Asset Based Community Planning

Asset based community planning is an interesting, useful yet different method of bringing direction and sense to the future of a community as the citizens think forward. The more traditional approach to community planning is the needs based model that certainly has its place and represents the more common way of developing strategies to improve quality of life within the community.

Needs based planning is driven by a leadership corps of trained planners or consultants skilled in problem assessment, demographic analysis, decision making methodology and geographical mapping techniques. The focus of this planning method is based on perceived community problems and severity and depth of identifiable needs. There is generally reliance on outside experts, consultants and funding sources and the identified need that requires attention. This approach is institution, cost and structure dependent overlayed with necessary but perhaps strict policies and procedures.

On the other hand, asset based planning is grass roots oriented relying on local residents who network with other concerned citizens to bring about new directions. The focus is the already existing community assets that residents appreciate, use and hallmark as the attributes of living in that community. There is a reliance on the existing physical and service resources, neighborhood empowerment, capacity building, citizen networks and local community strengths. This approach is citizen skilled, appreciation driven with an attitude of community investing, capacity enhancements and resource richness.

In the traditional needs based planning method, planners more than citizens use profession developed skills to determine what is missing in the community and build strategies to hopefully solve that resource or service shortfall. Asset based planning focuses the attention on citizen groups who network to identify and build on the appreciated elements of the community that make for quality of life in that community. In needs based planning, for example, the gathered data might suggest that the community is deficient in acres of parkland. This is important to know. In asset based planning, citizens identify and communicate with networked support systems how the existing local river way that meanders through the community brings an identity, richness and vibrance to the quality of life. It is more of what the community “is” than what the community “is not.”
The asset approach is one of resource or service appreciation, citizen participation, engagement in positive thinking and networking rather than needs deficient thinking that focuses on problems, shortages and lack of social capital. One can note the essential difference between the two approaches in attitude and focus.

**How specifically does asset based community planning work?**

The first step is one of attitude. Those involved focus on positive attributes of the community, those elements that are appreciated and represent the strengths of the community and the quality of life success stories that exist. The next step is to shift from institution based resources of the traditional community-planning arm to the social capital that exists in neighborhoods, resident networks, formal and informal grass roots settings. The idea here is to use the energy of the people to give capacity to the process. Third, participation patterns need to be developed so that citizens feel as if they own the process, they are empowered and their voice is the active force in speaking to the qualities of the community. Citizen leaders rather than professional staff led the discussion. Lastly, the effort is to engage multiple levels of the community that link their thinking together so that both public and private enterprise identify and support the assets of the community.

Asset based planning is not without its struggles. Planning is the charge of government and business and not generally the citizen. But the strength of this model is to engage the citizens as leaders. It does require planners to start the process, provide support structure but to also allow the citizens to be empowered. The mind set of looking at the existing strengths rather than unmet needs is difficult for many to use as their base philosophy. It requires a commitment to stay focused on the assets and not the deficiencies.

**Where does such an approach lead?**

Most professional planners would argue that the end result may be more of a local community public relations statement rather than a plan of action. Asset based planning is not meant to replace traditional needs based planning but to be an additional and alternative method of bringing sense to the future of the community.