

Community Visioning

 IN A NUTSHELL



WASHINGTON STATE
MAIN STREET
PROGRAM

Developed in partnership with BERK Consulting

Written 2023

Community visioning is an essential practice that invites the community at large to share their ideas, experiences, and hopes as related to their community's "living room" — the downtown district. This, in turn, allows the Main Street board of directors and Executive Director to work together to set priorities that reflect a broader vision for the district. We recommend going through a community visioning process every 3-5 years in tandem with your strategic planning process.

Start the process by putting together a strong team. This project is a natural fit for your Outreach Committee, alongside your Executive Director and a few board members. Once you have a team established, you can start digging into the community visioning process.

There are four potential pieces of the community visioning process: a market analysis, community survey, focus groups, and stakeholder interviews.


Market Analysis

GOAL: Collect baseline community data

1. **Reach out to Washington Main Street** for help on a basic demographics and market analysis report.
2. **Review the data** to confirm or inform the community segments you would like to reach out to during other elements of this process.

Community Survey

GOAL: Gather high-level feedback from a broad segment of community members

1. **Identify your targeted list of participant types.** This will likely include business owners and property owners in your district, residents of your town, and anyone who visits your district for work, shopping, or other business. **Ask: Whose input is needed to create a vision for your downtown?**
2. **Develop your survey.** Aim for 5-10 questions that are mostly closed-ended (multiple choice, ranking, etc), with a maximum of 1 or 2 open-ended questions. Include an explanation of who you are, your purpose, and why surveying is part of the process. 
3. **Determine your platforms and outreach plan.** Where will your survey be available, and how will you reach your targeted participant types? How does your community (and your sub-communities) like to be engaged?
4. **Release your survey.** Ideally, your survey will be open for three weeks, with consistent reminders and advertising throughout that time.
5. **Analyze** the results with an open mind.

Survey Outreach Ideas

Digital Distribution: Send it out via your newsletter, post it on social media, share in local Facebook groups, ask your partners to share via email and social media.

Physical Distribution: Make blank surveys available in businesses in or near your district with a clear drop-off box for completed surveys.

Marketing Materials: Develop marketing materials with a QR code link to your survey — post flyers around town, send postcards to your mailing list, connect with local schools to post flyers or send them home with students.

Additional Resources



Anytime you see this icon, it means that there is a sample document or additional resources available in our online resource library that you can download and use! Visit preservewa.org/main-street-resources

Please note: The documents in our online resource library are *samples for reference only* and do not constitute legal advice. Your organization should consult an attorney or seek necessary counsel before adopting legal documents.

Focus Groups


GOAL: Gather in-depth feedback from specific interest groups or demographic groups

1. **Develop a list of demographic and interest groups** you'd like to hear from. Consider whose voices are often at the table and whose are left out. Some groups you may include in this list:

Demographic groups: Families and youth, older adults, young adults, native Spanish speakers, the disability community

Interest groups: Downtown residents, business owners, property owners, educators, nonprofits, the faith community, city and county representatives

2. **Develop your agenda.** 

- ◇ **Develop open-ended questions** that can lead to deeper responses. Analyzing your survey results can be a great starting point for this, and you may consider adapting some of your survey questions for focus groups.
- ◇ **Decide how you will facilitate conversation.** You might choose to arrange participants in a circle to encourage free-flowing conversation, set up small groups where people can discuss each question before sharing out. 
- ◇ **Determine a facilitator.** The facilitator's goal is to effectively gather feedback from all participants by guiding and encouraging conversation while staying as unbiased as possible. Community members should feel that they can truly share anything in this space.

3. **Schedule your focus groups.** We recommend scheduling 3-5 focus groups at a variety of times to accommodate a wide range of participant schedules. To simplify planning, determine your schedule first and invite participants to RSVP for the meeting that works best for them, aiming for 6-9 people per session.

4. **Eliminate barriers to attendance and incentivize participation.** Here are some ways to do that at every stage of your community visioning process:

Identify and eliminate as many barriers as you can. Ask yourself what might prevent your intended audience from engaging with your surveys, focus groups, or interviews and aim to address each barrier. For focus groups or interviews, that might include offering virtual options for those who may otherwise be unable to attend, providing reasonable compensation for participants (i.e., providing meals during the meeting, paying for their parking, or providing or reimbursing for childcare), and ensuring that the meeting space and materials used for the meeting are accessible for all. For surveys, that may mean translating the survey (and open-ended answers) into other languages spoken in your community or going into businesses to record verbal answers from busy owners.

Incentivize participation. Especially as you seek input from parents and families, people who work long hours, and community members whose ideas are not often sought or incorporated, a small form of compensation can go a long way in showing you value their input, and even in making it possible for them to join. For your focus groups and stakeholder interviews, you may provide lunch or dinner to all attendees, or give them a gift card to a local businesses to thank them for their time and expertise. For your survey, you might host a drawing for a gift card to local businesses, with each survey response and social media share of the survey receiving an entry.

5. **Recruit participants.** As you invite people to attend focus groups, let them know what you're doing, why you're doing it, and how your work will affect or benefit them. Aim to invite participants 3-4 weeks in advance. To ensure you have a mix of your desired focus group participants, you may need to consider how to reach out to underrepresented groups in your community. If this is new to you, consider connecting with partners who represent these groups or have already connected with them. You might also ask survey respondents if they would be interested in joining a focus group, which can help you connect with community members outside of your current network.
6. **Host your focus groups!** Make sure someone other than the facilitator is there to take ample notes and plan time afterward to debrief as a team.

Stakeholder Interviews

GOAL: Understand the perspectives of community leaders and decision makers

1. **Develop your list of interviewees.** You might start with city, county or port officials, legacy business owners or other influential business leaders, and leaders of other local nonprofits or groups as you consider what stakeholders to interview. At this stage, you may also take notes on what you would like to learn from each interviewee. We recommend conducting 5 interviews, each as a one-on-one conversation.
2. **Develop your interview questions,** which can be modeled after your focus group and survey questions, but should be based on each interviewee's individual expertise. 
3. **Schedule your interviews** based on your interviewees' convenience and schedules. You'll want to schedule 60-90 minutes for each interview. Be sure to eliminate any barriers to participation, as outlined earlier in this guide.
4. **Conduct your interviews** and be sure to take ample notes. Your interviews may be conducted by your Executive Director, board members, or Outreach Committee members.

Tips for Facilitating Interviews and Focus Groups

Adapted from IDEO's Insights for Innovation Toolkit



Build rapport. Practicing active listening, thinking about your body language, considering the tone of your voice, and genuinely greeting and thanking each attendee when they arrive and depart can show that you really want to hear their ideas.



Ask open-ended questions and ask participants to explain. You may ask them "why?" a few times to get to that explanation.



Allow space for silence and feel free to ask participants to think aloud. They might share more concerns, reasonings, and motivations.



Embrace empathy and curiosity. Seek to understand what each participant is sharing from their perspective, and recognize that while you may be the Main Street expert, each participant is the expert of their own experiences — that's why you asked them to share more, after all!



Ask people for stories. You might start a question with, "Tell me about a time when..." to hear about specific experiences.



Ask people to elaborate on their experiences, when possible. For example, if someone shares frustration about parking, ask them to walk you through how they look for parking downtown. It might lead to a great understanding of their thought process or of unseen complications.



Mind the gap. Tune in to moments when people's words and actions aren't aligning, and ask (politely and with a tone of curiosity, rather than judgment) for more insight!

Once you have completed your Community Visioning process, including analysis of your collected community input, you can move forward in your strategic planning process with confidence. Be sure to keep your thorough notes on the process, timeline, questions, and stakeholders involved — this will help you tackled your next community visioning process with ease!



Find a sample survey, focus group agenda, stakeholder interview questions, conversation facilitation guide, and more resources at preservewa.org/main-street-resources