Community Visioning Program
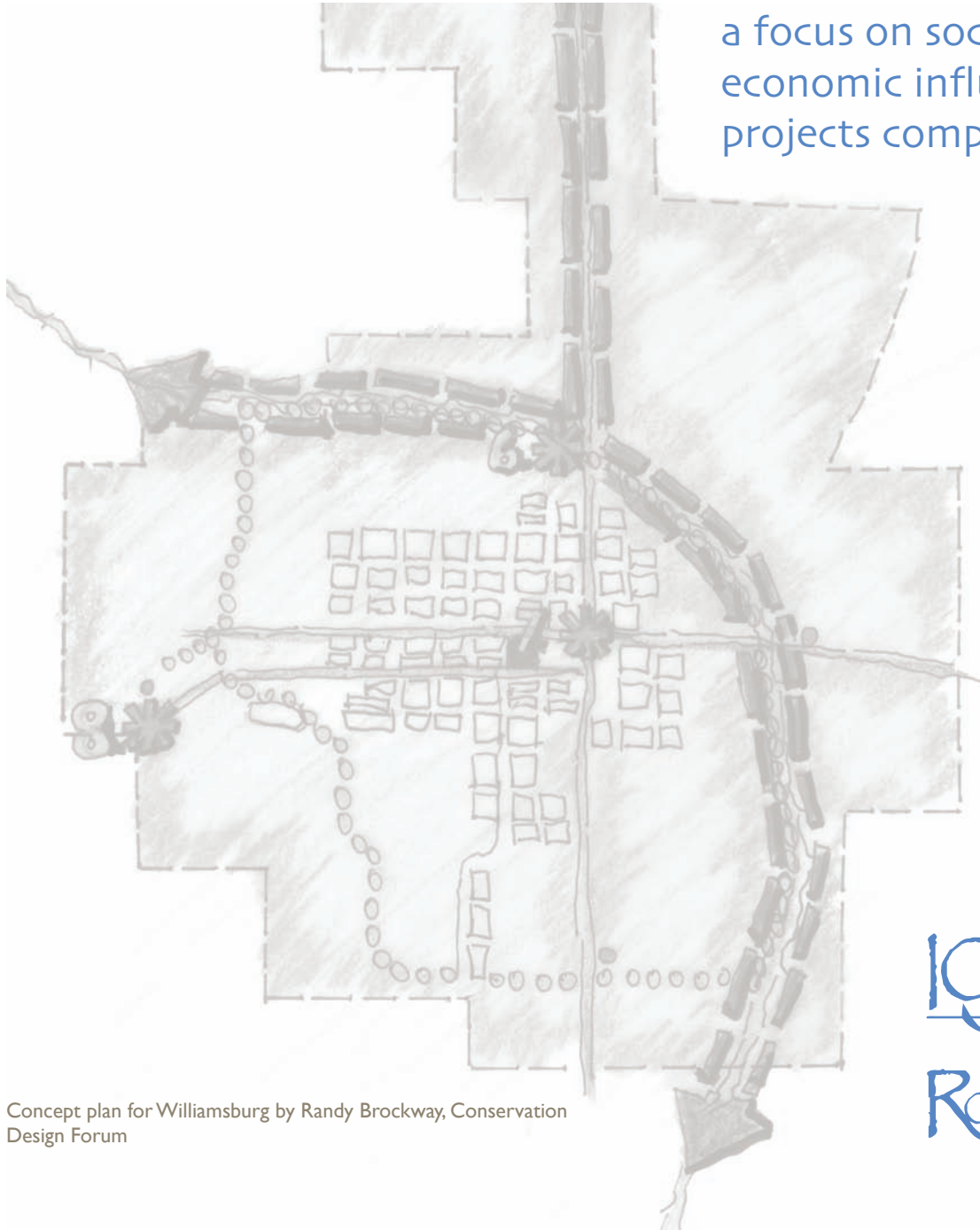# Impact Assessment:

a focus on social capital, economic influence, and projects completed

Concept plan for Williamsburg by Randy Brockway, Conservation Design Forum

IOWA'S LIVING ROADWAYS

Acknowledgments

Introduction

The Iowa's Living Roadways Community Visioning Program is a participatory design process that seeks to integrate technical landscape planning and design techniques with sustainable community action and to assist communities in making sound and meaningful decisions about the local landscape. The process includes the following steps:

- Identification of issues
- Investigation of physical and cultural dimensions of landscape issues
- Establishment of goals for change
- Creation of physical strategies to address issues and meet goals in partnership with technical experts
- Development of an implementation plan

Successful completion of the program results in a conceptual community landscape plan and the development of implementation strategies that empower communities to build, step by step, as resources become available.

To determine the rate of successful project implementation and the level of client satisfaction with the Community Visioning Program, Trees Forever field coordinators interviewed representatives from 40 communities that have participated in the Visioning program. The results are summarized in a follow-up report originally produced in 2002 and updated in 2004.

The purpose of this study is to further evaluate the impact of the visioning program on participating communities by interviewing steering committee members from past visioning communities. The report provides a summary of the study, including a description of the methodology, a presentation of the results, and conclusions based on those results.
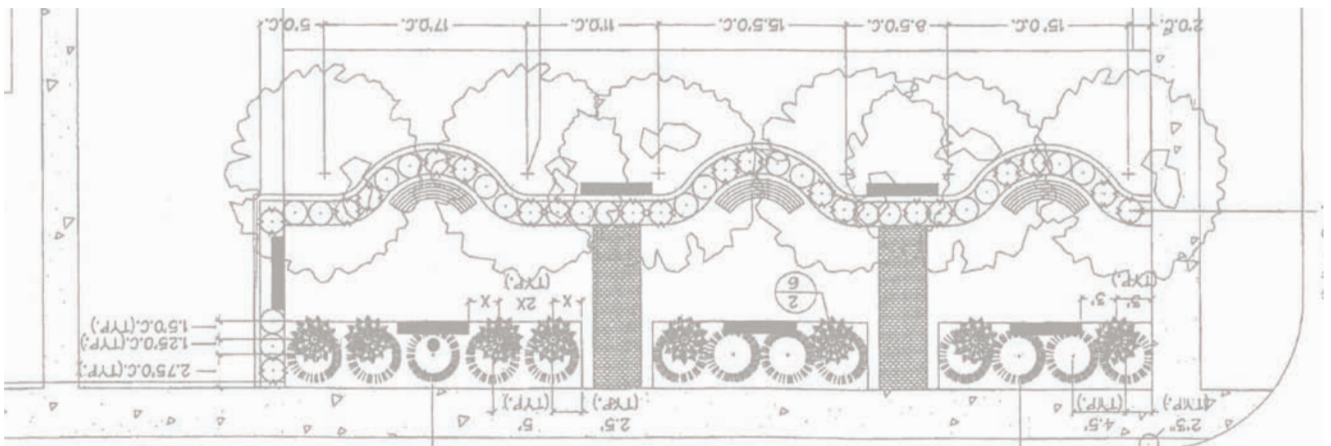
Part of a landscaping plan for Wellsburg by Meg Flenker, Flenker Land Architecture Consultants

Methodology

Interviews of past participants in the Visioning Program were conducted to learn what actions have been taken in the communities since completing the visioning process. The interviews also revealed how individual participants perceive the effect of the program on economic activity in the community and whether or not participants personally benefited from the experience. Information was collected by interviewing steering committee members from communities that had participated in the visioning program in 1998–99, 1999–2000, and 2000–01.

Communities from these three program years were selected for the study primarily because of timing. The social networks in small communities that participate in the visioning program have a tendency to change frequently. Therefore, it would have been difficult to contact representatives from communities that participated in the program earlier than 1998–99. Communities that participated in the visioning program after 2001 would have had little time to implement any projects, making it difficult to measure the impact that the program would have.

A total of 338 potential respondents were identified by reviewing past visioning community files and by consulting with Trees Forever field coordinators, who maintain contact with some communities. Contact with potential respondents was initiated through letters, which were followed up with phone calls. The actual interviews were conducted by telephone.

Interviewers were able to make contact with at least one steering committee member from 27 of the 35 communities selected for the study. Only 77 of the 338 potential respondents were successfully contacted. Much of the contact information on file was out of date, particularly for communities that participated in visioning in 1998–99; many of the potential respondents had changed phone numbers and addresses.

Most of the responses were gathered from committee members from communities that completed the visioning process in 2000–01 (49.35 percent), while the fewest responses were collected from representatives of communities that completed the process in 1998–99 (11.69 percent). The distribution of communities and response rates according to the program year is as follows:

Visioning year	Total no. of communities	Communities contacted successfully	Interviews completed	Percentage of responses
1998–1999	13	6	9	11.69
1999–2000	10	10	30	38.96
2000–2001	12	11	38	49.35
Total:	35	27	77	

The respondents were asked five general questions about their respective communities and the possible impact of participation in the visioning program. In addition, the respondents were asked 11 specific questions about each visioning project completed.
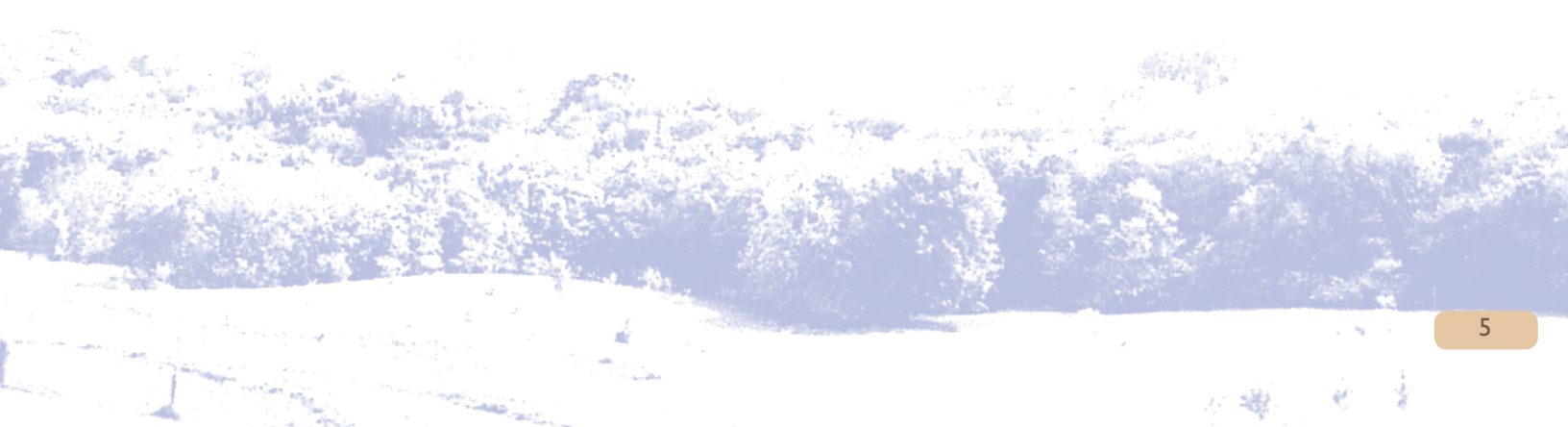
Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study addressed the following areas:

- Project implemented
- The implementation process
- Maintenance of completed projects
- Direct and indirect effects of participation

Project Implemented

How many Community Visioning projects do communities complete?

Previous surveys of community leaders suggest that approximately 85 percent of first phase projects were completed. In this study, we documented how many first phase projects were completed based on physical evidence in the field. From previous surveys we have little data about how many projects were completed several years after visioning or how many of the total proposed projects were completed. In order to assess the percentage of all projects proposed for the sampled communities, we compared the total number of projects proposed in the concept plans to the number of projects completed to date.

What types of projects are completed?

Towns and communities are places that are improved not only by necessity but also out of pride. Some places may be more significant within a small town than others, leading to more emphasis on completion of transportation enhancement projects in these areas. For example, is restoration of the town square more likely than neighborhood street enhancements? Are entryways more important than recreational trails?

The Implementation Process

From which sources to communities obtain funding for implementation?

Funding available may have an impact on the types of projects that communities choose to implement. Where communities find funding could also indicate how important residents perceive community enhancement. Communities that obtain funding primarily through volunteer labor, private donations, and local fund-raising efforts have successfully engaged their residents.

What problems do communities encounter during the implementation process? Are these problems perceived as severe impediments or minor set-backs?

Understanding the types of problems that communities experience during the implementation process provides the insight necessary to develop the most effective methods for making and executing transportation-related community enhancements.

Maintenance

Who is responsible for maintaining completed projects?

The continued success of implemented transportation-related enhancements relies on regular maintenance such as mowing, watering, planting, and so on.

Direct and Indirect Effects of Participation

What direct effects does participation in the Visioning Program have on communities?

Economic development and quality of life are important issues to residents in small communities. The completion of visioning projects may have a direct impact on quality of life in the community by improving aesthetics, or play a role in economic development by enhancing the business district or tourist attractions.

How does the visioning process affect individual steering committee members?

Community members' participation in the visioning process may also have an indirect impact by creating project building capacity, as well as new social networks. The capacity of communities to manage their own affairs is crucial to the successful implementation of transportation-related enhancements. Therefore, the Visioning Program aims to develop human resources and equip individuals with the understanding, access to information, knowledge and training that enables them to perform effectively. Learning how individual steering committee members benefit from the visioning process allows us to measure to some degree the level of capacity building accomplished.

Does participation in the Visioning Program prompt members of the community to promote any new economic activities?

One of the expected indirect effects of any development such as landscape improvements is an improved city economy.

Results

Projects Implemented

The respondents were asked a number of questions regarding Community Visioning Program projects completed in their respective communities. Information requested included how many projects had been completed, what types of projects were done, what sources of funding were obtained, what problems were encountered, and who is responsible for project maintenance. Often respondents were unable to recall or simply did not know the number and types of projects completed.

How many Community Visioning projects has your community completed?

Based on the recollections of the 77 respondents, an average of 1.2 visioning projects was completed in the 27 visioning communities. Eleven respondents (14.30 percent) said that their respective communities had begun conceptualizing visioning projects but did not complete any. More than half of the respondents (59.70 percent) said that their communities had completed at least one visioning project. Less than 25 percent of those interviewed recalled completing more than one project. (n=77)

Planting project in Cherokee

Table 1. Number of projects completed

No. of projects	No. of respondents	Percent
None	11	14.30
One	46	59.70
Two	11	14.30
Three	6	7.80
Four	1	1.30
Average:	1.2	

What types of visioning projects did your community complete?

Respondents who said that their communities had done projects were asked to identify the types of projects completed. Many respondents had difficulty recalling what types of projects were done, but based on the recollections of those who did, the majority of the projects were related to community entryways, including landscaping and signage. Representatives from eight communities reported the completion of an entryway sign and six reported the completion of entryway plantings. Those from four communities reported the completion of tree- planting projects. Other types of projects reported include streetscaping and parks. Representatives from four communities reported that no projects were completed.

Figure 1. Types of projects completed

other 3.70%
streetscaping 7.40%
parks 7.40%
tree planting 14.82%
none 14.81%
entryway signage 29.63%
entryway plantings 22.23%
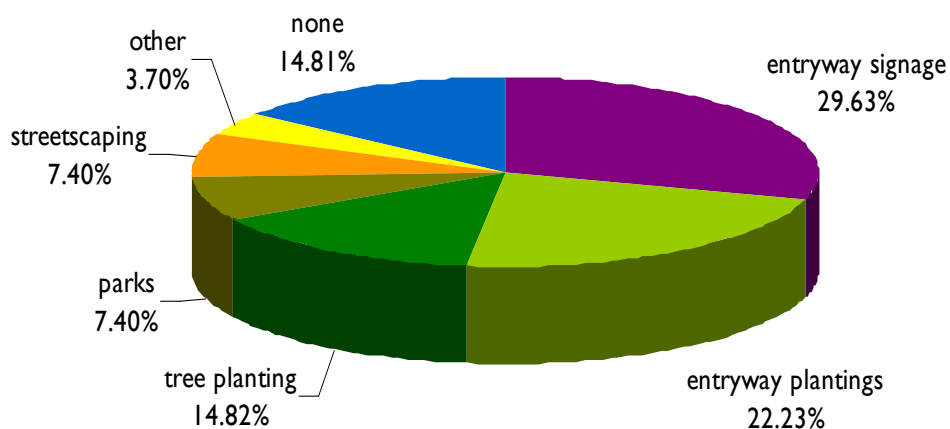
The Implementation Process

From which sources did your community obtain funding for project implementation?

Projects were funded by several organizations, both local and external. External public or private grants from organizations such as Iowa's Living Roadways, the Lion's Club, and USDA played a major role in funding project implementation. Respondents from 20 communities indicated that volunteers from local government and other civic organizations such as the Kiwanis Club and the Rotary Club contributed substantial labor to implementation. Local businesses and individuals donated labor, as well as materials. (n=27)

Table 2. Funding sources for implementation

Funding source	No. of communities	Percent
External public or private grants	20	74.1
Volunteers	20	74.1
Local government	16	59.3
Civic organizations	15	55.6
Local businesses or individuals	14	51.9
Fund-raising campaigns	6	22.2

Figure 2. Sources of funding obtained by communities
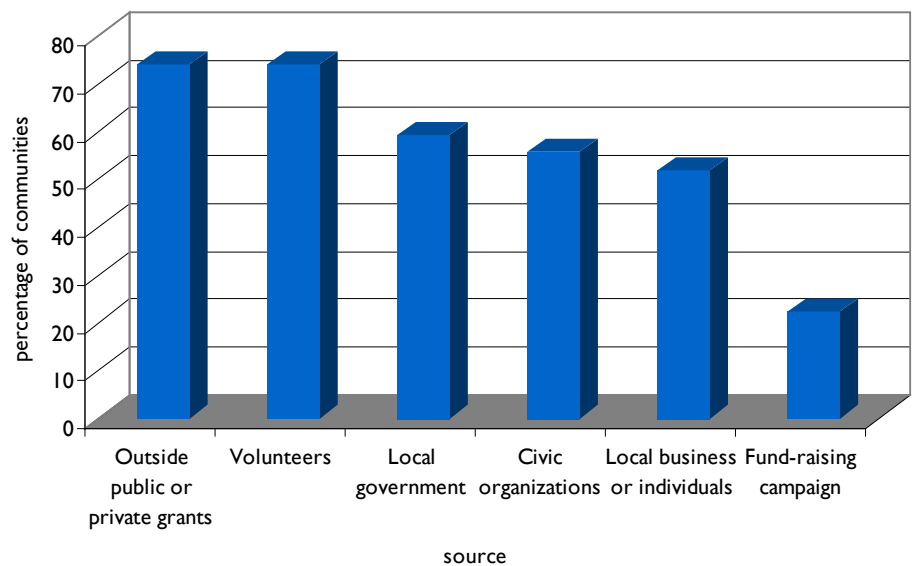
What problems did you encounter during the implementation process? How would you characterize the severity of these problems?

Respondents were asked to rate the severity of specific problems they may have encountered during the implementation process, using a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = no problem to 5 = a major problem). The respondents did not encounter major problems while completing visioning projects. Problems that were encountered were not perceived by respondents as severe; rather, problems were rated as either nonexistent or minor. All of the mean responses were less than 3.

Table 3. Problems encountered during implementation

	No. of respondents	Mean response
Looking for funds	63	2.97
Maintaining interest, motivation	69	2.59
Recruiting volunteers	68	2.04
The grant process	57	2.00
Working with the DOT	67	2.00
Working with the landscape architect	66	1.61
Working with ISU staff or interns	66	1.53

Other problems identified by respondents that were not rated include rigid DOT regulations and policies (three people), direction and planning (two people), and working with DNR (one person). Issues involving Trees Forever were not addressed in this study.

Entryway signage and landscaping in Earlville

Maintenance

Who is responsible for maintaining completed projects?

According to 78 percent of the respondents, maintenance for the majority of visioning projects typically becomes the responsibility of the city once the projects are completed. The percentage of respondents who indicated that entities other than the city are responsible for maintenance drops dramatically. Nearly 30 percent of the respondents said that members of the original visioning committee are still involved with maintenance. (n=64)

Table 4. Entities responsible for project maintenance

	No. of respondents	Percent
City	50	78.13
Volunteers	26	40.63
Visioning committee	18	28.13
Economic development group	8	12.50
Citizens or individuals	5	7.81
Rotary Club	5	7.81
Trees Forever	3	4.69
Museum board	1	1.56

Entryway signage in Missouri Valley

Direct and Indirect Effects of Participation

The major aim of this study is to measure the impact of completed visioning projects on the participating communities. Therefore, respondents were asked the possible effects of completed visioning projects on their communities, as well as the effects on them personally of serving as members of the visioning steering committees. Both direct and indirect effects of the visioning program were explored.

What direct effects did participation in the Visioning Program have on your community?

Interviewers read statements to respondents of the possible impact that visioning projects could have on communities. The respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement, using a scale from 1 to 5 (1= strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). The statements art grouped into three categories: project building capacity (orange), direct/indirect economic impact (green), and satisfaction with service provider performance (blue). The average scores for each group of statements are listed in table 5 and illustrated in figures 3, 4, and 5.

When asked of the possible impact on the community of completing one or more visioning projects, almost all of the respondents recognized the aesthetic value of the projects in terms of the improvement of the physical appearance of the community (mean value of 4.58). Respondents also indicated that completion of one project led to the conceptualization of other projects.

A committee member explains a community map to residents at the charrette in Belmond

Completion of visioning projects was not perceived to increase intercommunity relations (external linkages with other communities) or improve the economic conditions in the communities. However, respondents indicated that visioning projects increased the internal and other external linkages with those directly involved in the projects. Respondents said that good working relationships were developed and are maintained with different groups involved in the project, such as other steering committee members, Iowa State University, Trees Forever, ISU Extension, professional landscape architects, and funding agencies. (n=77)

Table 5. Direct and Indirect Effects of Communities

	Because of the visioning process and project:	Average response
Project Building Capacity	The physical appearance of the city improved	4.58
	Relationships among steering committee members developed and are maintained	4.47
	The community was able to start a new project	4.17
	The community joined a regional, statewide, or national economic organization	2.32
Direct/indirect economic impact	The community attracted more tourists	2.16
	The economic burden on the city was reduced	2.05
	The community began to collaborate with neighboring cities	2.04
	The community attracted new businesses	2.01
	The city's income increased	1.90
Satisfaction with Service Provider Performance	The community developed and maintains good working relationships with:	
	Iowa State University	4.49
	Trees Forever	4.35
	Iowa State University Extension field staff	4.35
	The visioning landscape architect	4.34
	Funding agencies	4.13

Figure 3. Program impact on program building capacity

	Value
physical appearance of the city improved	4.55
relationships among steering committee members developed & are maintained	4.4
community was able to start a new project	4.15
community joined a regional, statewide, or national economic org.	2.3

strongly disagree 0 — 5 strongly agree
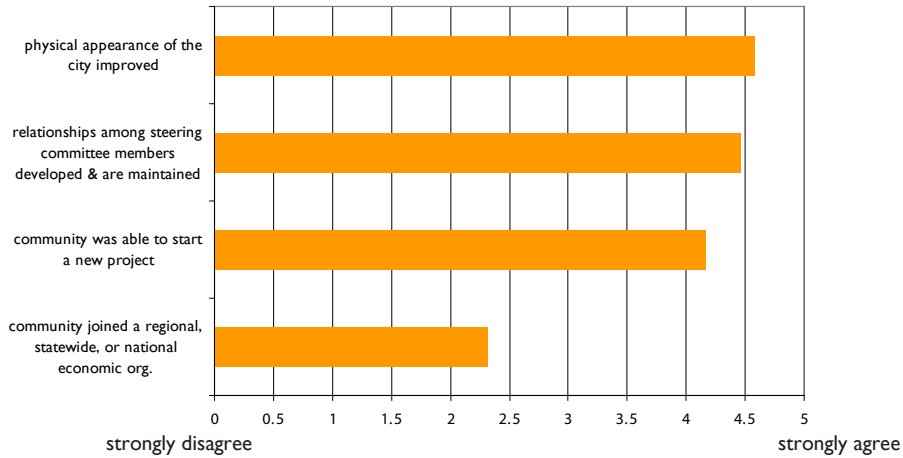
Figure 4. Program impact on economic activity

	Value
community attracted more tourists	2.2
economic burden of the city was reduced	2.1
community began to collaborate with neighboring cities	2.1
community attracted new businesses	2.05
city's income increased	1.9

strongly disagree 0 — 5 strongly agree
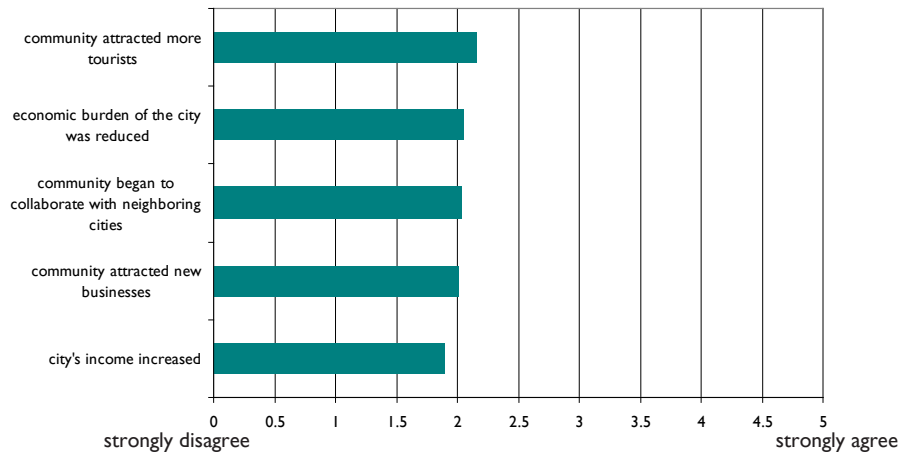
Figure 5. Program impact on satisfaction with service provider performance

	Value
Iowa State University	4.5
Trees Forever	4.4
Iowa State University Extension field staff	4.4
the visioning landscape architect	4.35
funding agencies	4.15

strongly disagree 0 — 5 strongly agree
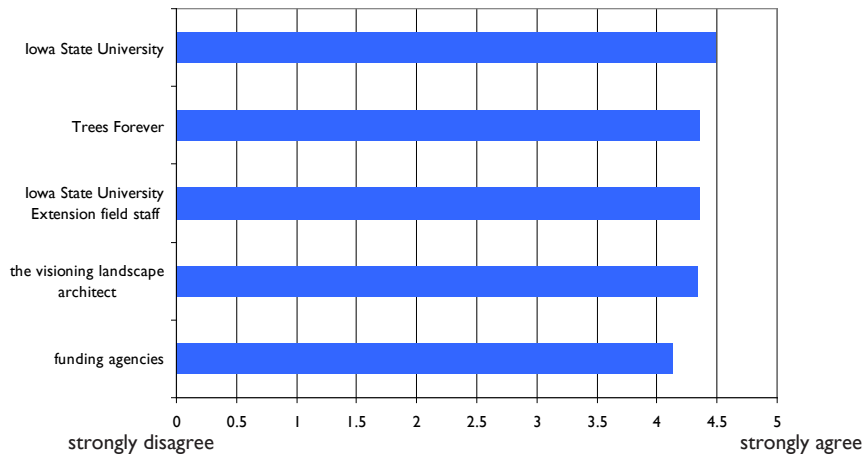
What do you think is the impact of the visioning process and project on you as a steering committee member?

Interviewers read statements to respondents of the possible impact that visioning projects could have on respondents themselves as committee members. They were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement, using a scale from 1 to 5 (1= strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). These statements are grouped into three categories: capacity (orange), education (green), and social cohesion (blue). Table 6 and figures 6, 7, and 8 show the average scores.

The respondents indicated that membership on the visioning steering committee was beneficial in many ways, such as increasing their awareness of needs and opportunities, teaching them communication and relationship skills, and teaching them how to set goals for their communities. (n=77)

Table 6. Program impact on steering committee members

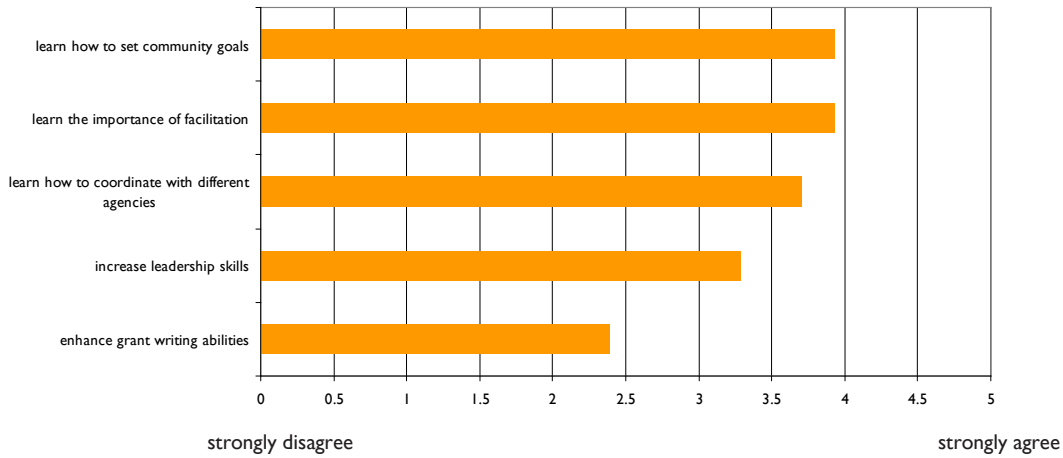|	Participation as a steering committee member in the visioning process was beneficial to me by providing me with the opportunity to:	Average response
Capacity	Learn how to set goals for my community	3.93
	Learn the importance of facilitation	3.93
	Learn how to coordinate with different agencies	3.71
	Increase my leadership skills	3.29
	Enhance my grant writing abilities	2.39
Education	Increase my awareness of the needs of and the opportunities to better my community	4.40
	Learn about and participated in a needs assessment (landscape inventory and analysis)	4.01
	Learn more about the local ecology	3.90
	Identify funding opportunities available	3.56
	Learn the charrette process	3.39
Social cohesion	Develop and maintain relationships with other committee members	4.21
	Make new friends	3.60

Figure 6. Program impact on capacity

learn how to set community goals	(bar to ~3.95)
learn the importance of facilitation	(bar to ~3.9)
learn how to coordinate with different agencies	(bar to ~3.7)
increase leadership skills	(bar to ~3.3)
enhance grant writing abilities	(bar to ~2.4)

0   0.5   1   1.5   2   2.5   3   3.5   4   4.5   5

strongly disagree   strongly agree

Figure 7. Program impact on education

increase awareness of needs/opportunities to better community	(bar to ~4.4)
learn about/participate in needs assessment	(bar to ~4)
identify funding opportunities available	(bar to ~3.55)
learn the charrette process	(bar to ~3.35)

0   0.5   1   1.5   2   2.5   3   3.5   4   4.5   5

strongly disagree   strongly agree

Figure 8. Program impact on social cohesion

develop/maintain relationships w/other committee members	(bar to ~4.2)
make more friends	(bar to ~3.65)

0   0.5   1   1.5   2   2.5   3   3.5   4   4.5   5
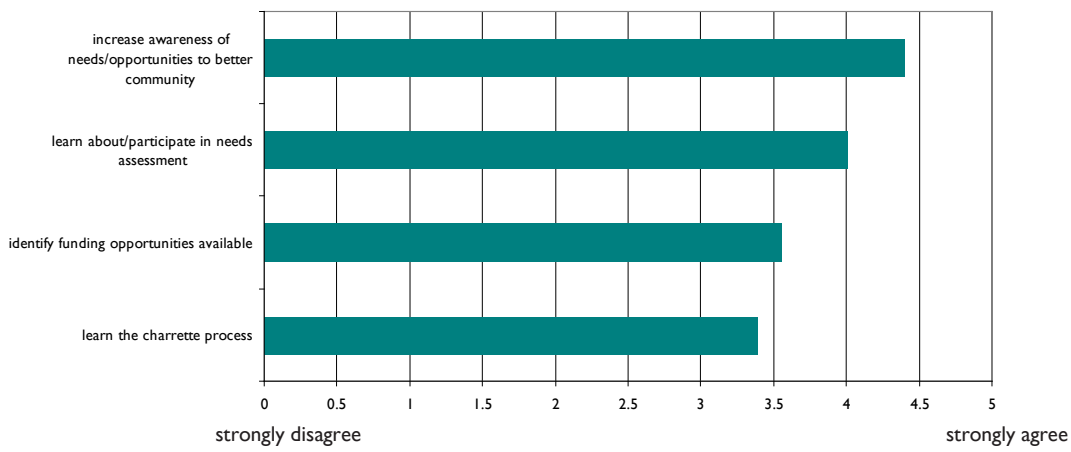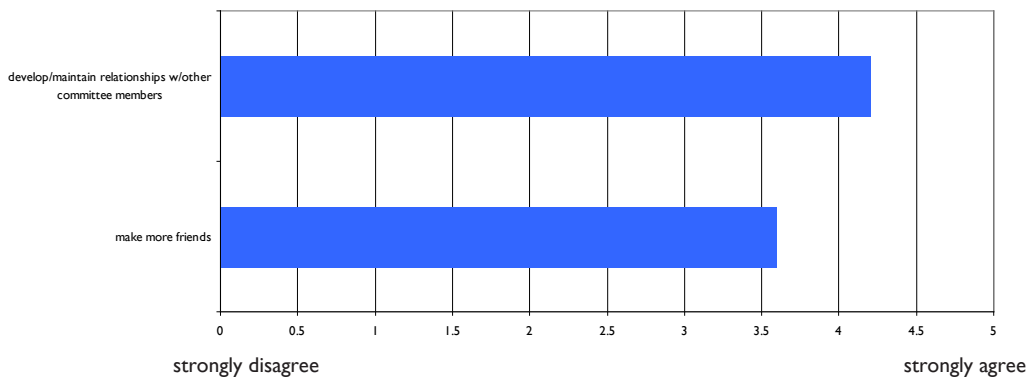
strongly disagree   strongly agree

Have any individuals or groups in your community promoted any economic activities since the completion of the Visioning Program?

One of the expected indirect effects of any development such as landscape improvement is an improved city economy. Interviewers read a list of actions to promote economic activity to the respondents and asked them whether individuals or groups in the community have promoted any of those activities since the completion of the visioning projects. Nearly one-third of respondents could not remember any economic development action that resulted from completing a project.

According to respondents, the downtown or retail sector experienced the most economic development promoted resulting from the Visioning Program (64.38 percent), followed by retention of locally-owned business or industry (45.83 percent) and preservation of historic and cultural sites or events to promote tourism (41.67 percent). (n=77)

Table 7. Economic development strategies pursued since completion of visioning

Economic development strategies	Percent of respondents		
	Yes	No	Uncertain
Work to revitalize downtown or retail sector	64.38	30.14	5.48
Take action to retain or expand locally-owned business or industry	45.83	36.11	18.06
Develop/promote local historic or cultural site/event to promote tourism	41.67	38.89	19.44
Organize/rejuvenate a committee to recruit new business or activity	38.36	41.10	20.55
Apply for county, state, or federal financial assistance to attract industry or business	31.51	35.62	32.88
Seek outside investors to develop single- or multiple-family housing	29.17	51.39	19.44
Develop a business incubator or small business assistance program	16.44	53.42	30.14
Seek corporate or outside investments to expand business or industry	15.07	45.95	36.99

Volunteers plant native vegetation along U.S. Highway 71 near Exira

Figure 9. Economic development strategies pursued since completion of visioning
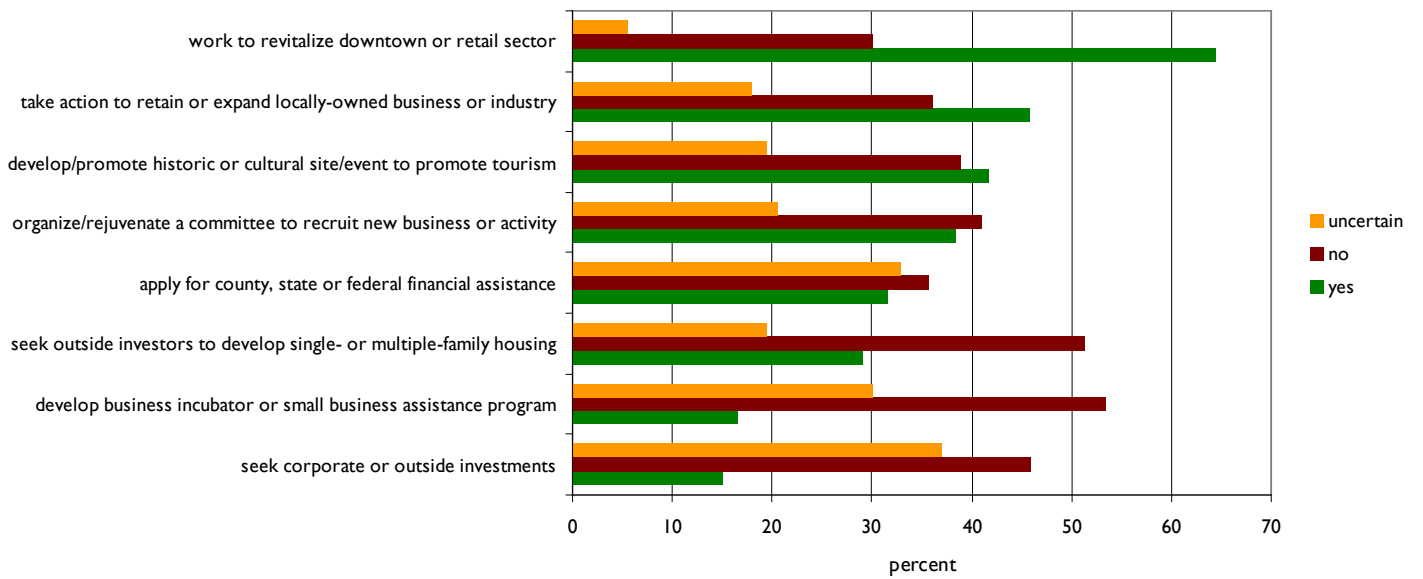
Summary

The results of this study provide insight into the impact that the visioning program has had, as well as the nature of the communities that participate. For example, in the majority of visioning communities, maintenance of visioning projects becomes the responsibility of the city upon their completion. The affect of this phenomenon remains to be seen, although the fact that the visioning projects became the responsibility of city government could explain why steering committee members were unable to recall certain details.

Although respondents did not perceive that visioning projects affected actions to promote economic development, nearly all of the completed visioning projects improve the physical aesthetics in the participating communities. In addition, the higher the perception of the improved physical appearance of the city as a result of the visioning program, the higher the perceived impact on the respondent as member of the steering committee.

The interview process revealed that social networks in the visioning communities changed quickly. Because of this high rate of "turnover," the interviewers had difficulty contacting many of the potential respondents. When former visioning participants left their communities, if was often difficult to determine whether or not new contacts exist and how to reach them. Based on this phenomenon, one could conclude that future evaluation work that involves contacting visioning committee members should be done no more than two years after completion of the visioning process.
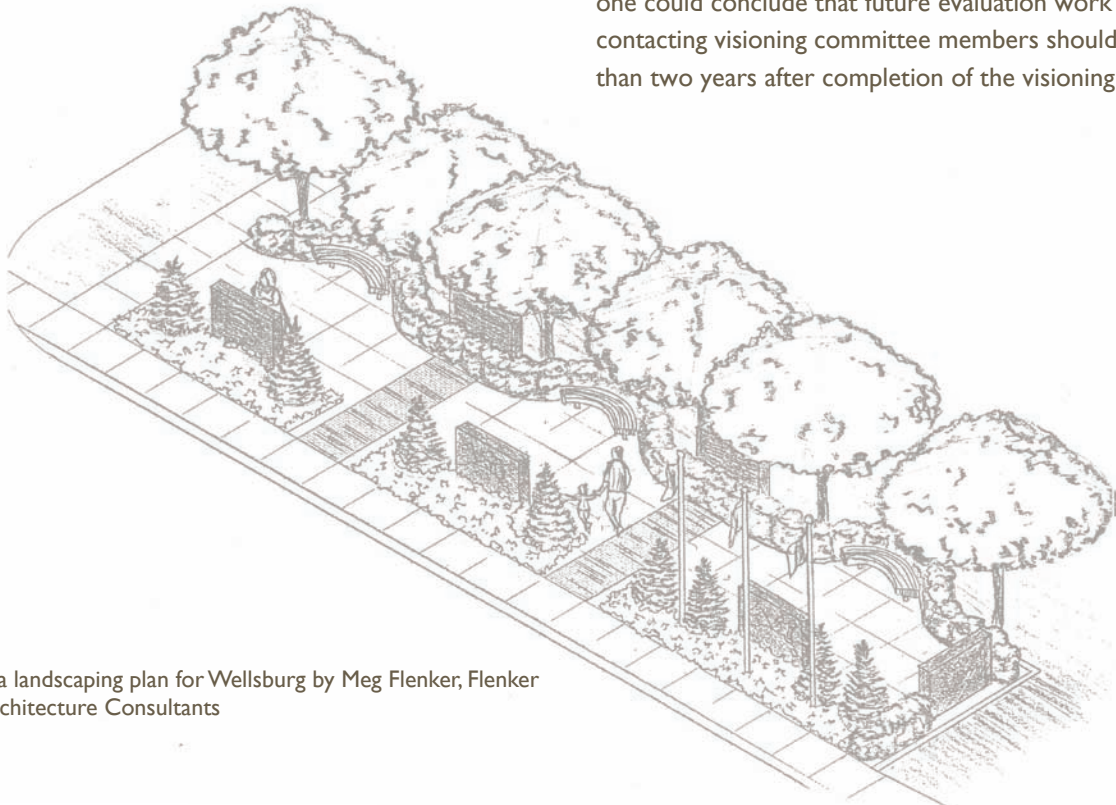
Part of a landscaping plan for Wellsburg by Meg Flenker, Flenker Land Architecture Consultants

Volunteer planting group in Audubon

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