

Methodology

The Plan is largely based in ethical normative theory in that it seeks to understand the *characteristics* and *values* of the community, examines them in relation to trends experienced by the community, and provides a rational course of action that seeks to produce a desirable outcome (Brooks 2002, 22). This theoretical approach gives credence to the notion that long range city planning is more of an art than a science, with good plans being tailored to fit the unique qualities, characteristics, and values of their respective communities rather than being based on a standardized mathematical formula. Cities are complex systems that are subject to discontinuities of past trends, such as shifts in the economy and energy prices, making the use of forecasting as a sole method for planning a questionable methodology (Phdungsilp 2011, 708). However, this is not to say that forecasting exercises, such as projecting population, are not useful in helping to describe the current state of the city (for example - whether or not it is growing).

Using this theoretical approach, the methodology selected for the overall framework of this planning effort is known as “backcasting.” Backcasting is a future studies approach to planning that requires the client, in this case the City of Hoover, to begin the planning process with the end in mind, envision a successful outcome, and take steps from the present to achieve the vision (The Natural Step 2013). Originally used to help develop plans for technology development and sustainability practices, the backcasting method has in recent years become a popular methodology for city planning, enabling the community to develop a vision for what it thinks *should* take place in its future, then “back up” and develop a strategy for how to achieve the vision. This differs from forecasting - an exercise attempting to determine what *will* happen in the future and planning in anticipation for that projected scenario - in that it focuses on developing a plan for a future that is desirable rather than one that is completely dependent on past trends.

The method of backcasting that the planning team will utilize consists of five basic steps: (1) developing a community profile, describing the present and analyzing trends; (2) developing a vision for the future; (3) setting goals; (4) determining a course of action in order to attain the vision; and (5) analyzing the results to determine if alterations to the course of action are needed. Throughout the process, public input is crucial to ensuring that the plan is well-informed and in tune with the values and desires of the community. The citizens of Hoover, through stakeholder focus groups, online survey instruments, and open public workshops, will add important data layers to each of the five steps.

The purpose of developing the community profile is to gain a full understanding of the community at the present, creating a “snapshot in time” to help serve as a baseline for the project moving forward. According to Hammond (2005), complementarity is the “elaboration, enhancement, illustration, and clarification of the results from one method with the results from the other” (249). In order to retrieve the necessary data slices to fully develop this profile, the team will conduct its research following a mixed-method strategy, utilizing methods that complement one another and help to create a holistic image of the community in its present state. According to Gaber and Gaber (1997), mixed-method research is a research strategy that allows planners to combine “quantitative methods with qualitative methods into a single research

project” in order to gain a “more holistic understanding of the problems they are investigating” (95). This research method can be applied given the understanding that neither quantitative methods nor qualitative methods are superior to the other and that planners should adopt a “paradigm of choice” – meaning they consider that different situations call for different methods to derive a suitable explanation (1997; 98, 101). In the case of Hoover, an analysis of census data may produce a base line understanding of what population currently resides in the community, but by itself will not provide sufficient insight into the day-to-day dynamics and interactions within the community. Within this mixed method study, the team will employ a “methodological triangulation” approach – using multiple methods to analyze the conditions of Hoover (Gaber and Gaber 2007, 136). The particular methodological design the team will implement will be “between-method triangulation” – where the team will use multiple tools, such as census data and field research, to retrieve multiple empirical data slices that triangulate toward one “big picture” image of the community’s conditions (2007, 136-37).

According to Daniels et. al. (2007), the community profile provides a summary of “the physical, economic, and social” characteristics of the community, “an excellent introduction to the plan, and helps build interest of residents and non-residents in the rest of the plan” (67). This profile will pull from both primary data sources – data slices collected first-hand by the researcher – and secondary data sources – data slices gathered in previously published research. The profile will present data and information regarding geography and history, population and economy, environment, land use, and existing transportation and infrastructure systems. Given the time and financial constraints, much of the data provided in the community profile – especially that pertaining to population and the economy – will be retrieved from secondary data sources like the Census. Gaber and Gaber (2007) state that planners should search for existing useful data slices previously published in order to cut down on the expenditure of limited resources on new research whenever possible.

As mentioned before, census data alone cannot convey the entire picture of the complexities of the community. In addition, relying solely on secondary data sources can compromise the internal validity of the project – if the researcher made the correct observations based on the data (Gaber and Gaber 2007). Thus, the team seeks to validate and complement the data presented by the Census by producing primary data slices by means of qualitative methods in the form of field and photographic research. The variables the team seeks to obtain in the area surveys and photographs include evidence of the community’s strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities as we see them.

The methods of field research we engage in include windshield surveys and site reconnaissance. Both approaches are part of a non-participant research strategy and are used to gain first-hand qualitative information about the community. A windshield survey is the act of gathering observations by traveling by automobile throughout the community to gain a macro perspective, while site reconnaissance is a method by which the researcher studies the smaller details of the community by walking along corridors and through neighborhoods (Gaber and Gaber 2007). We intend to use these methods to familiarize myself with Hoover, noting significant impressions, trends, and divergent observations we see playing out in the field. We seek to protect ourselves from questions of internal validity by providing, at a minimum, “thin descriptions” of the empirical observations made. Issues of external validity – the

generalizability of the findings – are resolved by the understanding that no two communities or their respective situations are alike. The reliability of my findings will be questioned or confirmed when presented in the public participation workshops later in the planning process.

Next, we engage in photographic research. We conduct a mapping and survey form of photographic investigation. Mapping involves the use of aerial imagery to provide a birds-eye view of the study area, while survey photography captures a first-hand, eye-level view of the research site (Gaber and Gaber 2007). High resolution aerial imagery of Hoover for the mapping investigation will provide the greater context for the survey images.

We will gather survey imagery first-hand when conducting field research. Survey images are taken in the form of medium and close-up shots in order to get high amounts of detail in the variable while still being able to relate them to the general context. These shot ranges are also considered to provide greater anonymity to individuals captured in the images, allowing for less obtrusiveness into the daily activities on the citizens of the community. In dealing with questions of internal validity, we research the needed variable before taking photos and attempt to take shots that accurately display the situation being observed in the field. Coupled with the mapping imagery, both forms of photographic research will be used to further complement data provided by the Census and by written reports covering various topics of the community profile. Once the implementation of these techniques helps create a “big picture” view in the community profile, the resulting profile is then be used to help inform and shape the public discussions initiated in the visioning workshops – thus building a sequential framework into the research project.

The second step in this sequential process of acquiring information concerning the present state of the community is that of actively seeking input from the “stakeholders” of the plan, those that would “affect the plan or be affected by the plan” (Berke et. al. 2006, 275). Hanna (2000) demonstrates the necessary and informative interaction in the plan making process between the information provided in the community profile and the insight gained in citizen participation:

The relationship between participation and information centers on the nature of participation...Participation helps shape information development. Its influence is synergistic. Participation not only facilitates the additions to the planning process of new information and new interpretations of existing data; it also diffuses knowledge to those who may be peripheral players in the process....Preparing and analyzing data, interacting with non-agency players, and presenting information to the public can be transformative action – even though their impact may not be explicit. Information is a key component of consensus building....The process of developing and agreeing on information is a critical part of embedding the influence of information on individual and institutional understanding....(401).

The goal of the public participation program is not only to provide a more holistic view of the community in conjunction with the census data, but to bring citizens, community leaders, and various local organizations together to begin serious discussion about creating a positive future for the community. Within the planning participation program, the participants will

engage in the practice of visioning – a process by which citizens form a consensus regarding the current state of the community and craft a vision pertaining to their desires for the future condition of the community. Through the process of visioning, our goal is to get the stakeholders to collaborate with one another to discuss the community’s current condition and issues to be addressed (Cuthill 2004). The public participation program will consist of three mediums: open public workshops, an online survey, and focus group visioning workshops.

For the first phase of the public participation program, we hold a series of public workshops, three led by the mayor for introductory discussion and three focused more of plan development, designed to provide a high level of input to our planning efforts from the community at large. The latter three workshops are facilitated by KPS Group, the lead consultant. These workshops lead to discussion concerning current conditions in the community, a desired vision of the city’s future, and items the public desires the City to address in the plan.

In these meetings, Daniels et al. (2007) suggest beginning the discussion by addressing two questions:

- Where have we been?
- Where are we now? (16).

Next, the topic of discussion will be for the citizen participants to begin setting desired goals for the community to attain over time (Berke et. al. 2006). Daniels et. al., (2007) suggest framing this discussion in the visioning process by asking the following questions:

- Where are we going?
- Where do we want to go?
- How do we get there? (16)

These questions really get at the heart of the visioning process and will be the foundation for the discussion. The goal of this step is for the citizens to craft their vision for the future development of the community and gain a better understanding of what it will take to attain that vision.

We also implement elements of a SWOT analysis as a catalyst for further discussion to build upon the issues covered in the first workshop – asking the participants to analyze the community’s *strengths*, *weaknesses*, *opportunities*, and *threats*. After obtaining a greater understanding of issues from this analysis, we then discuss how to take advantage of or address the issues brought forth.

Next, we discuss what a common vision for the city of Hoover should entail over the life of the plan and discuss various goals and objectives residents would like to see reached over that time, goals being general statements of desired results while objectives are more defined and measurable benchmarks for accomplishing the goals. This exercise is meant to add further clarification as to the type of community the participants wish to see develop over the life of the plan.

The second part of the public participation program is the utilization of an online survey instrument. This offers an inexpensive and convenient means of getting a considerable amount of input from a large segment of the population. The information from the survey is meant to serve as another layer of input, not an instrument for gathering data for in-depth statistical analysis. Simply put, we will be treating the results as if they were gathered at an open town hall meeting. Given time and resource constraints, we could not hope to cover as many topics as the survey will cover in open public meetings. The survey will ask questions about a variety of topics, including general perceptions of the community in whole and in part, adequacy of city services, desired development types, and what the City should focus its resources on in the coming years. The survey will also ask some basic questions about the person filling out the survey to give us an idea of who contributed input, but not enough to run extensive analysis.

The third aspect of the public participation program involves a Community Advisory Committee focus group we have assembled for the public participation program include individuals with a variety of interests, perspectives, and expertise. The group includes real estate developers, business owners and managers, property owners, representatives of neighborhood and civic organizations, educators, and environmental enthusiasts. In the workshop with the Community Advisory Committee, we engage in a charrette that focuses on more specific aspects of the community than in the open public meetings.

As we continue to produce the plan, developing the vision and its supporting implementation strategy, we consult with the Community Advisory Committee to see if the Plan is on target with the input received prior to initiating the draft. Simultaneously, we meet with the mayor and department heads of the City administration, as well as members of the City Council. The primary aim in involving these groups through the completion of the plan and presentation to the Planning Commission is to build consensus amongst the leaders of the community. Additionally, taken together, the groups are fairly well representative of the racial, cultural, and gender makeup of the community. They also serve as a gauge for how well we are adhering to the vision as communicated by the citizens in the public participation program. We then provide these groups with an opportunity to ask questions and give input on the draft plan.

When the initial draft of the plan is complete, I will present it at a public workshop hosted by the Planning Commission. Some initial questions may be answered at that time, but the primary purpose of the workshop is to introduce the plan to the Planning Commission and the public. The volume of information presented will most likely prevent an extended period of public comment. Instead, a separate public hearing will be scheduled some time following the workshop. In the interim, the plan will be posted online and made available in physical form at City Hall so the public may study it and prepare comments and questions for the public hearing.

In order to analyze the functionality of the Plan and its ability to achieve desired results, the Plan and the City's progress in implementing it should be assessed over time. Traditionally, the first thorough assessment of a plan occurs approximately 5 years after its adoption. This timeframe is recommended for the assessment of the Plan given that the short-term actions presented herein are to be taken within 5 years. Public participation should be a part of the 5-year assessment of the plan. Adjustments should be made if the implementation of the plan is off schedule or resulting actions create results counter to those desired by the community. The City

should repeat the planning process and consider revising the plan after 10 years to account for changing characteristics and values of the community.