Summary of
Follow-up Interviews

Community Visioning Program

Prepared by
Iowa State University

Summer 2015

IOWA'S LIVING ROADWAYS
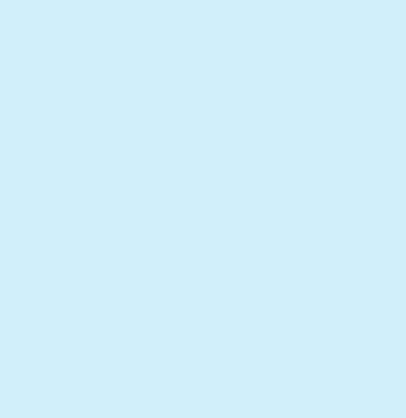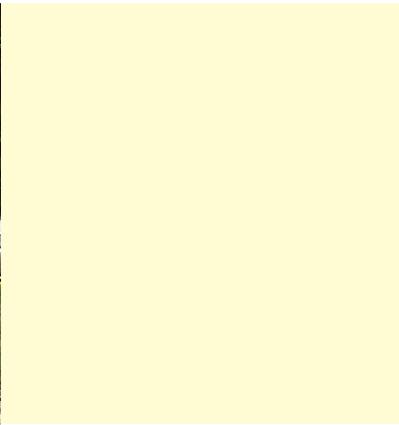
Acknowledgments

The steering committee members from past visioning communities who took part in the interview process provided insight as to why projects were or were not successful, as well as the value of the visioning process itself.

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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 projects, step by step, as resources become available.

This study is part of the ongoing program evaluation of the Community Visioning Program in terms of number and quality of projects completed, as well as impact on social capital and economic development of client communities.

Methodology

To evaluate the effectiveness of the Visioning Program for communities both during and after the planning process, Trees Forever field coordinators met with 182 representatives from 46 past communities over a period from 2006 to 2014 (Table 1, Figure 1). Face-to-face interviews were conducted during which participants were asked open-ended questions related to their expectations, positive aspects of the process, actions taken to publicize the process, and challenges or obstacles experienced during the process. Information was also collected regarding the impacts realized after communities finished the planning process. Impacts discussed included economic and/or livability issues, derivative projects, sustainability of the steering committee, and the current group's connection to Trees Forever staff.

The time between when the study communities participated in the Visioning Program and when the interviews were conducted ranged from one to nine years. With these particular study communities, no significant relationship exists between the length of time between program participation and the interview and the number of projects completed.

The data were coded using NViVo software (a platform for analyzing unstructured data) and analyzed using SPSS.

Table 1. Communities surveyed by year of participation in the Visioning Program

Program Year	Community	Year of Interview	Number Interviewed	Program Year	Community	Year of Interview	Number Interviewed
1996–97	Carroll	2006	1	2009	Garner	2012	7
1997–98	Churdan	2006	2		Glenwood	2014	2
	Columbus Junction	2006	1		Laurens	2012	1
	Greenfield	2006	6		Lohrville	2012	3
1998–99	Grandview	2006	10		Parkersburg	2014	4
	Toledo	2006	1		Riverside	2012	7
2002	Cascade	2006	1		Robins	2014	5
2003	Alton	2006	1	2010	Hudson	2014	2
	Belmond	2006	4		Rolfe	2014	4
2004	Britt	2006	1		Walford	2014	2
2007	Franklin	2011	1	2011	Chariton	2014	6
	Lake View	2014	1		Lisbon	2014	3
	Lamoni	2014	6		McGregor	2014	2
	Manly	2010	4		Monroe	2014	1
	Marble Rock	2010	4		Monticello	2014	1
	Tipton	2012	2		Mt Vernon	2014	7
2008	Belle Plaine	2014	15		Rockwell City	2012	2
	Ely	2012	1	2012	Center Point	2014	7
	Lake Park	2013	6		Colo	2014	6
	Manson	2012	5		Paullina	2013	1
	Odebolt	2014	8		Tripoli	2014	1
	Webster City	2010	3		Villisca	2014	9
	Woodbine	2014	4	2013	Ossian	2014	11
						Total Interviewed:	182

Figure 1. Communities sampled
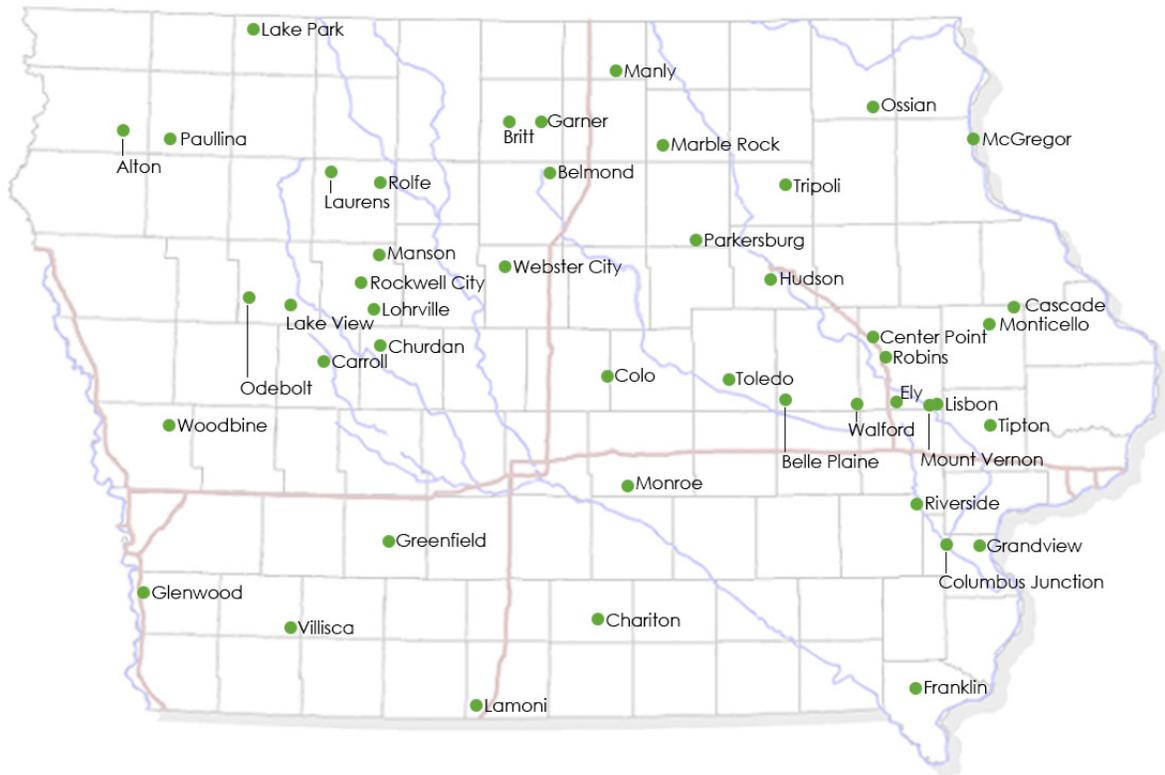
Projects Completed or In Progress

Nearly 98% of the sampled communities have completed projects since participating in the Visioning Program. Of these, 8.7% have completed seven or more projects. Only 2.2% (one community) did not completed any projects (Table 2, Figure 2).

A total of 137 projects were completed. Table 3 shows a breakdown of projects completed by the professional consulting firms that developed concept plans for the study communities and year of participation.

Table 2. Projects completed

Projects completed	Communities	
	No.	Percent
0	1	2.2%
1 to 3	30	65.2%
4 to 6	11	23.9%
7 or more	4	8.7%
Total	46	100.0%

Figure 2. Projects completed
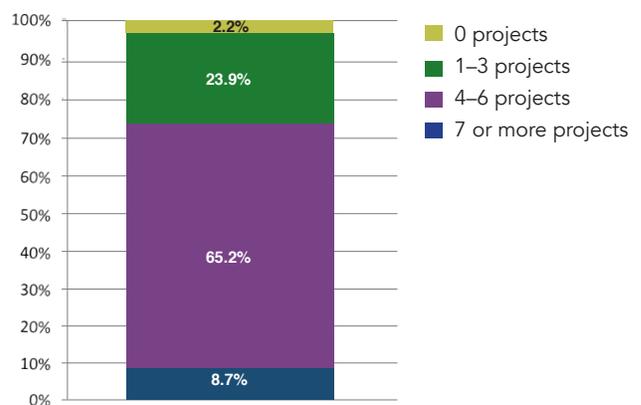
Table 3. Firms and number of projects completed for the sampled communities

Firm	Program Year	Completed Projects
Adamson & Associates	1999	3
Bolton & Menk	2012	3
Ciaccio Dennel Group	1998	5
Craig Ritland Landscape Architect	1999	1
	2002	3
	2008	6
	2010	1
	2011	3
	2012	8
	2013	1
Dunbar/Jones	1996	5
Engineering Plus	2003	2
Flenker Land Architecture Consultants	1998	1
	2007	5
	2008	7
	2009	2
Genus Landscape Architects	2007	5
	2010	1
	2011	6
	2012	2
Godbold Landscape Architect	2007	2
	2008	7
	2009	4
	2011	5
Hall and Hall Engineers	2011	9
	2012	1
Hoffman Design Consultants	2008	4
	2009	3
	2010	1
Howard R. Green & Company	2008	3
	2009	1
Jeffrey L. Bruce & Company	2012	1
Jack E. Leaman	2007	2
Dan Pratt	1998	3
Dolores Silkworth	2002	10
Shive-Hattery, Inc.	2011	4
Veenstra & Kimm Engineering	2009	4
Yaggy Colby Associates	2004	3
	2007	1
	2009	3
Total Projects:		137

Questions about the Visioning Process

1. What were your expectations going into the visioning process?

Communities applied to participate in the Community Visioning Program for a variety of reasons, ranging from trail planning and way-finding to funding assistance and leadership training. The expectations of the representatives of the sampled communities are shown in Table 4. None of the community expectations was identified by interviewees at a significantly higher frequency than others.

Trail planning was mentioned as an expecction most often; however, less than 30% of the sampled communities indicated trail planning as a goal. Interviewees from approximately 25% of sampled communities named designs, ideas, and direction; downtown or Main Street planning; and transportation corridor improvements as expectations. Other physical expectations included entryway signage and beautification (17% each), and way-finding signage and planting (9% each).

Social expectations include community cohesion (20%), community identity (2%), and leadership training (2%). One community expected assistance with funding.

Table 4. Expectations of sampled communities

Expectation	Frequency	
	No.	Percent
Trails planning	13	28%
Designs, ideas, and direction (generic)	12	26%
Downtown or Main Street revitalization plan	11	24%
Transportation corridor improvements	11	24%
Community cohesion	9	20%
Entryway signage	8	17%
Beautification or enhance community	8	17%
Way-finding signage	4	9%
Other plantings	4	9%
Question not answered	4	9%
Automotive transportation planning	2	4%
Unsure	2	4%
Funding	1	2%
Flooding issues	1	2%
General plan; community identity	1	2%
Leadership training or facilitation	1	2%

Figure 3. Committee expectations for the visioning process
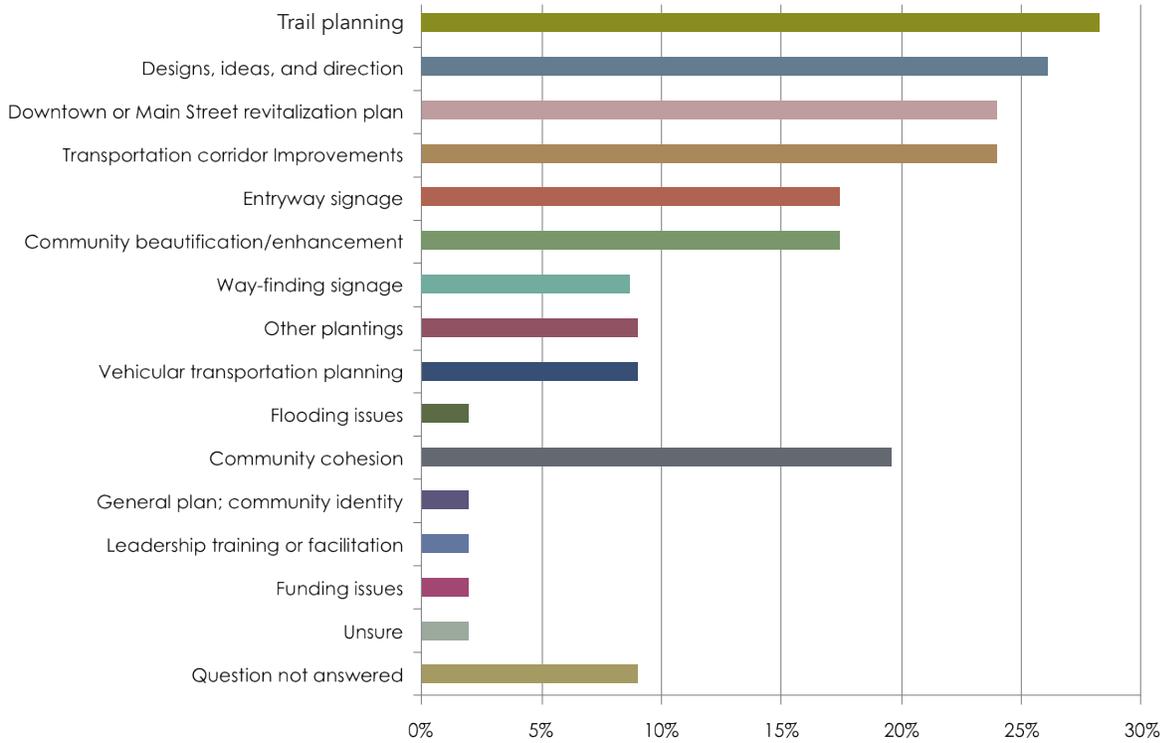
1a. Were the expectations met, exceeded, or not met, and why?

Interviewees from 80% of the sampled communities indicated that their expectations for the Visioning Program were met or exceeded. Nearly 44% of the sampled communities' representatives said that their expectations were exceeded. Nine percent said their expectations were partially met. Representatives from only two of the 46 communities indicated that their expectations were not met. This question was not answered for two communities.

Of the communities whose expectations were met or exceeded, representatives from 10 had praise for the consultants with whom they worked. Of communities whose expectations were not met, two had criticism for their respective firms. For example, interviewees in one community said that the designer did not provide them with a plan that they could use, because the Iowa DOT would not allow what was proposed. As a result, more than half of the concept plan could not be implemented. The interviewees thought that all state entities should "be on the same page" in terms of what is and is not allowed regarding transportation enhancements. Interviewees also indicated that assistance with securing funds and writing grants is needed.

Table 5. How well the program met expectations of sampled communities

Expectations were:	Frequency	
	No.	%
Exceeded	20	43.5%
Met	17	37.0%
Partly met	4	8.7%
Not met	2	4.3%

Representatives from almost 50% of the sampled communities cited community involvement as the high point of the visioning process. Interviewees were impressed by the number of residents who provided feedback on the proposed designs. Committee members in one community described public involvement as "critical." They said that the open house meetings for input and the public presentation were important parts of the process and that having the design team and Trees Forever facilitator at these events to answer questions was helpful.

They also appreciated how the process engaged different people in the community, particularly the youth at the focus groups. Some interviewees said they liked involving residents early in the process in conversations about where people walk, how youth get from place to place, safety issues, etc.

"[We] loved getting the kids involved!"

Nearly 40% of sampled communities named the open house as a high point of the visioning process, and 35% cited the vision of the landscape architect.

"The open house presentation to the community was good and generated lots of feedback to the committee from the wider community."

One interviewer recorded that "the group was very impressed by the way their design team looked at patterns of change from the 1850s through the present to help determine how the community was settled, and how transportation changes influence the design of the community and their concept plans." Another interviewer noted that the participants enjoyed seeing the variety of ideas that the consultant and the student interns developed, and they described involving students as a "win-win" strategy. Interviewees also indicated that the vision helped sell the projects to the community.

"The [landscape] architects came up with fantastic design ideas for the town. Everyone was pleased with the sketches that were completed for [our community]. For example, limestone was incorporated and highlighted throughout the designs and is one of the major, existing architectural features in [our community]."

"[The consultant] knew how to translate people's ideas into graphic form, and also had a good handle on what is feasible and what is not."

"[The consultant] and the ISU student intern were great."

Other high points mentioned during the interviews included a specific project (28%), a strong steering committee (13%), working with Trees Forever (13%), and the focus groups and special places mapping assessments (8.7%).

Figure 4. High points of the visioning process

Category	Percentage
Community involvement	48%
Open house	37%
LA's vision	35%
Specific project	23%
Working with Trees Forever	13%
Strong committee	13%
Focus groups and special places mapping	9%
Working with the city or public agency	4%
Annual celebration	2%
Recovery precedent	2%
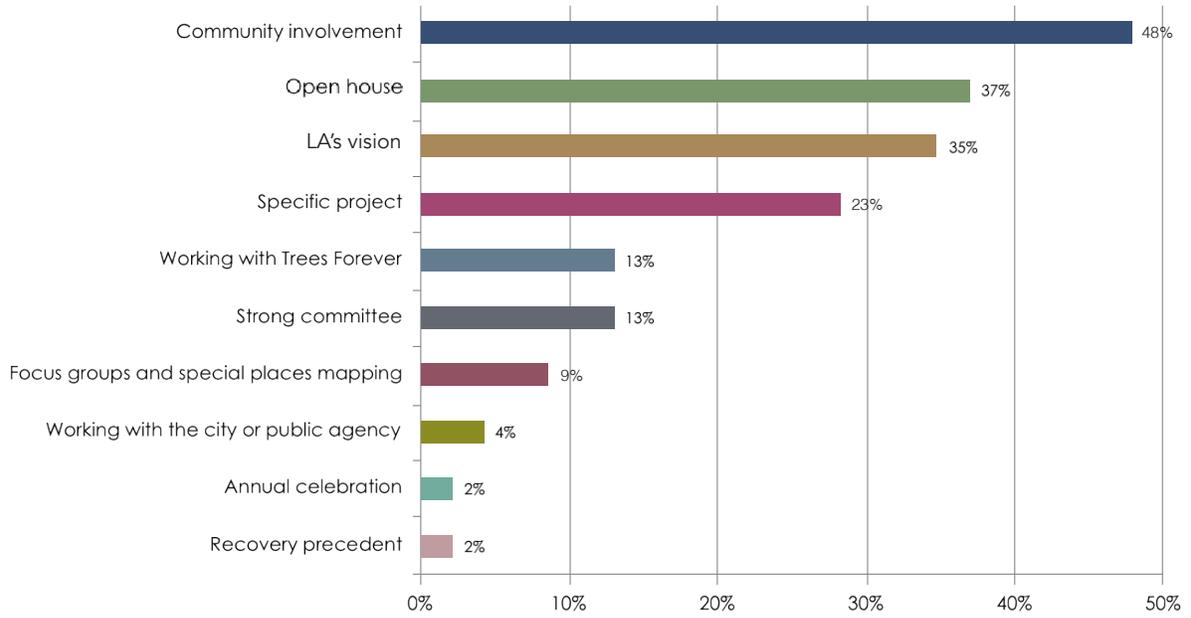
Table 6. High points of the visioning process

High points	Frequency	
	No.	%
Community involvement	22	47.8%
Open house	17	37.0%
LA's vision	16	34.8%
Specific project	13	28.3%
Strong committee	6	13.0%
Working with Trees Forever	6	13.0%
Focus groups and special places mapping	4	8.7%
Working with the city or public agency	2	4.3%
Annual celebration	1	2.2%
Recovery precedent	1	2.2%
Question not answered	1	2.2%

3. What actions did your committee take during the visioning process to have your efforts noticed and shared in the community?

Sending press releases to local newspapers was the most common strategy used to share the visioning process with the public among the sample communities (67.4%). Nearly 40% of the communities used public events—especially with food—to inform the public. One steering committee held the public presentation meeting at a pancake breakfast, during which more than 400 people were served and all walked by the committee members and the presentation boards. Some committees took their presentation boards to community events and to city council meetings during the first year of implementation.

"We have a very large community gathering every year in August for crime night out. Our committee had a booth with information about our projects and a sign-up sheet to start a local garden club to assist in beautification projects throughout our community."

Table 7. Actions taken to market the visioning process

	Frequency	
	No.	%
Press releases	31	67.4%
Public events	18	39.1%
Word of mouth	11	23.9%
Fliers	10	21.7%
Meetings and keeping minutes	10	21.7%
Engaged other community groups	7	15.2%
Number of times mentioned	6	13.0%
Website postings and social media	4	8.7%
Presentation to city council	3	6.5%
Public access/TV sports	3	6.5%
Question not answered	3	6.5%
E-mail	2	4.3%
Radio spots	2	4.3%
Notice with utility bill	1	2.2%

When the types of actions taken by committees were categorized and compared to the number of projects completed, some interesting patterns emerged (Table 8). For example, approximately 80% communities completing between one and six projects relied most heavily on traditional forms of communication—that is, press releases, public access television, radio spots, and presentations to city council. These communities also relied on public notices/events, such as fliers posted in public places or sent in utility bills and community events. Half of the communities completing seven or more projects relied on digital media (websites, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter), public notices/events, personal contacts (word or mouth and engaging other community groups), and other actions (meetings and keeping meeting minutes).

Of all the communities completing projects, those completing four to six projects took actions from 2.9 of the five categories. The average among all of the communities completing projects was 2.5 categories.

Table 8. Actions taken to market the visioning process

Projects completed	No.	Type of Action					Average no. of actions
		Traditional communication	Digital communication	Public notice/event	Personal contact	Other action	
1 to 3	30	80.0%	16.7%	73.3%	43.3%	23.3%	2.3
4 to 6	11	81.2%	18.2%	63.6%	27.3%	45.5%	2.9
7 or more	4	25.0%	50.0%	50.0%	50.0%	50.0%	2.5
Total	46	80.4%	21.7%	69.6%	39.1%	32.6%	2.5

3a. How did the community view your work and results (and how did you know)?

More than 50% of the sampled communities were supportive of the visioning process, according to interviewees. Approximately 28% of the interview participants indicated that residents did not support the visioning process.

During one interview, committee members described how residents would approach them to discuss the process and that when people attended city council meetings, they showed an interest in the program.

"People told us they liked the projects in conversation. [We received] positive feedback at the public presentation. For example, one person said, 'When you get ready to build that trail, I'll be there with my skid loader to help.'"

"We heard comments and [had] good turnout at the public meeting. [We] got funding and support for the east gateway sign."

Table. 9. Communities' views of program results

	Frequency	
	No.	%
Supportive	24	52.2%
Not supportive	13	28.3%
Unnoticed	6	13.0%
Question not answered	3	6.5%

Figure 5. Communities' views of program results

Question not answered; 6.5%

Unnoticed; 13%

Not supportive; 15%

Supportive; 52.2%
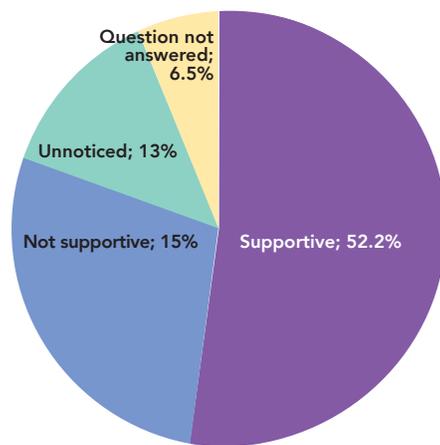
4. Do you recall specific challenges or obstacles during the process?

Representatives in only 13% of the sampled communities indicated that they did not experience any obstacles during the visioning process. These communities participated in the program in 2007 (Lake View and Lamoni), 2008 (Garner and Riverside), 2009 (Lohrville), and 2012 (Center Point).

The most frequently cited obstacle was a lack of participation/support from residents. More than 40% of the sampled communities experienced this problem. The lack of support stemmed from a variety of reasons, including unwillingness to change, concerns about funding for project implementation, and difficulty understanding the assessments.

For example, some interviewees noted that it was difficult to get enough participation in the community assessments, particularly the focus groups and the survey. Some residents did not support the assessment process. According to one interviewer, "during the process of collecting photos [in one community], a challenge came up during which a community member became very upset that someone was photographing their property. It was a concern that the private property was going to be identified as a project. It was challenging that the photographer wasn't fully aware of the program being limited to public property."

"Getting everyone on board was a challenge; however, as [interviewee] pointed out, even some of the biggest complainers came to help pull weeds so they started to come around. Of course many small towns are limited by manpower and [our community] is no different."

"It took some time for some members of the community to get on board. It always helps once you show them something. So while we didn't have stellar participation early on things got better as the process progressed, especially after the open house."

Thirty-five percent of the communities experienced a lack of cooperation from the city or public agencies. Lack of support from the city and inconsistency between the Iowa DOT's policies and the community's needs were some of the reasons stated. One obstacle mentioned repeatedly by committee members in one community was the way that the city dealt with proposals to change the downtown square, according to the interviewer. The city was apparently not in favor of change.

More than 30% of sampled communities cited funding as one of the primary challenges in the visioning process. Because the program does not provide implementation funding, interviewees suggested adding assistance with grant writing to the process.

Table 10. Challenges and obstacles during the process

	Frequency	
	No.	%
Lack of community member participation/support	20	43.5%
Lack of cooperation with the city or public agencies	16	34.8%
Cost and funding	15	32.6%
Committee	12	26.1%
Situational challenges	8	17.4%
Lack of volunteers	7	15.2%
No issues	6	13.0%
Length of process	5	10.9%
Working with Trees Forever	3	6.5%
Meeting time and place	2	4.3%
Getting youth involvement	1	2.2%
Low focus group participation	1	2.2%

Figure 6. Obstacles encountered during the visioning process
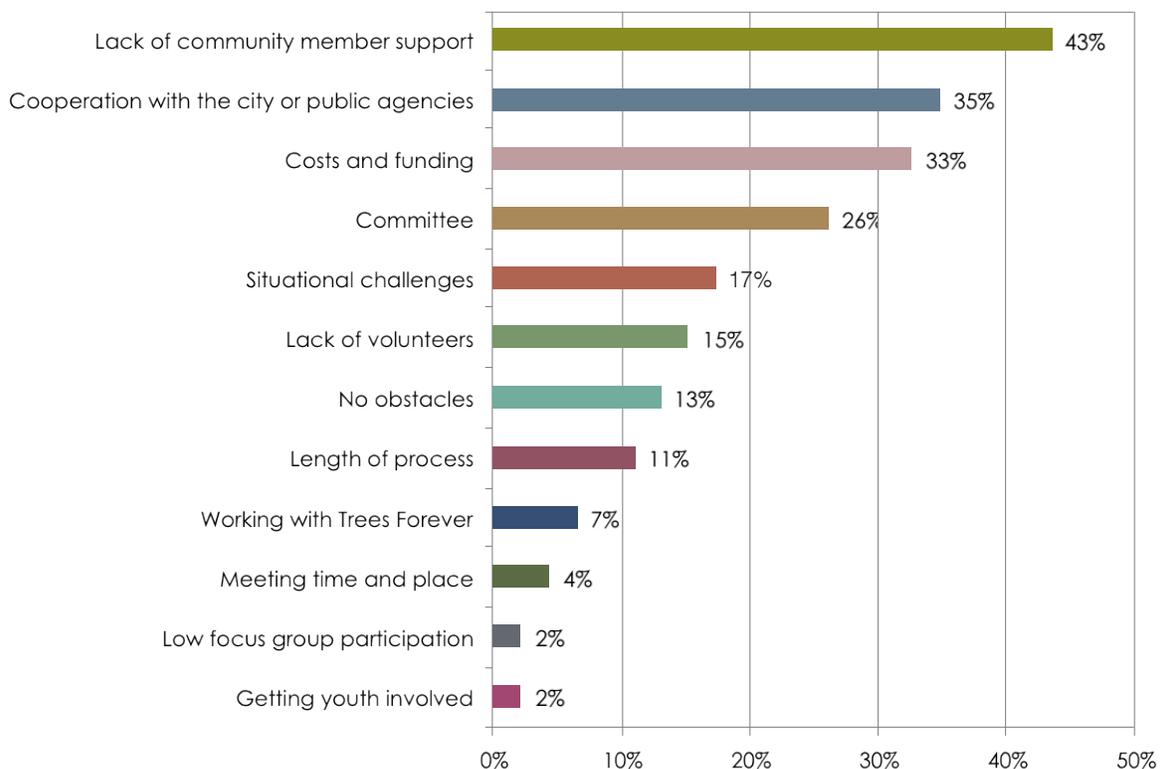
## Questions about the Post-visioning Process

1. How far did you get with the concept plan that came out of the visioning process? Design? Funding? Implementation? What factors made that achievable (or what obstacles prevented achievement)?

Representatives from 45 of the sample communities identified 181 projects proposed through the visioning process. Representatives from six of the communities did not answer this question. More than 75% of the 181 projects have been completed, and 18.2% were in process at the time of the interview. Approximately 6% of the projects are on hold or were canceled (Table 11, Figure 7).

Table 11. Status of concept implementation

	Frequency	
	No.	%
Projects completed	137	75.6%
Projects in process	33	18.2%
Projects on hold or canceled	11	6.2%

Figure 7. Status of concept implementation
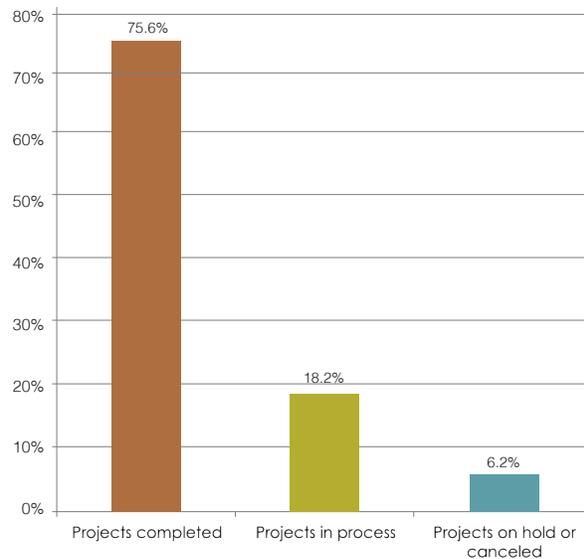
2. How would you identify the impact on your community as a result of the visioning process In livability factors In economic benefits?

Representatives from 63% (29 communities) said that the visioning process had a positive impact on their communities. Interviewees from seven communities stated that it is too early to tell what the impact is, and representatives from six communities said that the visioning process had no impact on their community. The question was not answered in 9% of the communities (Table 12, Figure 8).

All of the participants who said that the visioning process had a positive impact on their communities mentioned the affect on the quality of life of the residents. Improvements to aesthetics and the economy and tourism were cited by 62% of participants. Other positive changes mentioned were increased community solidarity and coherence in city planning (Table 13, Figure 9).

Table 12. Impact of Visioning Program on communities

	Frequency	
	No.	%
Positive impacts	29	63.0%
Too soon to tell	7	15.3%
No impact	6	13.0%
Question not answered	4	8.7%

Table 13. Types of positive impacts

	Frequency	
	No.	%
Quality of life	29	100.0%
Aesthetic	18	62.1%
Economic and tourism	18	62.1%
Community solidarity	5	17.2%
Cohesion in city planning	3	10.3%

Figure 8. Impact of Visioning Program on communities
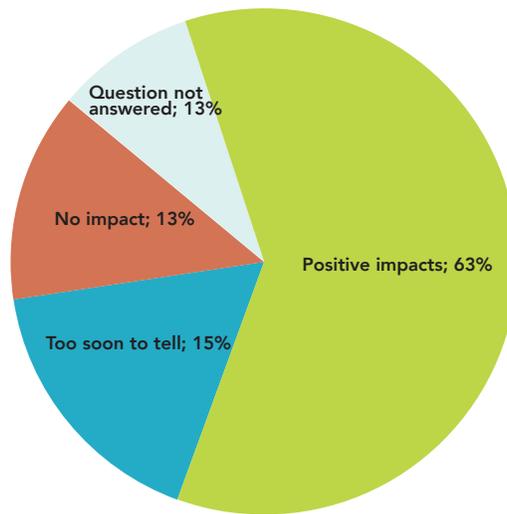
Figure 9. Types of positive impacts
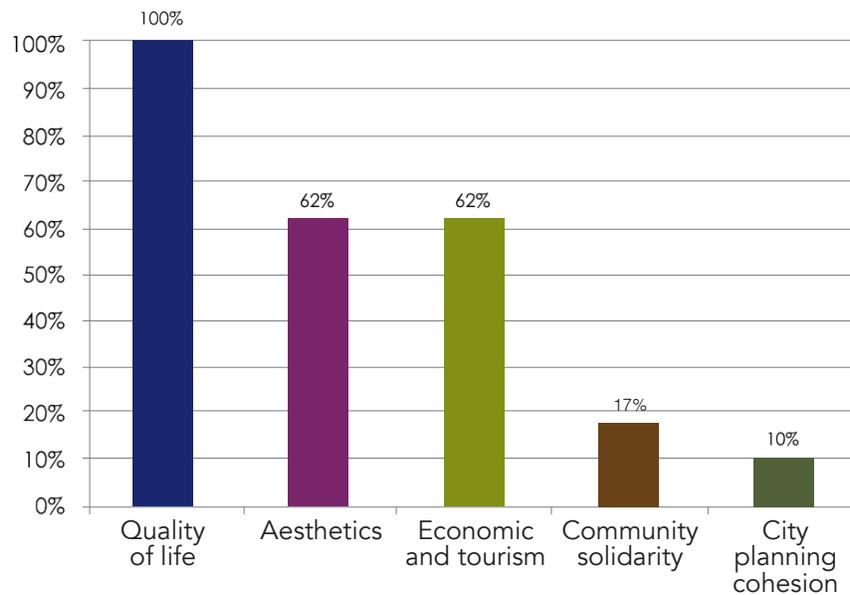
3. Did any other community projects come out of the visioning process, or are any projects under consideration for future implementation?

Other projects came out of the visioning process in 42 of the 46 sampled communities. Representatives from more than 40% of these communities mentioned trees and planting projects. Trail improvement projects—both land and water—and sidewalks were derived from visioning in 33% of the communities. Park improvements and corridor enhancements were derived from visioning in approximately 30% of the communities (30% and 28%, respectively). Other projects mentioned were water and hydrology, historic preservation, signage, art, and tennis courts (Table 14).

Table 14. Projects derived from the visioning process

	Frequency	
Type of projects	No.	%
Trees and plantings	19	41.3%
Trails (land and water) and sidewalks	15	32.6%
Park improvements	14	30.4%
Corridor enhancements and beautification	13	28.3%
Water and hydrology	5	10.9%
Historic preservation or interpretation	4	8.7%
Signage	3	6.5%
No derivative projects	3	2.2%
Art	2	2.2%
Tennis court	1	2.2%
Yes, but no description provided	1	2.2%
Question not answered	1	2.2%

4. Is there a committee that still meets? If so, who are the participants?

More than half of the communities surveyed have maintained their original steering committees, while in one-third of the communities the original committee was either replaced or has evolved into a different group.

Table 15. Status of original steering committee

	Frequency	
	No.	%
Original committee exists	24	52.2%
Committee replaced or evolved into a different group	15	32.6%
Individual leader	3	6.5%
No committee	4	8.7%

4a. What factors have affected the sustainability of this group's efforts?

Strong leadership is the main reason why steering committees still exist and are still working under the umbrella of the visioning project. Coordination with other organizations and strong community involvement are other factors in the sustainability of these groups (Table 16).

Table 16. Factors affecting committee sustainability

	Frequency	
	No.	%
Strong leadership or committee	18	75.0%
Coordination with other organizations	9	37.5%
Strong community involvement	5	20.8%
Passion and desire	4	16.7%
Projects to be done	2	8.3%

5. What is your group's current connection to or identification with Trees Forever? How can Trees Forever help with future projects?

More than 90% of the visioning communities have an active relationship with Trees Forever. These communities contact Trees Forever primarily for funding consultations; information regarding on issues such as trees, landscaping, trails, and other transportation corridor enhancements; and leadership issues.

Table 17. Committees' existing relationship with Trees Forever

	Frequency	
	No.	%
No active relationship	3	6.5%
With active relationship	43	93.5%
Funding consultation	26	60.5%
Source of information	22	51.2%
Source of leadership	5	11.6%
Source for project evaluation	3	7.0%
Training	1	2.3%

Conclusion

Since 2002, program evaluations consistently show that visioning communities are completing a significant number of the projects proposed through the process and that participation in the program spurs communities to pursue additional projects outside the scope of visioning.

Of the 46 visioning communities that were represented in the follow-up interviews conducted between 2006 and 2014 for this study, only one did not complete any projects, indicating at least 98% of visioning communities complete at least one project. Of those, 65.2% completed 1–3 projects, 23.9% completed 4–6 projects, and 8.7% completed 7 or more projects. This figure is consistent with past evaluations, which indicated that approximately 94% of communities completed at least one project.

Representatives from 45 of the 46 study communities identified 181 projects proposed during the visioning process, of which more than 75% have been completed and 18% were in progress at the time of the interview. Interviewees from more than 90% of the study communities also indicated that participation in the visioning resulted in additional projects not originally proposed during the process.

Representatives from 80% of the study communities indicated that their expectations were met or exceeded; interviewees in 44% of the sample said that their expectations were exceeded. At the same time, 87% experienced obstacles during process—resident participation (44%), cooperation of local government and/or public agencies (35%), and obtaining funding (33%). Interviewees in 63% of the communities cited that the visioning process had a positive impact. Of these, all noted that quality of life was improved. These perceptions of steering committee members are consistent with previous program evaluations.

Implications

Because the results of this study are based on anecdotal evidence provided during interviews, a logical next step is to verify information when possible. For instance, whether or not a committee engaged the city council during the process is verifiable through examination of public records. Use of both traditional and digital communications methods is also verifiable.

In addition, further analysis is needed to more fully understand the relationship between the characteristics of steering committees and actions taken, as well as that between committee characteristics and number of projects completed. How these factors affected the support of residents should also be examined.

A correlation of the data collected from the 46 communities with data collected in previous evaluations could further confirm the validity of this and past program evaluations. Case studies in several visioning communities are currently under way that include videotaped interviews and photo documentation of projects.

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