CAPACITY PROJECT C08

Linking Community Visioning and Highway Capacity Planning

AUGUST 2014

Aprimary part of Congress's charge to SHRP 2 was to create a system for integrating economic, environmental, and community goals into the transportation planning process. In addressing the challenge, SHRP 2 investigated community visioning as a method that transportation agencies can use to clarify those goals and the agency's own role in meeting them. In the context of transportation planning, the practice of visioning is sometimes used to create a shared base of understanding and generate policy direction for the future of a community. Visions are planning and policy exercises that engage community stakeholders in building long-term, consensus frameworks for future decision making. The goal is to reach decisions that are more coordinated with partner agencies and more closely connected to the values of a community.

Visioning holds great potential to support collaborative decision-making processes. To assist, the SHRP 2 Capacity project C08, Community Visioning Approach to Support the SHRP 2 Collaborative Decision-Making Framework for Additions to Highway Capacity, has developed guidance on the role visioning can play in transportation planning. The project's objective was to help transportation agency practitioners assess the possibilities of community visioning efforts, identify practical steps and activities when engaging in visioning, and establish links between vision outcomes and transportation planning and project development processes. To these ends, project C08 developed a model—the Vision Guide—for the preparation, creation, and implementation of a visioning process. A companion web tool, T-Viz, was also developed.

The Vision Guide

Visions are significant sources of input for transportation planning processes, which now range well beyond topics of access and design to consider community goals and values and a host of interrelated issues. Visioning processes may help guide appropriate transportation decisions to enhance economic competitiveness, environmental stewardship, and community resources, while improving transportation outcomes.

Visioning processes tend to produce high-level, policy-oriented outcomes that prove challenging to integrate within focused, project-specific transportation planning and development efforts. These outcomes can, however, be linked to the transportation planning and project development processes, including long-range transportation plans, corridor planning, project programming, environmental review, or permitting processes. For example, vision statements may help shape the goals of a long-range transportation plan; maps of desired future conservation areas may provide input into the range of solutions considered in corridor planning;

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or decision-making principles for future transportation systems may provide direct input into developing consensus on a draft transportation improvement plan. The Vision Guide is intended to help visioning practitioners identify practical activities involved in visioning, in strategically managing aspects of a vision, and in establishing links between vision outcomes and transportation planning and project development decisions. Figure 1 shows the key elements of the Vision Guide. Figure 2 shows an example of using T-Viz to show how a vision outcome can be integrated into a transportation plan.

The Vision Guide is a visual representation of a multiphase, activity-oriented process for preparing, creating, and implementing a vision. It addresses four critical components of the visioning process:

- considering communities,
- reaching stakeholders,
- forming partnerships, and
- tracking commitments.

Figure 1. Key elements of the Vision Guide. Vision phases (the three columns) help organize a vision, activity areas (chevrons) are the building blocks of a vision, and decision points (boxes) represent critical milestones.

Considering community context, livability, and quality of life and communicating each factor through the use of indicators is an important aspect of the visioning process. The Vision Guide provides a variety of tools and examples for using community indicators in preparing the vision to provide baseline information; in creating the vision to help stakeholders evaluate future alternatives; and in implementing the vision to help gauge progress toward the vision.

Reaching stakeholders is significant in early steps to establish relationships, critical when creating the vision, and important to implementation efforts. This component of the Vision Guide provides access to a variety of outreach tools and techniques, including web links to real-world examples from visioning processes.

Partnerships are crucial to the success of a visioning effort and are often the most lasting outcome of a collaborative effort. Forming partnerships early in a process is important to build broad support, secure resources, and develop organizational structures. When implementing the vision, partnerships with decision makers, key stakeholders, and elected officials can be critical to achieving the goals of the vision. The guide provides access to summary strategies and potential partnering structures associated with each salient activity area. In addition, real-world examples of partnerships are linked within the description of relevant activities.

Commitment tracking, otherwise known as implementation monitoring or performance reporting, is of increasing interest to visioning practitioners. In preparing for and creating the vision, the foundation of commitment tracking is built, and then it is applied in practice when implementing the vision. Within the online Vision Guide, practitioners have access to summary guidance related to developing a model commitment tracking process, including linkages between a tracking program and the steps in the visioning process.

Decision Factors for Transportation Agency Involvement

The outcome of a visioning process and how the benefits accrue depend on many factors, including the scope and scale of the project; the transportation agency's level of involvement; the sensitivity of the community to transportation, environmental, and community issues; and the engagement of stakeholders and elected officials. A practitioner should take into account these factors, and others, when assessing the potential positive and negative outcomes of participation in a vision. To help the transportation practitioner determine whether to engage in a visioning
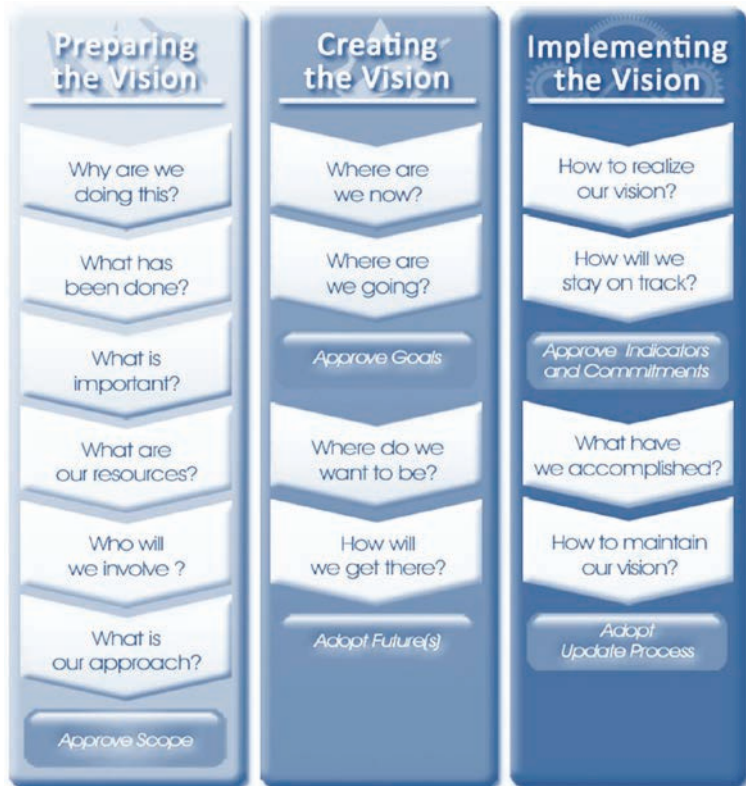
Figure 2. Example of adoption of vision outcomes into corridor planning: Integrating the PlanWorks Decision Guide and the Vision Guide.
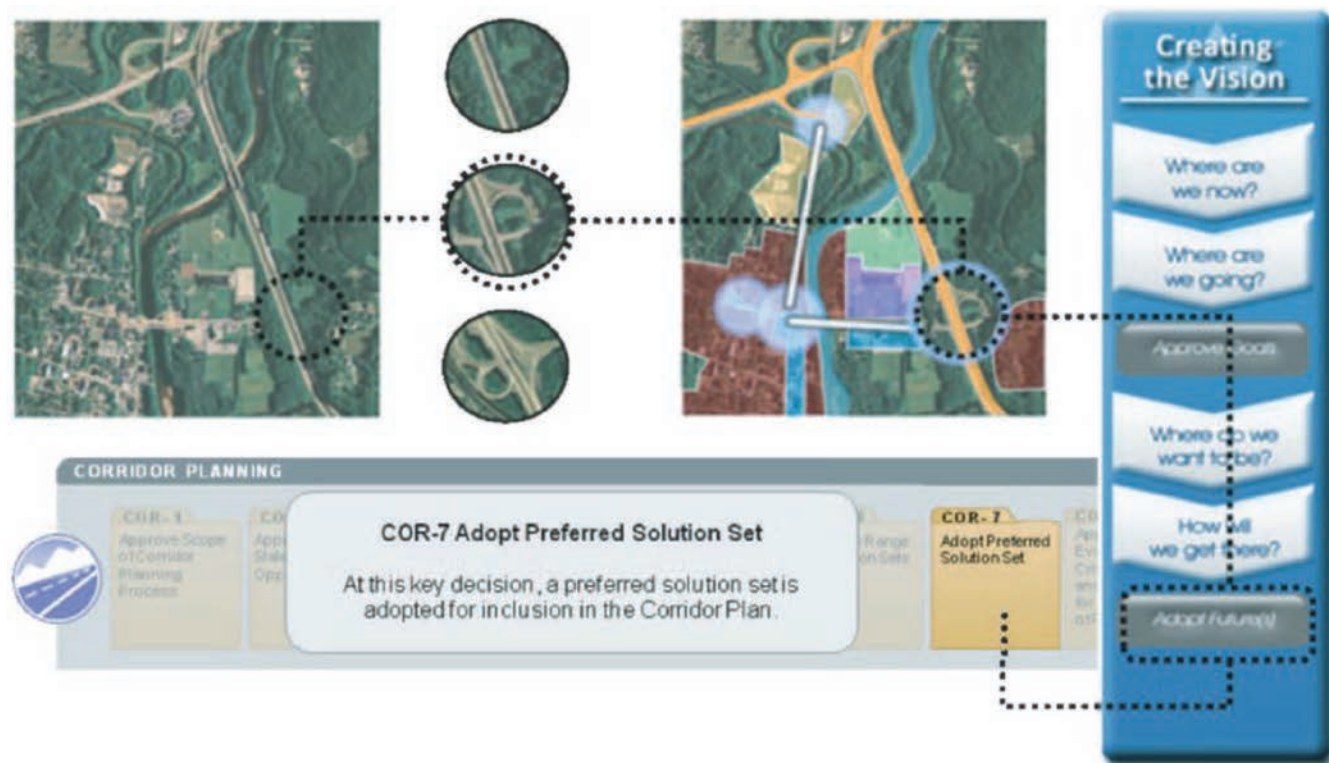
process, the Vision Guide presents a set of factors and the basis for assessing those factors, for agency managers to consider. Assessing the factors will help managers answer these questions:

- How might my agency benefit?
- Is the project outcome likely to be better?
- What utility might stakeholders derive?
- What does the agency risk?

The seven decision factors discussed in the Vision Guide include the following:

Improving Project Delivery: Visioning processes are not guaranteed to improve project delivery. Any open process provides a forum for opposing interests which could extend a project timetable, depending on the vision outcome. That risk should be balanced against the likelihood that project completion time frames may be significantly reduced through earlier participation of the public and resource agencies in planning and design phases. With the costs of contracting, construction, and right-of-way acquisition constantly increasing, projects completed on schedule provide long-term benefits by reducing delivery costs and providing mobility benefits sooner.

Resolving Conflict: Visioning processes that enhance public involvement through cooperative processes may reduce community opposition, mitigate risk of litigation, or help resolve conflicts, therefore enabling the efficient completion of projects. An agency manager must consider whether a visioning process is an effective strategy for managing potential conflict among stakeholders, and what the appropriate role of the agency may be within that process.

Enhancing Project and Process Outcomes: Visioning processes are often comprehensive and examine transportation within broader environmental, economic, or societal contexts. Early consideration of issues, partnerships with diverse interests, and improved communication among stakeholders may enhance planning and project outcomes for transportation agencies, as well as provide long-term benefits to communities. An agency manager should consider both improvements to intended outcomes and any possible unintended effects.

Increasing Public Ownership: Visioning may provide an opportunity to enhance public understanding and ownership in transportation decisions through inclusive and interactive involvement processes. Visioning processes are noted for employing a full range of public and partner involvement strategies to communicate with key stakeholders and with the general public. Agency managers must consider whether participating in a vision may improve the outreach and involvement activities of an agency.

Ensuring Open Processes: A visioning process is often open to participation from any member of the public or stakeholder group, and undue influence from any one interest may slant the process in one direction, with variable effects. The hallmark openness and intensive public participation in visioning processes may increase the risk of improper influence, but transparency and broad outreach and engagement efforts may mitigate negative consequences and produce positive results.

Arriving at Conflicting Solutions: A visioning process may arrive at a potential solution or set of preferred alternatives that are optimal from stakeholders' perspectives but are considered suboptimal from a design, engineering, cost, or systems planning perspective. An agency manager should consider not just the risk of possible outcomes but potential strategies for arriving at solutions that benefit and advance the agency's mission and goals.

Addressing Corollary Issues: Transportation agencies will want to carefully consider their readiness to become involved in a vision that addresses topics not directly within the agency's sphere of influence or authority, such as land use and zoning decisions. Stakeholder involvement and interagency cooperation are keystones of successful vision efforts, and an agency may consider whether involvement could assist in efforts to establish relationships with key public, private, and civic partners that do not currently exist.

Products

The Vision Guide, published as *Linking Community Visioning and Highway Capacity Planning* (SHRP 2 report S2-C08-RR-1), and a separate volume of appendixes are available on the TRB website at http://www.trb.org/Publications/Blurbs/166047.aspx. The appendixes present case study summaries and resources for the critical components of a visioning process. T-Viz, the companion web tool, is being integrated into PlanWorks, a web-based tool for collaborative planning and environmental review of transportation projects. PlanWorks will be available at www.fhwa.dot.gov/GoSHRP2 later in 2014. (During the research phase, this tool was known as TCAPP. That beta version was further developed based on knowledge gained from pilot tests and nationwide workshops and was rebranded based on market research.)