

2007 Public Outreach Award
Youngstown 2010

Last, Best Chance

Planners in Youngstown, Ohio, acknowledged citizens' sense of failure, then pushed them to envision success.

By Roger G. Smith

The challenge to Youngstown planners in 2001 was much more complex than simply creating a new city plan, although that was their charge. The Ohio city of about 80,000 people has been through three decades of steep economic and population declines. The rise in violent crime and political corruption was just as drastic. A 1999 study of community life in Youngstown described residents as frustrated and tired, the city as "stuck" and a "place in waiting." The last city plan dated to 1951 with only one update 23 years later.



Planners didn't need to outline the city's future; they needed to sell the notion to residents that there *was* a future.

"We were up against history and cynicism and past failures," says Anthony Kobak, the city's chief planner. "We were forced to innovate and be more aggressive than normal. Normally, planning processes don't have a marketing strategy," he notes.

The marketing and public education effort developed for the Youngstown 2010 plan, which engaged more than 5,000 residents in directing the city's future, received APA's 2007 Public Outreach Award.

Street cred

The city's history dictated that the Youngstown 2010 plan truly needed to be generated by the people, not by the public officials they had come to dismiss, Kobak says. First, the city partnered with Youngstown State University to convene Youngstown 2010, which became a pivotal marketing decision. The well-regarded institution provided staff expertise and resources, as well as something less tangible.

"Right away, this wasn't just a city effort," says Bill D'Avignon, Youngstown's community development director. "YSU lent a lot of credibility that the city, on its own, wouldn't have carried."

Planners pressed some community leaders, jaded by fruitless past efforts, into offering their insights during the plan's early visioning phase. Organizers then prodded residents to turn out for a large public meeting to review the vision using every marketing tool they could think of: billboards, public service announcements, a website, window stickers, T-shirts. The message amounted to a challenge; advertisements suggested that 2010 was the "last and best chance to save the entire community" and asked, "If we don't care ... who will?"

"We wanted to put the pressure on the public to get involved," says Richard Hahn, a 2010 volunteer and the owner of a local marketing and public relations firm. "This was not about buildings. It was about people."

The appeal's success stunned everyone. In a December 2002 meeting, more than 1,400 residents spent hours questioning planners and commenting on the vision. Nearly 100 people volunteered for committees that would shape details of the 2010 plan.

"Fourteen hundred was a mind-blower. Nobody does that. It wouldn't happen in most places," says Hunter Morrison, director of YSU's Center for Urban and Regional Studies and the former planning director of Cleveland. But, he adds, "people saw the value of it and wanted to be involved in the future of their community."

In the following months, the city engaged 170 volunteers to create the main elements of the plan: the economy, the environment, the neighborhoods, and the city's image. More than 800 citizens attended one of 11 neighborhood meetings during the summer and fall of 2004. Residents offered suggestions for improving quality of life in their neighborhoods and what they wanted to see happen with future residential, retail, and industrial development.

Enthusiasm surrounding the effort led the city's daily newspaper and public television station to offer regular coverage and updates, helping to create Youngstown 2010 as the brand for the city's future. Another 1,300 people met in January 2005 to review and comment on the finished product, which was adopted by the city in July 2005.

Youngstown 2010 organizers say their approach proves that residents truly want to help. People will participate if they understand the importance of their role and are communicated with regularly, they say. That means using every available marketing tool and encouraging everyone, even the most vocal critics, to become involved.

"There's nothing you leave out, nobody that isn't touched," notes Youngstown Mayor Jay Williams.

More information is available on the Youngstown 2010 plan website: www.youngstown2010.com. Also see "Youngstown Embraces Its Future," in the August/September 2003 issue of *Planning*.

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Images: Youngstown got people involved by treating the planning process as a marketing effort — and it worked. Photo The City of Youngstown.

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