

INTRODUCTION

In February of 1993, the City of Noblesville, assisted by Indiana University's Center for Urban Policy and the Environment, began "Benchmarking" as a means to update the city's comprehensive plan. The purpose of the initial stages of Benchmarking was to give all of Noblesville's citizens a role in the formation of the city's public policy by asking them to create clear statements of the goals of the community and to design a means of assessing the community's movement toward those goals. The premise of Benchmarking is that a community that pursues quality of life standards that have resulted from consensus will have the best chance of reaching an attractive future.

To determine the collective vision of its residents, a 61-member Benchmarking Committee was selected to begin the process. For two years, Committee members attended meetings, study sessions and a series of presentations examining applicable state, national and international trends. City staff made numerous presentations to local community groups and surveyed over 3000 Noblesville citizens in order to determine a vision statement for the community. Overarching goals, more specific subgoals, and finally measurable benchmarks were determined through discussion and consensus and, in September 1994, the Final Benchmarking Report was published. The report organized the community's goals into three areas - Land, People, and Economy - and collected information and data for each of the benchmarks.

In early 1996, a five-member Steering Committee was appointed by the Mayor and by the City Council to begin the next stage of the process, the first review of the community's progress toward its stated goals. The Steering Committee formed a 26-member Stewardship Commission. These volunteers were divided into teams, organized by the three main goal areas - Land, People, and Economy. Each team was responsible for collecting and reviewing the data identified as measurable in the 195 benchmarks of the original Benchmarking Report. This first phase of the Benchmarking process culminated with a meeting of the entire Stewardship Commission in February 1997. At this meeting, data collected by each of the teams were shared with the rest of the Stewardship Commission to create an assessment of the community's progress towards the first interim benchmark goals. The following section is a part of the first of a series of "report cards" on the direction of the community. Further periodic reports are planned at 5-year intervals beginning in 2000.

THE ECONOMY SECTION

Three areas of the economic and business health of Noblesville stimulated early benchmarking discussions. The many topics of concern, which eventually generated the economy benchmarks, began with interest in local goods and services, the property tax base, and employment opportunities. The overarching goal of the economic benchmarks reflects those initial concerns:

Expand and support a diverse business community. To provide a range of local services, to generate a reasonable and supportable property tax, and to create diverse employment opportunities will take active involvement by residents and the City. Determining and balancing the factors that affect these areas is the major economic challenge to our community.

Several themes emerged from the wide ranging discussions of economic issues during the benchmarking process. Five were identified by the Indiana University facilitators and appear in the 1994 Final Benchmarking Report. The dominant theme is that the people of Noblesville are not willing to sacrifice quality of life issues for economic gain. A second theme is that city government should take a more active role in the practice of local economic development. The desire for strong partnerships among government, existing business, education, civic and social organizations, and individual city residents is the third theme. A fourth theme is sensitivity to the needs of existing local businesses. The final theme is the recognition that increased business development is necessary to create additional property tax revenue without dramatically increasing the property tax rate and to support diverse employment opportunities.

These themes created four priority subgoals. First, business attraction and support activities should center on businesses that increase assessed value and that make minimum demands on public services. Second, the first product of Benchmarking should be a comprehensive land use plan that embodies the directions and intent of the benchmarks established by the community. Third, the City of Noblesville and the stakeholders of the community

should develop and pursue a marketing strategy that retains the goals of Benchmarking. Fourth, the target of business expansion in Noblesville should be the attraction of small business.

Each of these priorities is a request for action, and each, as well, is an issue of balance within our community. One of the purposes of this report is to determine whether action taken in our community pursues that balance. The Stewardship project has gathered information for all benchmark areas established in the 1994 Report and commented on the direction of civic and private action in Noblesville.

INCREASING ASSESSED VALUE

Without question, the participants in Benchmarking have agreed that the balance between our small-town atmosphere and the desire for an increase in the tax and employment base must always fall on the side of Noblesville's small-town quality. Managing this balance is difficult and sometimes causes great public interest. Knowing that tactics themselves can be controversial, the committee recommended three specific methods: expansion of infrastructure, abatement of taxes, and annexation of land. These methods permit a community to gain control of the fundamentals of growth and thereby have some control over its amount and its quality.

The expansion of infrastructure in the community includes the recent extensions of the sewer collection system to the southeast and southwest portions of Noblesville Township at a cost of approximately \$14 million. Another significant investment in infrastructure was the reconstruction and improvement of an approximately one mile length of 8th Street in Noblesville in 1996. Since 1993, tax abatement has been offered by the City on three instances and utilized by two Noblesville businesses, Warner Bodies and Indiana Cold Storage. More recently, tax abatement was offered as an incentive to develop an office/industrial park in the southeast portion of Noblesville Township. Substantial annexations have occurred since 1993. Noblesville annexed 1300+ acres from 1993 through 1996 and another 1300 acres since the beginning of 1997. The 1997 annexations include the Pebblebrook Subdivision with over 350 households and an estimated population of over 800.

No community can avoid the problems associated with the use of these tactics. Benchmarking, however, has supplied a framework to demonstrate their worth and to evaluate their accomplishments. Residents immediately and personally affected by them may not always see the intent outlined in Benchmarking, and one of the responsibilities of these reports is to verify that that intent remains primary. The long term values of the community are maintained in the current use of annexation, tax abatement, and infrastructure expansion, and avenues for the expression of citizen concern have remained open and active.

THE COMPREHENSIVE MASTER LAND USE PLAN

Government alone cannot be responsible for the protection and development of the quality-of-life in Noblesville. This theme of the importance of cooperative action recurs significantly in the other benchmarking area reports. The strongest statement the City of Noblesville can make on its own is to specify in a long-range plan the intended use of available land. Such a plan serves as the model for zoning and planning regulations as well as the rationale for council ordinances.

In 1992, the City Council initiated an update of the Noblesville Comprehensive Master Plan, last updated in 1981. The resulting new Plan, sub-titled "Planning for the Year 2010 - Changing Business as Usual," was needed to help manage the development explosion occurring in Noblesville. Updating the Comprehensive Plan began by the introduction of the "benchmarking" process to Noblesville. To help determine the collective vision of the community, a 60-member Benchmarking Committee was formed to steer this benchmarking process. As part of this process, over 3000 Noblesville citizens helped by completing questionnaires describing their likes and dislikes about the community. Their answers identified critical issues that the community most wanted to focus on and helped set the overall framework for the Master Planning process. With the help of planning consultants, another 60 citizens formed the Comprehensive Master Plan Committee, which worked to determine future land use in Noblesville. The updated Comprehensive Plan, adopted by the City Council in November 1995, introduced such

new guiding concepts to the community as growth by neighborhoods instead of by subdivisions, village commercial centers, an employment-generating corporate campus, and a system of greenways.

The new Comprehensive Master Plan provides design to the residential and commercial growth of our community and is a constant reference for planning commission responses to developers and petitioners. Since the Comprehensive Master Plan's adoption, it has been used by members of the Board of Zoning Appeals, Plan Commission and City Council as a decision-making guide in their deliberation of more than 15 land use variances, 42 conditional use applications and 5 rezoning cases. The updated plan has supported a number of significant projects currently under construction including the Walmart Supercenter at State Road 37 and Stony Creek Road, the Pebble Brook Village Center and the Noblesville Commons commercial development at the northeast corner of State Roads 32 and 37. Additionally, the Comprehensive Master Plan supports a pending proposal to develop an industrial park in the southeast corner of Noblesville Township.

The Comprehensive Master Plan is the single most significant outcome of the Benchmarking process. It has allowed Noblesville to face the onslaught of development and to manage it in our own directions.

MARKETING STRATEGY

One effective means of controlling the quantity and quality of the new business a community wants is to invite and welcome those that fit its established criteria. Benchmarking indicates the type of business Noblesville should pursue and considers the impact such business should have. The 1994 report also underscores the unequivocal community intent to retain and support present local business. A balance here between the development of proactive economic programs and the retention and support of existing businesses will require the open cooperation of present businesses and the City and Chamber as they pursue the expressed community desires for growth in revenue.

Although some efforts have been initiated by the community or some of its elements, the primary factor driving potential new business in Noblesville is who asks to be here. Supporting some proposals and discouraging others provides a small degree of selectivity, but no control. For Noblesville to have its best opportunity to gain business, commercial enterprise, and industry that fit the community-established, quality-of-life requirements, we must form a marketing strategy that is cooperatively created by public and private sources and that receives adequate financial and management support.

ATTRACTING SMALL BUSINESS

The Noblesville business community, through various organizations and cooperative actions, has taken a clear position in support of existing business. The Chamber of Commerce, recently having moved on the main square, is the most visible force both for assisting present establishments and welcoming new ones. Their location on the square has improved accessibility to community and business information. The Chamber lends their support to the business community by actively participating in land use hearings on issues that affect the community's business climate.

Encouragement to local businesses, as evidenced by gathered benchmark data, included a "Business Recognition Day" in October of 1996. Jointly supported by Hamilton County Alliance and Noblesville Chamber of Commerce, teams from these organizations, along with local public officials, made personal visits to roughly two dozen Noblesville businesses. The purpose of these visits were to formally recognize the contributions that these businesses make to our community. As part of each visit, the business was surveyed on their perception of the positive and negative aspects of the local business climate. At the time of this writing, plans are being made for the second annual "Business Recognition Day" for October of 1997. Additionally, Mayor Dennis Redick made personal formal visits to over half-dozen local businesses in the last year in order to recognize their commitment to the community and find out how city government can better serve them.

The traditional downtown of Noblesville on the courthouse square has remained vibrant as evidenced by the benchmarking data results. One of the economy benchmarking subgoals encourages the location of retail/specialty uses over office space in the downtown. Data results prove that the percentage of first floor retail/specialty uses

has increased from approximately 33% in 1992 to 48% in 1997. In this same time period, the downtown's first floor vacancy rate has decreased from 14% to 7.3%.

Although there are approximately 20 private or public employers with more than 50 employees in Noblesville, the majority of businesses are smaller businesses. Consequently, seeking quality small businesses for our community defaults to the same concerns this report has expressed in the lack of an overall community marketing strategy. Community events, such as the Noblesville Street Dance, Concerts in the Park and, in the summer, the Saturday morning Farmer's Market have attracted visitors incidentally to Noblesville, and we seem to have become one of the stops on the antique circuit, but we remain without a particular identity around which small business could gather. The downtown, our parks, and the river offer possibilities to anchor a marketing strategy independent from economic enticements.

CONCLUSION

The continued economic well-being of Noblesville can only be sustained through active measures that result from cooperatively made plans. We run the constant risk of having our economic life dictated by external factors that have no interest in the welfare of the community. By remaining consistent with our goals and energetically seeking appropriate marketing, we have a chance to find a balance that protects our small-town atmosphere and shapes growth.

The Comprehensive Master Land Use Plan is Noblesville's most valuable tactical asset. It describes the nature and direction of growth that represents the community's vision of a liveable future. Benchmarking supports the strategies of tax abatement, annexation, and infrastructure expansion as means to follow that vision. It is the duty of those who use this document to recall the vision that underlies it and to remember that it stands as an expression of the community will. The Plan is, however, only a guide, no matter how specific, and should remain subject to criticism and debate.

The continued health of the downtown area and a functioning community marketing strategy are interrelated keys to Noblesville's economic future. The courthouse square is the heart of Noblesville and the locus of its atmosphere. Its dependence on small business should be recognized in a marketing strategy that mixes our community's desire for the flavor of small businesses and the personal contacts they engender with our financial need for larger corporations and industries to bear the cost of services. A marketing strategy that coordinates existing efforts to attract businesses, corporations, and industries and that promotes the health of downtown Noblesville is a necessity.