Tennessee Certified Economic Developer
Capstone Project

Kimber Ellard

Determining the Best Quality of Place Assets for a Small Community

INTRODUCTION

Cities and counties, of every size across the country, own and manage assets such as recreation centers, sports complexes, dog parks, greenways, conference centers, and more. These assets serve two purposes; first to improve the quality of place for the citizens currently living in their community, and second, to promote the growth of the community. People may move to a community for work or because the cost of living is affordable, but they STAY, LIVE, and THRIVE there because they feel a sense of connection and pride in THEIR community. To create this sense of community pride, community leaders need to truly recognize their citizens' needs and wants to have a clear understanding of the community's current trajectory so they can develop a proper growth plan. Change is going to happen in a healthy community, but how it changes is, in part, up to the community leadership. Rather than arbitrarily approve the purchase, development, and management of any community asset, they need to ask themselves who they are, who do they want to be, and how can they make it happen (with the willingness to accept that they alone cannot control what the community ultimately becomes).

Coffee County, TN has two primary cities; Tullahoma (the larger of the two cities) and Manchester (the smaller city, but county seat and better situated for growth). Each of these cities, and the county itself, operate very differently. The city of Tullahoma seems to be in a constant state of self-evaluation and growth planning, which is evident in their successful recruitment of commercial/retail businesses and residential growth. The smaller city appears to be more reactive than proactive, which means they regularly find themselves uncertain of how to grow and are unprepared for the inevitable growth that, as a bedroom community for one of the state's fastest-growing cities, is now upon them. If any city is unable to grow from a reactive to a proactive

community it will never fulfill its full potential. Strong quality of place can't be achieved as an afterthought. Nor can it be achieved when our heads are in the sand. It requires planning, self-awareness, discipline, vision, resources, and commitment. But if done right, it can reap huge benefits.[1]

COMMUNITY'S SELF EVALUATION

Self-evaluation can be a daunting task for a community and can be the primary reason that it doesn't get done. The leadership doesn't always intuitively know how or where to begin the process of self-evaluation, so very often it just doesn't happen. First, a community should not rely on the elected officials to carry this burden. These are people that often are working full-time jobs and receiving little to no pay for their elected position. Their involvement and oversight are crucial, but there should be a community manager that takes the lead. This person remains a constant, non-elected, force in the community's growth plan so it remains on track.

No matter who the project leader may be, the task can be overwhelming. Luckily communities have access to many levels of assistance including DIY guidelines online[2], free or low-cost state resources such as the TN ECD Three-Star Program[3] or the UTCIS Asset Based Planning Program[4], and professional agencies[5] that can provide everything from guidance to the full scope of the evaluation. Each of these options will ask similar questions that will follow a similar path.

The first thing a community should ask is "Who are we now?". Are they a college town, family-oriented, or a senior community? Is their community heavily industrial or commercial? What assets do they have locally and regionally, and don't forget to include natural assets like lakes, rivers, mountains, and such. While considering the regional resources, one difficult question that

also needs to be asked is "What is our relationship with neighboring communities?". How well a community "plays with others" is a strong definer of who they are and an even stronger definer of how they will grow.

Within this community, there is a palpable disconnect between each of the cities. Many call this the "Friday Night Lights" syndrome, but the people living here can't tell you why they don't like the other city. They simply don't have a sense of camaraderie, partnership, or connection to the other community. Each community exists as a stand-alone community that considers the other competition in commercial/retail, residential, and often industrial recruitment. Over the years, the idea of "all boats rise with the tide" has been lost. This is unfortunate because their differences could be considered strengths to be combined to make for a much more diverse and attractive community.

Once the curtain has been pulled back and the community is honest about who they are, they can begin evaluating their current assets. These questions are "What do we currently offer our citizens?" and "What works and what doesn't?". Over time some community assets, whether publicly or privately owned, become outdated. This can mean they have fallen into disrepair or that they are no longer of interest to the community residents. One example of this loss of interest is golf courses[6]. Being a member of the country club doesn't hold the same status as in years past, so membership is down, causing rates to increase in order to maintain the property. Then add in the new normal where families are so busy with both parents working and juggling children's extracurricular activities that it limits the time they have available to spend as a family. Families are choosing to spend this precious little time doing things together. While several other factors can contribute to the downfall of a golf course, coupling these two, increased cost and limited time,

is enough to make a dramatic impact. If a community has a failed asset, like a golf course, it only takes a little creativity to turn things around and make them into something positive.

Now it is time to look to the future of the community. Asking "What does the community currently need?" is a start, but also asking "What is the current trajectory of the community?" is important. Are the citizens saying they want or need a new sports complex, senior citizen center, event center/meeting space? If so, then look at how the community is changing to help determine if those assets will best serve the community as it grows. Always keep in mind that those citizens who speak the loudest don't always represent the majority, sometimes they are fighting against the changes they see happening.

As a side note on that last point, in the authors opinion, there is nothing more detrimental to a community's growth than to have leadership with the mindset of "I have lived here my entire life and I don't want to see my town change". While this shows that they take ownership of the town and its future, it is not necessarily in the interest of everyone in a community. People should take ownership of their town and its growth, but it needs to be done as part of the whole community, not as a single crusader fighting for self-interests.

The final set of the community self-evaluation questions; "Who do we want to be?" and "How do we get there?". Once a community recognizes its trajectory, it should be sure the changes are positive. If industries are shutting down, do they focus on bringing in more industry, or do they change their target market to corporate headquarters. If they are a retail community and the malls and stores are closing, do they become an education/art/sports community? Knowing a community's identity and trajectory are key to planning and preparing for its future success.

So, the community has become very self-aware through its evaluation process. They know who they are and what they have. They now recognize their shortcomings in what isn't working anymore and what they lack. They see where they are headed and what they want to do to help them become a thriving community for the next generations. But how do they move forward?

Planning for a community's growth is essential and, just as in the evaluation process, there are a multitude of options for assistance range from state offered free or low-cost programs such as the Assets Based Planning/ 3-Star Program to professional paid consultants.

One part of the planning process that often gets overlooked is getting input from the community. In this community, Tullahoma is currently in the planning phase of their next 20-year growth plan and are holding multiple community input sessions to get ideas and feedback from the citizens. In speaking with one of the community leaders, it was said "This level of interaction between city leaders, planners, and residents gives the citizens a sense of ownership and pride in their community. The shows residents and business owners feel the leadership is working on their behalf.". Through communication with other stakeholders, those people gain a better understanding of how the future of the community fits their lifestyle. For example, if a family has moved out of a metropolitan community for the quiet life of a rural town then, through these meetings, learn that the plan is to become a highly commercial micropolitan community within 10 years, they can 1) give their input on what they want in the community they live in and 2) if the planned changes don't fit their lifestyle, then decide if they want to remain in the community.

After the community input is gathered and analyzed, the leadership can then decide what assets need to be eliminated or changed/improved. Do the citizens think the walking trails need to be

widened or have emergency stations throughout? Should the park's tennis courts be converted to pickleball courts? Maybe the closed movie theater would be an excellent community performing arts center or as in the case of Savannah TN, the unused space behind the coffee shop can be converted to a co-working space. Some communities have created walking trails over unused railroads[7] or, as mentioned earlier, turned golf courses into community parks that include walking trails, fishing ponds, community gardens, and even bee-keeping areas. Not every "non-working" asset needs to be shut down, sometimes a little creativity will fix the problem.

Another resource for planning is a sister city. While generally a sister city is considered to be more international than local, the concept can be applied to an equally similar community in the same state or country. The community leadership can find several other similar communities and visit and talk to their leadership and citizens. Recommend that your citizens do the same and give their feedback. These sister communities are often very willing to work together to share ideas, successes, and failures. Doing this takes a little more time and money but can be an invaluable tool in community modeling.

Of course, everything costs money, and all too often there is a budget that unravels so many plans, but it doesn't have to if the financial planning is done properly. The bigger the asset or project, the more in-depth the financial planning must be. For example, a dog park needs nothing more than a small plot of land (usually in an already existing park), a fence, some "play" equipment, and a water line. But something as large as a conference center or a fine arts center requires some very detailed evaluations. Some communities have spent months or years having a detailed analysis done to determine the best location, operations, cost, and potential for success of their plan for a conference center[8]

In 2000, Coffee County and the City of Manchester teamed up to build, own, and operate a conference center. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to have been much financial evaluation done in preparation for this development. After 20 years the business was never profitable and the losses each year exceeded the allowable loss budgeted. While a contracted study by MTSU's Business and Economic Research Center (BERC)[9] to review the economic and fiscal impact of the center showed that although the facility is "not able to monetize at a level to cover its expenditures" the estimated contribution to the county's economy ranges between $4.7 and $6.9 million annually. Even though the study showed that the ancillary tax revenue was exponentially greater than the operations cost, there was a great outcry from the community to walk away from the operation of the center. This is a great example of needing to know beyond what the community wants and needs, but also what the implementation and operations cost will be. There will always be the possibility of some projects getting delayed, modified, eliminated, or failing but the better the planning the fewer the compromises.

TAKING ACTION

With all research, meetings, and planning done, the evaluation and planning phases are, for the most part, complete, the community is now ready to move forward with implementation. It is easier and helps build momentum if the community starts small and works into larger projects.

Starting with the changes of the current community offerings is often the best first step. Look back at the initial evaluation of what isn't working anymore and how to improve. Community residents will see the needed improvements as progress in their best interests and will be more likely to get on board with projects down the road. For example, if the community starts with building an event center because they feel it will bring in more tax dollars but doesn't address the residents' concerns on the condition of the playground equipment or the greenways, then the community leaders run

the risk of appearing to spend money improperly. This attitude by the community residents can derail much of the progress.

The leadership should hold regular community meetings that detail their next steps and continues to get the residents' input on the projects. Doing this will be beneficial in multiple ways 1) shows the community that the leadership is committed to following through with the plan they developed with the citizens earlier in the process 2) provides the transparency that community citizens want 3) encourages residents to participate in the implementation of these projects.

Promotion is also key to building community buy-in and participation. The phrase "there is no such thing as bad press" does not apply here. The leadership should aggressively promote their progress on every platform available (this means to get on all social media and constantly update with positivity !!!). Let the people of the community know that repaving of the greenway is happening, show the progress, and make a big deal out of the completed project. When that project is done, announce the next project so the excitement builds.

Once the citizens are on board and excited about the changes, get their input on what new project should be implemented. Keep them involved in the planning and execution (a community that builds a playground together has a greater sense of pride in the completed project.

If a community decides to take on a large-scale project like a conference center, as Manchester did, the level of research, planning, and transparency increase exponentially, because so do the risks. This leads to the point that not everything works as planned and there needs to be a backup plan in place. While the conference center in this community has not failed, in the eyes of many residents it has. It took nearly 20 years before the community "outrage" was expressed and the leadership did not have an existing restructuring plan. This led to blame of fault for the perceived

failure, arguments over responsibility, and finally contention and possible litigation over the executed exit plan. An initial plan, with an annual or biennial review, goes a long way to mitigating these types of issues within a community. A combined review of the city(ies) and county is beneficial as well. This keeps all parties aware, involved, and in agreement which will help to avoid a negative action within the leadership and negative impression by the residents.

These continued discussions are also a good place and time to also discuss the changes in the community (expected and unexpected) and a regular review of what works, what doesn't, what is needed, and how to plan for it. Basically, the process has come full circle and in a healthy community, it always will.

SUMMARY

In summary, the success of a community largely depends on the quality of place aspect. A community's leadership needs to be constantly aware of the community's identity and trajectory to best provide the assets that provide the quality of life that the citizens, and future citizens, are looking for. If the leadership is not already involved in the continued evaluation of the community, they need to start by asking the questions of "who we are", "who do we want to be", "what do we have and what do we need". Taking the answers to these and other questions will start the evaluation and development of a community growth plan, that must include the involvement of the community residents. Getting and keeping the citizens involved in all levels of planning, evaluation, and implementation will build support and excitement.

Communities should be cautioned to always evaluate the cost and risks with each of these projects, with the greater the project the greater the evaluation. The cost vs the risk of a dog park will be vastly different than that of a conference center and the evaluation needs to correlate. But all the

evaluation and planning cannot guarantee the success or longevity of any asset. Dog parks may go out of style, residents of a community may begin installing their own pools and not use the community pool, or a conference center may not be profitable. In the case of these or any number of other scenarios are the case, a community needs to have a plan that will address it, i.e., remove the dog park, reduce the availability of the pool to key hours, sell the conference center to a private management company.

Changes are going to happen over time and the regular and often evaluation of the community and its assets is vital to the continued growth and health of any community.

Sources:

1 https://www.insideindianabusiness.com/story/39602181/what-makes-up-quality-of-place

2 https://clubrunner.blob.core.windows.net/00000050172/en-au/files/sitepage/club-program-information/community-assessment-tools/Community-Assessment-Tools.pdf

3 https://www.tn.gov/ecd/rural-development/threestar.html

4 https://www.cis.tennessee.edu/eda-university-center/asset-based-planning-initiative

5 https://www.crescendocg.com/community-needs-assessment/

6 https://www.businessinsider.com/american-golf-courses-redevelopment-transformations-2018-8

  https://www.builderonline.com/building/are-golf-communities-a-thing-of-the-past_o

7 https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40864-018-0094-4

8 http://www.agnewbeck.com/pdf/kenai/Seward/Seward_ConvCtr_Final_Report.pdf

9 MTSU BERC Study of Manchester Coffee County Conference Center June 2, 2017