

A Community Plan with a Heart

Around the time the City began to update Sedona's community plan about three years ago, Mayor Rob Adams authored an article in the Red Rock News. He said in effect that we live in a world class environment and that what we need is a world class city to match. Although at odds with the presumption of a "world class" anything, I took his underlying message to heart: we must look for the ingredients of Sedona's future in the community's relationship to the place it occupies.

The City Council had appointed eleven residents to sit on a Citizens Steering Committee, with the aim of assuring a plan genuinely driven by the citizens' vision. I joined the Committee, thrilled with the prospect of engaging Sedona's residents in the discovery of those ingredients.

This is what I have learned as a resident over two decades about these citizens and their relationship to the surroundings:

The stirring splendor and affirming spirit of this land promise an unrivaled opportunity to live out one's passions fully and with integrity. It's no wonder this slice of paradise has been a beacon for creators of art, spiritual adepts and seekers, and lovers of the Earth and of humanity. Parents nurturing



future leaders, young entrepreneurs, elders yearning to rest in nature's arms, and others looking for a community supportive of their dreams want to make this place their home.

As a member of the Committee, my three decades of experience helping organizations structure projects around the expectations and needs of stakeholders with diverse interests could be useful. Something like the following could open the door to a community plan that is intelligibly relevant to residents' actual lives. And it could maximize the contribution of everyone involved, applying each person's skill precisely when and where it was most needed.

- 1) The Committee would invite residents to imagine possibilities for their lives in the coming decades and create a collage from their dreams. Together, everyone would then polish this collection into a shared vision. This would set the foundation for a community plan.

- 2) The Committee would then listen to the children. The gleam of wonder and excitement in their eyes would paint the vision of a community in which they could

flourish. Settling for a merely sustainable, instead of a thriving, future would no longer be an option.

3) Having engaged residents in crafting a shared vision, the Committee would call on planning experts qualified to design a city equal to such an image. The Committee would hold the planners accountable for convincing citizens that their proposal would indeed support the shared vision.

In this way, the Committee would avoid unfairly expecting residents to come up with ideas as if they were planners, instead of dreamers about their lives. It would carefully avoid the replacement of visions by planning elements. Priorities such as protection of the environment and strategies such as a diverse economy are not visions. Neither are amenities such as bicycle paths and gathering places, or resolved issues such as smooth traffic flow.

4) Finally, City staff would assemble the citizens' shared vision and the planners confirmed proposal into an inspiring and useful package. They would be responsible for meeting Arizona's requirements for a community plan.

However, this is not what happened. The Citizens Steering Committee did not steer the City's planning efforts towards the community's vision of citizens' lives in Sedona 2020 and beyond.

The project logo focuses specifically on people, and also emphasizes the centrality of youth and family in community life. But the Committee reached out to residents for ideas as if they were planners, instead of engaging people of different interests and persuasions to imagine what their lives could be in the coming decades. It then attempted through elaborate means to retroactively fabricate the underlying vision from hundreds of these ideas. This is putting the cart before the horse: a community's vision is not derived from planning ideas; a community's vision evokes the planning ideas needed to realize it.



The result is a list of generic goals and improvements to the city, which the plan confuses with the community's real vision: environmental stewardship, community connections, improved traffic flow, walkability, economic diversity, and sense of place. And in the four dozen or so bullet points within this "vision," only one addresses youth and families, and even then through four layers of indirection: "We will help nurture a safe, supportive community that is responsive to the needs of youth and families."

How will it be for each segment of our community to live in Sedona during the next decades? A citizens' plan for the future of the city rests upon the answer to this

question. What effects do people expect a new community plan to have on the quality of their lives? This is the foundational question the Committee did not ask.

But it is never too late to ask about those expected effects. The plan has imprecise wording needing interpretation, and the expectations would be an invaluable resource for more accurate alignment of future decisions with the community's actual vision. The plan explains that it "... will guide the Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council in making development decisions." The plan does not disallow residents from applying clarifying information to decisions, anymore than it disallows additional information at public hearings.



A quality of life vision would contain contributions from artists, business operators, spiritual practitioners, young entrepreneurs, parents, youth, service workers, active seniors, wise elders, and other segments that comprise the fabric of our community. Creating this vision is as simple as asking yourself, your family, friends, and neighbors to describe the quality they hope to experience in their lives. This may even become an organized community conversation. The vision would belong to the citizens, and would develop over time to address rising issues. It could be

used by residents at public hearings on significant decisions by the Planning & Zoning Commission or the City Council.

Clearly, the success of such a conversation will be proportional to the level of citizens' interest in assisting the City Government with being responsive to their needs.