproductive arguing that sometimes occurs over differences that neighbors have and, instead, focuses on what they have in common.



Once everyone has voted, tally up the dots and note the top three to five ideas under each category. Those ideas with few or no votes/dots are eliminated from discussion. This list of the major strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats is your SWOT Analysis. This is the foundation of your Neighborhood Plan, and you will be building upon it.

The brainstorming process allowed everyone to express his/her ideas, and now the dot voting has eliminated all but the ones most widely agreed upon. This process also prevented any one person from dominating the process.

Follow-up

Once you have completed your SWOT Analysis, check to see if other groups within your area have also done a SWOT Analysis (business associations, master plan teams, etc.). Compare your SWOT Analysis to these others. If there are major differences, this may signal the need for further analysis. There should be great similarities – these further confirm the common ground that you are building.

Tip: If the SWOT Analysis will be done only by the Leadership Team, ask members to collect ideas from their neighbors on the area's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. These ideas can be presented during the brainstorming process. This will help increase the diversity of input into the SWOT Analysis and allow Team members to practice their leadership skills.



LAND MINE: A SWOT Analysis that has few strengths and many weaknesses may be indicative of a bigger problem. Groups that are not able to see positive aspects within their neighborhood may not be ready to carry out a redevelopment plan.

Resources/References

Green, "Asset Building and Community Development."

Jones, "Neighborhood Planning: A Guide for Citizens and Planners."

Michigan State University, "Charrette Handbook."