

The Missoula, Montana Scenarios Project

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Population growth and its consequences challenges many communities in the Rocky Mountain region. Growth and development issues paralyze local political initiative as interest groups hamstring decision-making by public officials. Suburban sprawl and industrial development interfere with the desire for a more livable community. Private property rights conflict with broader community values. Tradeoffs between environmental amenities and new job creation become divisive. This multi-layered conflict is mired in decades of community history. Old patterns of development are difficult to change.

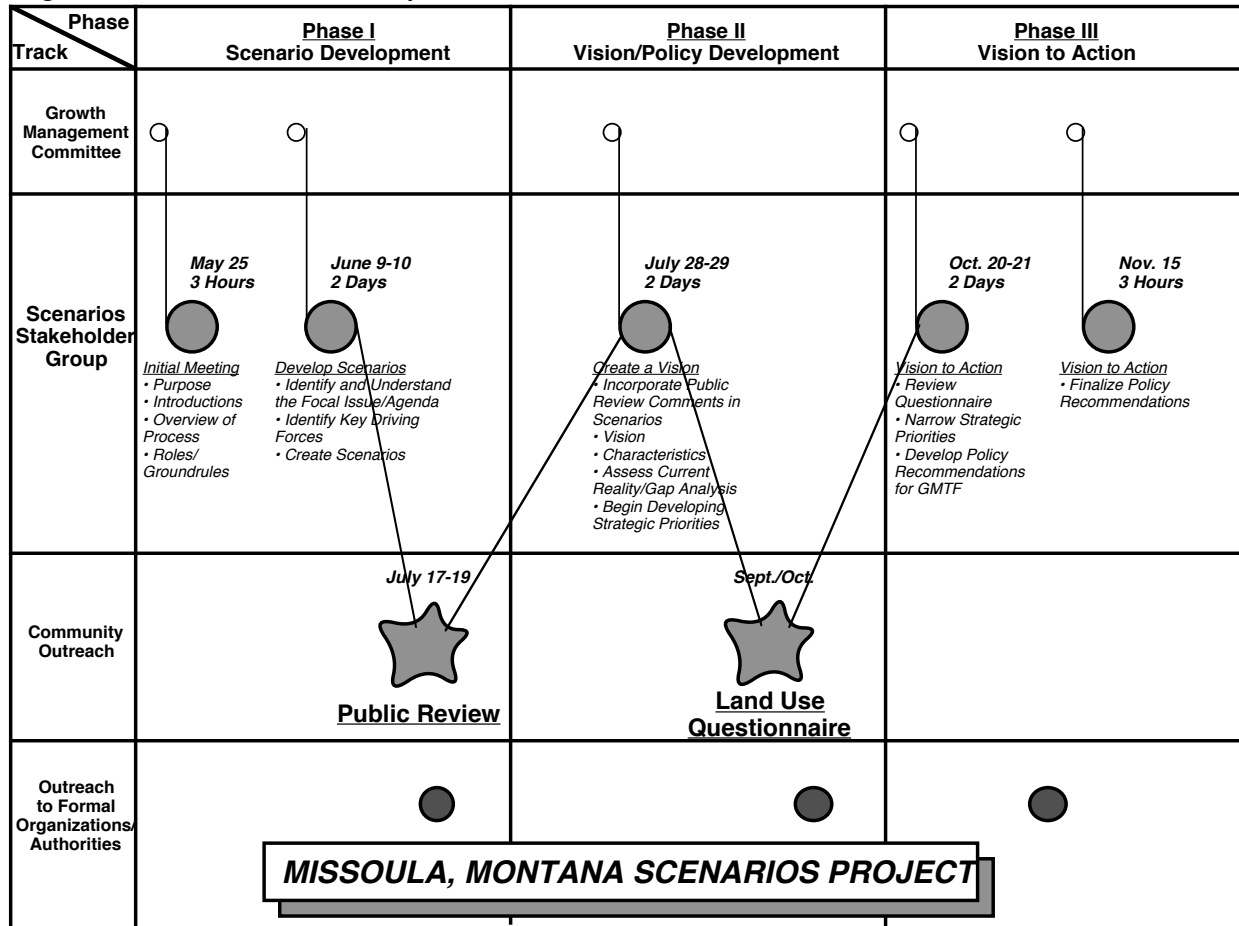
In the early 1990s, Missoula, Montana found itself in similar straits as bedroom communities and strip development threatened its spectacular mountain setting. Angry citizens and frustrated elected officials failed to cope with these challenges. Every citizen, it seemed, defined the problem of growth in different ways and fought for different solutions. Planning and development experts could not "solve" the problem for the community. Without the broad civic will to address these issues, there would be no political will to implement solutions.

In order to create civic will, Missoula used a new approach: collaborative scenario-based planning. Civic leaders chose this approach based on similar successful experiences in other communities. An inclusive, collaborative approach could build the civic will while scenarios could challenge traditional assumptions about how the future might unfold. By creating provocative new stories about the future, Missoulians could break down paralyzing mental maps that limited creativity. Instead of being stuck in historical responses to problems like growth, citizens could create a viable, coherent vision for Missoula and develop new and innovative responses to growth management.

The primary goals of the project were to identify and explore alternative futures for the Missoula Valley, develop a vision for the region supported by the broader community, and identify policies and management tools that would lead to the vision. In order to do this, the process needed to engage a broad cross-section of the region's citizens. It had to be credible, open and well-informed. The collaborative effort had to create a broad constituency to act in order to make progress.

Missoula's Growth Management Task Force (GMTF) -- the convening body for the initiative -- recognized early on that the only way to be successful in addressing the challenges of growth was to build a broad consensus about how Missoula should evolve. This unique committee of elected officials from the city and county, business representatives and neighborhood council representatives invited a team of citizens to help address the emerging issue of growth within Missoula Valley. Fifty four individuals from government, business, interest groups, academia and citizens from throughout the region were selected to serve as stakeholders. They reflected a wide variety of perspectives and experiences from affordable housing to outfitters. The GMTF designed a three-phased process to engage and educate the stakeholders (see Figure 15.3).

Figure 15.3. Missoula Process Map



In phase one, stakeholders developed four scenarios -- stories about how the future might unfold. Each story presented a plausible narrative of how important and highly uncertain factors affecting Missoula's future might play out over the next ten years. These stories captured, in fictional form, the hopes and fears of the region, which, in turn, informed the vision. "Status Quo Vadis" told a story of current trends rolling forward with political leaders unable to cope with the divisiveness in the community. Without effective planning, the city evolved into one of the "new gentry cities" in the West with high cost of living, sprawl and a high rate of migration. "A Not-So-Grimm Fairy Tale" (or "A Carousel IS Missoula") portrayed a shift from city-wide planning to neighborhood planning with a high level of trust and cooperation among citizens. In

the third scenario, "Field of Dreams," three major high technology firms moved to Missoula permanently transforming the region's economic base. With a growing economy, new infrastructure needs challenged local officials to stay ahead of the growth curve. New developments and a younger population forced many older residents to move out as the cost of living increased. The "Grapes of Missoula," the final scenario, told an opposing story as a downsizing federal government gutted public sector jobs the region depended on. Population plummeted and it would be years before the region regained a reasonable level of economic self-sufficiency.

In Phase II, stakeholders created a vision of a desirable future for the Missoula Valley. The scenarios provided a solid foundation for developing the vision. By identifying the aspects of each scenario that appealed to them or repelled them, stakeholders clarified their thinking about the vision. Ultimately, they defined ten critical aspects of a desirable future for the Valley.

These ten dimensions provided an interconnected, holistic vision to guide future development. The economy and the built environment would complement the natural environment. Education and the arts and culture would help enhance Missoula's already strong sense of community. Collaborative decision-making processes, durable partnerships between sectors and empowered, inclusive government would build a healthy social climate or civic culture.

Phase III focused on strategy and policy development. A thorough analysis of Missoula's current status for each of these aspects identified key gaps between current reality and the vision. Stakeholders then brainstormed more than one hundred strategic possibilities for bridging these gaps and achieving the vision. Seven priorities emerged from the dialogue:

1. Designing and implementing appropriate land-use and planning tools.

2. Protecting the natural environment based on carrying capacity.
3. Institutionalizing community information and problem-solving processes.
4. Encouraging the development of community/neighborhood councils.
5. Seeking legislative changes at the state level to give local government more power on development related issues.
6. Removing jurisdictional boundaries for neighborhood planning and city and county collaboration.
7. Encouraging environmentally friendly economic development and above average wage job creation.

An extensive education process about each of these priorities helped stakeholders define four specific recommendations for moving from vision to action that they would take to the GMTF. First, the city should establish a "bottom-up" neighborhood-based approach to city planning rather than the current "developer down" approach. Second, neighborhood planning efforts should be guided by wider agreements about community design standards and coordinated with infrastructure development. Third, the city and county should adopt a set of land use and planning tools that were congruent with the vision. These tools would provide for education to support planning efforts, comprehensive planning including fair share concepts, and appropriate regulation, incentives and financing. Fourth, community information processes and neighborhood councils should be established to support inclusive, collaborative consensus-based efforts to guide Missoula's development.

The GMTF, with its diverse membership, took the recommendations to Missoula's City Council and County Commission. Subsequent legislative action touched on all of the recommendations. Neighborhood councils and planning processes were established and are now

up and running. An urban development plan was adopted to guide neighborhood planning efforts. New growth was tied to infrastructure development and capital planning. Elected leaders unanimously voted to change the comprehensive plan and associated zoning regulations consistent with the recommendations.

None of these actions would have been possible without the engagement of the stakeholders. Because of the nature of the process they had been through, the stakeholders represented a "constituency to act" crucial to the success of this effort. Elected officials now had the support they needed to move ahead in addressing growth management issues. They had commissioned the work, sat in on the stakeholder identification process and observed the work. They had become convinced the work of the stakeholders reflected the will of the community. They now had concrete well-conceived recommendations when nothing coherent existed before. With a credible group of stakeholders behind them, risky political action became possible. Missoula now had the impetus to control its own future.