

VISION FOR A GREATER NEW HAVEN

New Haven, Connecticut

Vision for a Greater New Haven is a community-wide, citizen-driven process for developing and implementing shared community goals. The process consists of three phases: generating ideas for a citizen's agenda; developing short-, medium- and long-term objectives; and implementing the plans, all with continued participation from local citizens.

The New Haven effort is based on the citizens' vision concept that began in Chattanooga in 1984 and has been successful in a number of cities throughout the United States. Chattanooga, for example, estimates that its vision process, over nine years produced \$793 million invested in the city through 223 projects generating 1,500 permanent jobs, 7,000 temporary jobs, and providing services for 1.4 million people.

A broad concept of citizenship

Vision for a Greater New Haven began in the spring of 1993. Members of the religious community and the Chamber of Commerce organized a group of area leaders to think about an alternative planning process. The initial informal group formed the core of the current steering committee: 22 people representing business, government, the arts, religious organizations, grassroots organizing efforts and individual citizens.

Nearly 2,500 people from the greater New Haven area participated in the initial stage, the visioning process. Ten community meetings were held in February and March of 1994; seven meetings were held in neighborhood schools, two in senior citizens complexes, and one meeting brought together 85 high school students.

The meetings were preceded by three months of aggressive outreach based on two months of planning. The goal of the outreach efforts was and is to involve the broadest range of citizens in Vision, including those with the most power and those with the least power in the community. Vision's former Director, Heather Calabrese, recounts that "at one of the early meetings at a neighborhood high school, we literally had a major utility president

sitting with an ex-gang member, talking together about their vision for this city."

Early achievements

The ideas generated at the community meetings were divided into 33 categories ranging from drugs and crime to transportation, economic development and the arts. Over 500 people met to discuss specific topics of interest and develop concrete goals and recommendations. In June 1994, the results were presented on the New Haven Green; citizens were asked to "vote" for the goals they thought most urgent for the city and the region and to sign up for citizen action groups to work on achieving those goals.

The citizen action groups developed short, medium, and long-term objectives, the second phase of the process, while continuing to work on outreach and seek opportunities for collaboration with efforts already underway in the city. Early in the implementation process, citizen action groups have also accomplished a number of concrete successes.

The most visible achievement to date is the mile-long pedestrian pathway to connect downtown with the Long Wharf waterfront created by Vision's Waterfront citizen action group. The group forged an alliance with the U.S. Post Office, the office of Mayor John DeStefano, Jr., Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro's office and the Special Olympics World Games to create the wheelchair-accessible walkway in time for the Special Olympics in the summer of 1995. The next steps will be interim goals of creating signage, lighting and recognition for the "Vision Trail"; long term goals are to create access along all waterfronts, including rivers, and to enrich these areas with recreational and cultural activities.

The Image citizen action group created a Council on Public Relations that produced a press kit distributed during the Special Olympics and an Internet site with New Haven information. The Youth citizen action group implemented a short term goal of a roller skate donation drive with drop off at local libraries and organized roller skating parties at school gyms. The Economic Development citizen action group is building a coalition of groups interested in establishing a summer camp for youth entrepreneurs in 1996.

Priorities for the next nine months

The citizen action groups continue to forge ahead in specific areas, with support from Vision staff. Meanwhile, a strategic planning process in the summer of 1995

brought together steering committee members and citizen action group leaders to decide on Vision's priorities for implementation in the next six to nine months. The Vision Trail is one of four priorities; the others are:

■ **Housing:** *The Homestead Act for New Haven:* Vision's long-term goal is the rehabilitation of 600 units of blighted housing in New Haven. In the next year, Vision will create a formal consortium with city agencies, nonprofit housing developers, banks and intermediaries. The consortium will develop a plan for rehabilitation, ownership and residence and will also rehabilitate 25 units of housing this year.

■ **Transportation:** A regional transportation authority is the project's long-term goal. In the next year, Vision will develop and implement a transportation action plan that demonstrates visual progress. Examples include placing bike racks downtown and on buses.

■ **The International Festival of Arts and Ideas:** Vision's long-term goal is to support the creation of an international arts festival in New Haven, linking it with the *New Haven Register's* Waterfront Festival. In the next year, Vision will work with city schools to develop curriculum relating to the festival. Vision will also develop a plan with city artists and neighborhood organizers for local economic and performance opportunities related to the festival.

■ **Promoting Understanding Among Current and Future Leaders:** Vision is working with the Anti-Defamation League's World of Difference program to create and implement a 6-hour training for 150 leaders in the community who represent diversity in experience, culture and race. This training will launch an ongoing dialogue to contribute to cultural understanding and respect in the community, and thus to increase diversity within Vision efforts.

Maintaining integrity and trust

Heather Calabrese believes Vision has worked hard to move from a leadership model of planning into a "true citizen's model that strives to give every participant an equal voice." The challenge is to keep moving in that direction. She notes that the two ways that Vision might lose its integrity and fail would be if it does not stay an open process and if it does not continue to reflect the way the community looks.

Calabrese recalls a conversation with an outreach worker in the African-American community, a long-time activist who told her "I'm involved in Vision because I trust that you won't just pick my brain, say thank you, and go away and do whatever you want." Calabrese feels that Vision has been successful so far in demonstrating that "this is not a white, middle class, warm and fuzzy effort. In New Haven, people who have been involved in social change for a long time feel really used and abused. Vision will not just use them for legitimacy without allowing them to remain in the decision-making process." Vision's biggest challenge, however, remains the struggle to keep the process as diverse as possible as it moves to a focus on implementation.

Measuring success

Calabrese emphasizes: "This process is not touchy-feely. It is very strategic, with clear short-term, long-term and intermediate goals. But it moves slowly to allow open participation. The challenge is how to communicate that to the community and to funders." Participants and funders both expect to see concrete, visible results quickly, and neither group is used to this kind of alternative, participatory process. Vision must balance the need to show successes, like the Vision Trail, while continuing education about the process.

—*Jobs & Environment Campaign*



UPDATE

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The Vision process has continued to be a fluid one with a blending and merging of participants, planning, activities and results. For example, some of the original action groups met only briefly. Some decided to collaborate with other Vision action groups or to work within community organizations that serve parallel purposes. Some met longer and took on specific tasks. When these tasks were accomplished, some decided to merge with other organizations. Others continue to meet and organize to this day. The very nature of this process makes it difficult to abstract the relative contributions of Vision and other agents of change to the Greater New Haven community. But looking at the variety of activities in New Haven over the last two years sheds light

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Scope: Greater New Haven area
Inception Date: 1993
Participants: Local citizens, agencies, businesses
Project type: Community-wide visioning, citizen-led initiatives
Methods used: Visioning process, community organizing
Lessons learned: Maintaining an open and representative process is critical to success. It is equally important to balance this process with concrete, visible achievements.

on the important contributions of Vision and its action groups in guiding or supporting revitalization efforts in the community and region.

The Regional Cooperation committee undertook several activities to educate a broader audience. In the spring of 1997, the committee hosted three panel discussions in Hamden, Orange, and Guilford. In March 1998, the committee will host a conference addressing the issues that have put Connecticut in the position of exporting more of its young adults than it retains. This theme was chosen precisely because the committee believed it was likely to help suburbanites see that they have a personal stake in promoting regional cooperation. The Transportation Committee developed a comprehensive Transportation Action Plan that integrated non-motorized transportation into its vision. The formation of a Regional Airport Authority to manage Tweed-New Haven Airport is underway. The Higher Education Committee has worked with area colleges to design partnerships that work to the benefit of the colleges and the Greater New Haven community.

The Public Education Committee has

supported a number of improvements to New Haven schools. In response to the importance placed in the first phases of the Vision process upon community involvement in and access to primary and secondary school facilities, "Community Schools," whose doors are now open for use after regular school hours, have been designated. A curriculum framework to set academic, literacy, content, art, and performance standards and testing for students from K-12 has been developed, and two charter schools have opened. Vision began a campaign in 1997 for state funding of reduced class size for schools in which 30 percent or more of students are eligible for subsidized lunches or 20 percent or more are learning English as a second language.

A variety of activities have focused on race relations through programs such as the "World of Difference" Leadership Launch, a "March Together Against Violence—Be a Peacemaker" event, a series of forums called Community Dialogues on Race Relations, and study circles. A "Diversity Roundtable" will focus on increasing diversity in the workplace by enhancing employability. Vision has been asked to staff the Roundtable.

Because there is, in fact, excess housing in New Haven, the Homestead Act was replaced by Mayor John DeStefano's "Livable City Initiative," which is taking housing that is least viable and leveling it for use as open garden areas. Sliver lots are being sold to adjacent residents to be used for yards and gardens.

The first two International Arts Festivals, in June 1996 and 1997, were a tremendous success. Vision volunteers have been involved in various arts events, including the HarborFest, events organized by the Arts Council, and the International Festival.

The Vision process is not a short-term engagement in New Haven. Members of the original steering committee have been invited to extend their commitment or to pass on the torch after the first four years. The greater New Haven Chamber of Commerce is taking a leadership role in supporting Vision in 1998. By bringing business into collaboration with other segments of the community, Vision for a Greater New Haven will be part of the ongoing process to create a real and meaningful shared plan for the future.

—*Community Sustainability Resource Institute*