

2.2 Gather Community Input & Draft Prosperity Components

Based on extensive community input, identify and prioritize the community components and factors that residents believe best define your community's prosperity. In other words, create a first draft of the prosperous community components and factors table such as Figure 2.9 for your community. Look for common elements in all the community feedback and comments as input for developing a vision and plan for the future of the community (Chapter 3 toolbox). Revise and finalize the prosperous community components table after completing a community visioning exercise in Chapter 3.

As the book points out, successful community and economic development policy must be based on broad input from the community - everyone, from teenagers to the most prominent citizens, must feel like they have been heard - and therefore contributed to creating a vision and plan for a prosperous community. There are many ways to gather public input, and, depending on the scope and nature of the community project, some or all can be used. They include focus groups, town hall meetings, one-on-one confidential interviews, and surveys. Below we provide links to download worksheets for these techniques for gathering public input. You don't necessarily have to use them all - as a matter of fact, public input "fatigue" can set in if these tools are used too frequently.

Beginning in the Introduction to the book, we have discussed "community action groups" and commented on what they can do to help build your prosperous community. In many cases, when interest starts to build to improve a community or to address an immediate issue such as the closure of a major employer, community residents begin to talk amongst themselves and form groups or coalitions to take action, hence our term community action groups.

When local citizens care enough to form these action groups, as opposed to just haranguing elected officials or others in authority to "do something" it is an indication that collective action and caring for the community is in the community's "DNA." As time goes by and simple talk begins to turn into a desire to develop a plan, there must be a lead organization to direct all the activities involved in developing the roadmap to prosperity. Often, an existing community or economic development organization is tapped for the lead. In some communities, a "Steering Committee" composed of representatives from several key community organizations and local governments is formed. Selecting or establishing a lead organization that is representative, effective and widely trusted is a critical success factor for most any community planning initiative.

The Steering Committee will need to decide early in the community input and planning process whether or not outside professional assistance is required or preferred. Completing the public input process as the important first step in a community planning process will require significant labor resources, and, while some communities undertake the process through volunteers, outside assistance is frequently engaged.

Focus Group, Town Hall and Individual Interview Scope:

Set up focus groups, town hall meetings, and individual interviews with key stakeholders in your community to learn more about the kind of community they would like to live in and envision for the future. Learn what aspects of the community they like and dislike, and what community assets can be built upon and what liabilities or shortcomings to work on. Conduct focus groups and individual interviews with a broad cross-section of residents and stakeholders.

- **What:** Gather input from residents and stakeholders to use in creating a community vision and customized roadmap to prosperity.
- **Why:** To collect feedback from community stakeholders to understand the situation from their perspective as well as collect what they would like to see moving forward to create a collective vision for the future of the community
- **Who:**
 - **Focus Groups:** Invited participants including a mix of large and small businesses, elected officials, and key community organizations and other stakeholders.
 - **Town Hall:** Open to all community members
 - **Interviews:** Key business leaders and elected officials
- **When:** Schedule conveniently for the participants
- **Duration:**
 - **Focus Groups:** 60-90 minutes
 - **Town Hall:** 60-90 minutes
 - **Interviews:** 30-60 minutes
- **Where:**
 - **Focus Groups:** In-Person, ideally
 - **Town Hall:** In-Person
 - **Interviews:** In-person, online or call

Focus Group, Town Hall and Individual Interview Instructions:

The following are recommended orders-of-operation to plan, host and report on your community input for Focus Groups, Town Halls and Individuals Interviews.

1. Planning

- Identify key industries in your community and key stakeholders and residents with whom you would like to hear from.
- Prioritize the individuals you want to speak with individually vs. in a focus group.
- Begin securing a date, time, and location for holding the focus groups.
- Determine a moderator and note taker for each focus group.

- Determine who will conduct individual interviews and set up timeblocks for conducting interviews via phone, Zoom, in-person, etc.
- Collect contact information of those you wish to invite to focus groups and conduct interviews with.
- Determine date, time and location for conducting town hall meeting

2. Promotion:

- Send invitations for focus groups and confirm participants.
- Begin scheduling individual interviews.
- Promote town hall meetings via your own marketing channels (ex: website, newsletter, social media, etc.) and work with local media outlets (ex: radio, newspaper) to run PSAs to promote to community members outside of your marketing channels.

3. Preparation:

- Determine the questions to ask in focus groups, town hall meetings, and individual interviews, and draft agenda and interview guide. ([sample in separate download](#))
- Determine how all meeting notes will be recorded (ex: Voice Memos, recorded Zoom meeting, pen and paper, etc.).
- Determine how to collect information from all meetings and interviews (ex: Set up a Google Form for Community Action Group members to transcribe notes into).
- Set up any necessary forms and documents for note compilation.
- Determine any items you need on hand for focus groups, town hall meetings, and interviews (notepad, markers, name tags, etc.)

4. Conducting the Meetings:

- Open each meeting or interview with a reminder of the purpose for the meeting and explain any ground rules for the event.
- For the individual interviews, assure the interviewee that all comments will be confidential.
- Take notes and/or record audio.
- Address questions as needed.
- Close the meeting/interview by thanking participants for their time and feedback, and explain how they can receive updates from your group.

5. After the Meetings:

- Hold a debrief meeting with the Steering Committee.
- Set a deadline for all team members to process their notes.