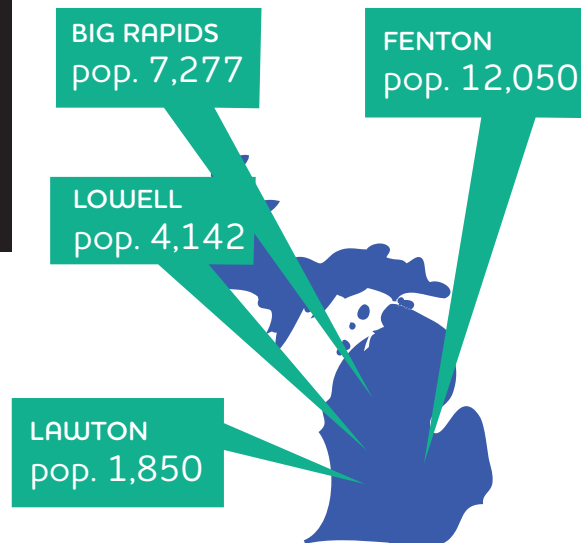


Which Way Do You Want to Go?

Is Your Council Ready to Answer that Question?

By Lewis G. Bender, PhD



So, why did you run for city or village council? What makes running for elected office worth the time, effort, and personal risk? Often the response to these personal questions include answers like: “I love this community and I want to help make a difference.” Or “We need to address these problems.” These personal questions translate very quickly into community-based questions.

Effective strategic planning is designed to bring elected and appointed leaders together to answer these personal/key community questions: Where do we want to go? What will make a difference for our community? What larger issues do we want to address?

There is no “one size fits all” process for addressing these important questions. The strategic planning process for answering these and other important community questions can take on many forms. However, before attempting to create an effective strategic planning process for your community it is imperative that leaders determine if you are **ready** to do strategic planning.

KEY QUESTIONS INCLUDE:

How well do we work as a team? Do we trust each other? Are we playing “gotcha” games?

If you are a team that lacks mutual trust and engages in personal attacks, don’t start a strategic planning process. Occasionally municipal leaders will suggest that a strategic planning process will help “bring us together.” This can be true of teams that disagree with each other on issues but act from a base of mutual respect and support. It is a mistake to do strategic planning with teams that lack basic person-to-person respect. Councilmembers who engage in personal attacks in-person or on social media will not be able to resist the same behaviors during and after the strategic planning process. In a negatively charged environment, strategic planning and the actual plans can be used by “sides” as weapons against each other.

The City of Lowell’s process is a classic example of a council and a newly appointed manager addressing their mutual expectations before proceeding with a strategic planning process. This elected-appointed team has many strong personalities and were very successful in moving the community forward. In many ways, Lowell’s success can be attributed to their ability to work as a team.

Do we understand and adhere to our respective roles?

In strategic planning, as well as other decisional processes, elected leaders need to identify where they want to go. Managers and staff need to figure out how to get there. When elected leaders tell the manager and her team how to get there, the specter of “micro-managing” quickly appears. When the manager and staff attempt to tell the elected leader where to go, the ownership of the plan quickly shifts to the staff and not the council-staff team. While it is normal for elected and appointed leaders to consult with each other regarding where and how, it is important that every member of the team embrace their respective roles. Effective strategic planning is a team effort bringing elected and appointed leaders together around shared goals. Differing perspectives are encouraged. Crossing role-job boundaries will undermine, even destroy, a strategic planning effort.

Are we ready to use the strategic plan as a key factor in our ongoing decisions?

A strategic plan is primarily a communications tool. Long ago, we abandoned the notion of long-range planning. Back in the day, councils and staff would discuss, debate, and argue *ad nauseum* over “how many angels danced on the head of a pin.” We created large, beautifully detailed documents, and put them on shelves—never to be seen or used again!

“If you are a team that lacks mutual trust and engages in personal attacks, don’t start a strategic planning process.”

Strategic planning recognizes that we don’t have the power to see the future. Opportunities and challenges have ways of suddenly appearing and messing up our best plans. Who could have anticipated COVID-19, the recession of 2009-10, the loss of revenue sharing, etc.? Flexibility and ongoing communication between and among elected and appointed leaders are paramount to the success of a strategic planning effort. The City of Big Rapids serves as an excellent example of building the strategic plan into their ongoing decision processes. Their strategic plan is short, understandable, and regularly used by everyone involved in the decision-making process.

Lawton



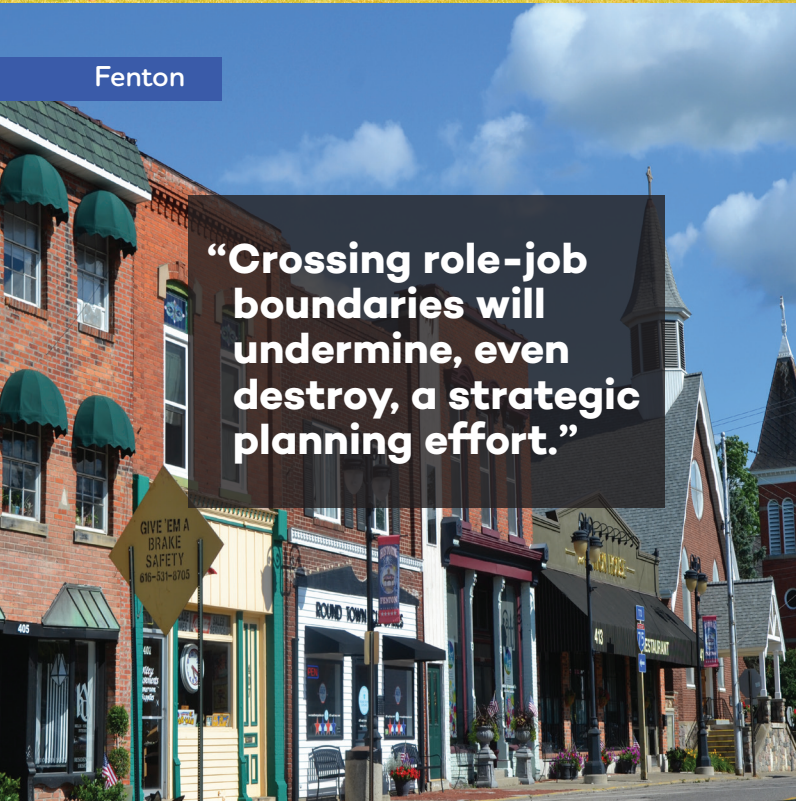
Lowell



Big Rapids



Fenton



“Crossing role-job boundaries will undermine, even destroy, a strategic planning effort.”

Is this our first strategic plan? Or are we building on past plans?

A strategic plan is a three-to-five-year commitment by a council or board and staff to a direction—and a set of major goals. It is usually best that a novice council or board take a more cautious approach to initial planning. Elected leaders need to become more familiar with municipal operations, each other, and the staff. Creating a one year set of goals and objectives is a more reasonable initial planning step before taking on a strategic planning effort.

Similarly, an experienced team may be more interested in expanding the strategic planning process to include a wide circle of people. An experienced council may wish to move to including more people in the input process of its strategic plan.

**You have decided to go forward.
What are some of the key questions?
Who should be involved in the strategic
planning processes?**

Once a council and manager have decided to go forward with a strategic planning process, the challenge is always: Who should be involved in the process? To quote the Cheshire Cat: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get." If the initial planning group believes that strategic plan outcomes may require a great deal of "buy-in" from many people, then many people should be involved in the process. The range of participants can be from only the council and manager and senior staff to input from community groups to involving the general public. However, if it is assumed that the outcomes will have a minimal impact on many others then the choice may be to only include the main decision-makers. Everyone is very busy, and time is very valuable. The decision to involve many people requires a serious pro-con discussion.

When the leaders of the Village of Lawton grappled with this question it became apparent that the leadership team had to figure out where they wanted to go before involving others. Indeed, they had to figure out the important questions facing the community before attempting to go in any particular direction.

What process should we use?

Again, this depends on where you want to go. If the team is looking for a working document that is basically focused on keeping the elected and appointed leaders on the same page over the next several years, then the process should be simple and straightforward. Oftentimes, the council and manager can identify internal strengths-weaknesses and external opportunities-challenges (SWOC) and goals, objectives, and first year tasks within a four-hour workshop.

If the decision is to involve a larger group, then the group might go with a "sandwich approach." With this approach, the council and manager spend one evening identifying the SWOC, their shared vision, and major three-to-five-year goals. The leadership group then "parks" this discussion and seeks input from other groups (staff, community groups, the public, etc.). The leadership group then reconvenes and reviews the input and moves forward to create the final strategic plan. The City of Fenton used this approach in its second strategic planning effort. In that process we used members of the city council as breakout group facilitators in an evening meeting involving approximately 150 residents.


Prior to submitting the proposed strategic plan to the council for final adoption, the manager and her staff should review and revise the document to ensure that the tasks can be accomplished within the prescribed timeframe. Any process should emphasize do-able goals, objectives, and annual tasks.

SWOC= Strengths-Weaknesses & External Opportunities-Challenges

Should we use an outside facilitator?

The obvious bias of this author is: yes. However, it is very possible to do strategic planning without an outside facilitator. Perhaps someone in the community could be trusted to lead the effort. In any case, it is important to have someone who can be trusted by all participants and who does not have a bias toward any outcome.

Final thoughts.

In the final analysis effective strategic plans are about shared ownership and commitment. Elected leaders must "own" the goals and direction they have chosen. Managers must be committed to finding ways to accomplish those goals. 

Lewis G. Bender, PhD is a retired professor from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and has four decades of strategic planning experience. You may contact him at 618.792.6103 or lewbender@aol.com



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