

Win-Win Situation

Communities Plan Future, Earn Certification

By Symone Salisbury

What factors determine a community's success? Location, strong leadership and technological capabilities may provide an initial advantage. Many communities, however, languish because they fail to define their vision, goals and action plan.

The Winning Communities™ certification program assists and recognizes communities dedicated to improving their future and realizing objectives.

Winning Communities

Jim Dittoe is president of Winning Communities, a consulting company that collaborates with communities on strategic planning. His background includes 30 years of leadership in chambers of commerce and economic development councils throughout the Midwest.

Dittoe has completed between 10 and 12 community planning projects since establishing Winning Communities in 1995. Clients have included Wells County and the cities of Portage and LaPorte. The certification component has only recently been added.

According to Dittoe, the Winning Communities certification process involves “creating a shared vision, realistic goals, measurable objectives and an action plan. ... What do you do? Who's going to do it? How much is it going to cost? What's the timetable?”

“Most communities don't have these kinds of things,” he continues. “If they do, they're maybe not as focused as they should be.”

He has designated change, challenge, concern, commitment and championship as the five C's of communities.

Huntington County is Indiana's first certified Winning Community. Charlestown, Green County and Clay County currently are working toward earning a Winning Community certification.

Certification process

Cities, towns and counties are eligible for the designation, which is endorsed by the Community Bankers Association of Indiana, Inc. (CBAI). Applicants must accumulate 100 points based on tasks with assigned point values. Certification lasts for five years.

Self-examination by communities, an exercise Dittoe describes as “agonizing self appraisal,” helps provide direction to the undertaking.

First, the community organizes a steering committee. Then the steering committee gathers a team of collaborators. Participants conduct research regarding community, state and national trends relating to issues such as education, technology and governmental relations. This research helps leaders shape their vision, goals and action plan for the community.

After reviewing the assets, challenges and opportunities defined by community members, Dittoe relates that, “I feed it back to them. We set goals, and we have discussion groups, and we go through the process and end up with a document that says, ‘Here is our vision for the future. Here are our goals. Here are our measurable objectives. And here's our action plan to get there.’ ”



Members of the Huntington County Winning Communities team (from left): Pat Horoho, Stephen Zahn, Marcia McClelland, Travis Holdman and Carol Pugh. Not pictured: Ryan Warner.



A major goal of the library is to promote a countywide library system that enhances technology advancement.

Upon completion of the program, the community is recognized with a public announcement celebrating its accomplishments, and a ceremony in which it is awarded a certification plaque.

Key ally

Joe DeHaven is president and chief executive officer of CBAI. The organization's support of the Winning Communities certification has been instrumental in building momentum for the program.

According to DeHaven, the Winning Communities program appeals to CBAI for several reasons.

"I think the attraction is that it (certification program) fits in well with what the CBAI historically does," noting that his members are typically the economic leaders of their communities. "As a result, that is a very natural place for my members to get involved and be the impetus for doing a whole community analysis, and help fund it and lead it...to develop a consensus of defining goals and timetables for accomplishment."

A market tax program offered by the Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI), a division of the U.S. Department of Treasury, also attracted CBAI to Winning Communities.

"CDFI allocated \$50 million in new market tax credit program financing back in May of this year," DeHaven states, "and it just seemed that this program fit really well with our market tax credit allocation."

First of its kind

Currently in the implementation stage, Huntington County is the first certified Winning Community in Indiana. Twenty-three organizations sponsored the county's endeavors.

Travis Holdman, president and chief executive officer of Markle Bank, is one of five individuals leading Huntington County's strategic planning. In addition, he is the current chairman of the board of the CBAI.

"Just as businesses conduct strategic planning each year," he contends, "I think that communities need to be doing the same thing."

The team established five subcommittees as part of the county's project: communication and technology, economic development, empowering humanity, education, and parks and recreation. Each subcommittee will launch an action plan, starting with the economic development group.

"The economic development group has already picked up the ball with this, to run with it to take a look at entrepreneurship," Holdman reports. "We're looking at an entrepreneurship initiative within the county."

Dittoe adds, "One of the areas that was designed as a goal area in the Huntington project was the area of technology. Making information more readily accessible to citizens ... how can there be tie-ins with the economic development program? We weren't talking about that 25 years ago. The technology wasn't there."



A new science building at Huntington College is part of the development of a technology and entrepreneurial program.

New construction at Markle Industrial Park shows economic coordination.



Major players

Along with Holdman, Stephen Zahn and Ryan Warner are Huntington County bankers involved in the project. Zahn is chairman of the board, president and chief executive officer of First Federal Savings Bank. Warner is president and chief executive officer of Bippus State Bank.

The trio co-chairs the Huntington County Winning Communities Committee. Partners include Pat Horoho, executive director, Huntington County United Way; Marcia McClelland, executive director, Huntington County Community Foundation; and Carol Pugh, executive director, Huntington County United for Economic Development.

Along with Dittoe, they work closely with the Huntington County Economic Development Board and Huntington College, which Holdman says is “redeveloping a more aggressive internship program with its students.”

“Our (CBAI’s) role,” DeHaven explains, “really is to expose our bank presidents to what Winning Communities is, and then to encourage them to pull together the mayors or county councils or other government bodies that need to be involved, pull together the other leaders in the community to be involved and to work with Winning Communities.”

Overcoming obstacles

What challenges arise in community development?

“I think participation is always a challenge, to get people in the community to get involved,” Holdman reflects. “Again, get folks out to let them know that they have input because one of the goals of this whole project is to get input from the community.”

The Huntington County Winning Communities committee

encourages individuals to explore improvement beyond their immediate borders. Holdman asserts, “I think that’s key and a challenge to us is to keep people focused on the big picture, and not a narrow focus on what’s going on just in their single community.”

Dittoe contends, “There is no status quo. There is this constant change going on and people have to deal with that. People have to deal with that together, and that’s when we structure things, but we’ve become almost too structured.”



Jim Dittoe

Measuring success

To maintain certification, initiatives and goals must be revisited regularly as part of an ongoing process. Holdman maintains that continual monitoring is necessary for long-term success.

“There has to be somebody in the community that takes responsibility for that (continual monitoring),” he emphasizes. “Maybe it’s the United Way or the (Community) Foundation or the Economic Development Board or the county commissioners. I think there are plenty of opportunities for government and elected officials to join in the process as well. Encourage them to be involved in all of this, and I think that’s key because in every project, funding becomes an issue, and those are the folks who can make it happen.”

Dittoe adds, “It’s winning – it’s not planning communities. It’s winning. It’s achievement.”

Dittoe illustrates his point by referring to Charlestown, which will become the first city to earn a Winning Communities designation.

“Every year, they’ll look at the plan, but every three years is when they’re going to have to go back and build upon their successes. Because people will have changed, the leadership of the organizations will have changed, the dynamics of the community will have changed.”

In a time of change, Dittoe stresses the importance of 1,440: the number of minutes in a day. That number “is very finite,” he observes. “So we have to do something. ... We can do this together.”

Dittoe proclaims, “It’s exciting that people are doing this.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Jim Dittoe at www.winningcommunities.com

Joe DeHaven, Community Bankers Association of Indiana, Inc., at (317) 595-6810 or www.cbai.org

Travis Holdman, Markle Bank, at (260) 758-3111



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