

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 PEOPLE SECTION

The original Benchmarking Report noted three themes in the People section: the importance of community cooperation, the desire for diversity in a "life cycle" community, and a need to address a variety of issues affecting at-risk families. From the benchmark listings and from many hours of tapes and many pages of notes and outlines, the authors of the 1994 Final Benchmarking Report identified these elements as reflecting the sense of the community. The Benchmarking committee members also created numerous benchmarks that could document these areas and set priorities that recognized the three themes.

Each of these priorities is a request for action, and each, as well, is an issue of balance within the 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 has commented on the direction of civic and private action in Noblesville.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY COOPERATION

Much of the involvement that Noblesville's citizens have with their community is through positive, volunteer action. Although no exact percent is available, the number of organizations that are based in volunteer work and the number of persons who do that work indicate that a significant number of persons donate their time and effort to a wide range of organizations, groups, and clubs.

In their final meeting, the Stewardship team investigating People benchmarks reported a concern about the range of volunteerism. They found that the increase in the number of organizations providing volunteers for the community has created some duplication in service that better coordination among agencies and organizations might prevent. At least three attempts have been made to assess and publish the number and nature of community organizations, but no one has made such a list since the one created by the Hamilton County Community Service Council in 1994.

At the time of this writing, it has been reported that a group from the Hamilton County Leadership Academy are working on an update of this document.

Benchmark priorities seek an increase in the coordination among service and volunteer organizations in Noblesville. Recently, two programs have increased connections between business and education. The Hamilton County Alliance's "Classroom to Commerce - An Education/Business Partnership" supports internships for county educators with local businesses. Noblesville Chamber of Commerce members and representatives of Noblesville Schools have created a School-To-Work committee to engender communication and cooperation between employers and the schools. Both groups indicate the growth of positive connections between education and business, but other efforts among other stakeholders in the community are either missing or hidden.

Unfortunately, the original People benchmarks failed to incorporate information from religious organizations and their many volunteer works. For a true picture of volunteerism in Noblesville future Stewardship design must include this major area of contribution to the Noblesville community.

THE DESIRE FOR DIVERSITY IN A "LIFE-CYCLE" COMMUNITY

Like many of the themes established through the Benchmarking-Stewardship process, the issue of diversity is best presented as a concern for balance. The most powerful factors that impede progress toward these goals are growth and its complications. If Noblesville intends to provide opportunities for education, housing, work, health, service, and recreation for all of its citizens throughout their lives, then it must commit planning, resources, and infrastructure to that end.

Noblesville's overarching goals demand that we become more responsive to the needs of our residents and protect our small-town atmosphere, and juggle this duty with the responsibility to manage the growth that appears inevitable. This is only compounded by the realization that the community's members and their needs are dynamic; as population demographics shift, so do needs. Answering the needs of a "life-cycle" community demands an awareness of all elements within it and an anticipation of their "aging."

The provision of opportunities for diversity in housing, education, business, and government is a Benchmarking priority. Beyond fulfilling the responsibility any community has for all of its citizens, diversity assures a range of opportunities at each phase of the cycle. The larger problem of balance is not only of present demands but also of needs across time. Growth, particularly in upper-middle, high income, single-family housing, can affect possibilities for members of the community in the present and affect as well their opportunities in the future, when their circumstances and needs are different.

Benchmark goals support the provision of diverse recreational and educational opportunities for all of Noblesville's citizens regardless of their age or economic status. Recreational programs provided by the city parks department and other organizations continue to increase both in number and diversity of events. The new construction of educational facilities in the community increased the available space, thereby providing greater access for life-long learning opportunities including adult continuing education, GED programs and classes sponsored by area universities. Other gathered benchmark data highlights that Noblesville's families with preschool children appear to be well provided for in terms of childcare accessibility. Estimates of the capacity of childcare providers in Noblesville, according to the benchmark data, indicate that the number of child-care slots has increased by over 50% from 1993 to 1997.

Another benchmark topic generating lengthy discussion concerns the affordability of housing in Noblesville. Coming up with an appropriate definition of affordable housing in terms that are applicable to Noblesville's housing stock and demographics has and continues to be a difficult issue. The availability of commercial apartments is easily determined, but the Stewardship team for People benchmarks found that an accurate understanding of the community's absorption of medium and low-income residents is not possible without exploring further the use of private homes and apartments as rental property.

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES AT-RISK

The overarching goal of the People Benchmarks includes the word "compassionate." The extent of volunteerism noted above underscores the desire of the community to assist those in need and to expand the awareness of the conditions of risk through education. Problems of mental and physical health, and substance and physical abuse affect the entire community regardless of social or economic conditions. The response a community makes to its citizens at-risk is a fair indicator of the compassion noted in the goal.

Many of the markers that Benchmarking tracks in human services and needs come from federal census information that is only available at the close of each decade. A special census that acquired some relevant data was not yet reported at the time of this document.

The perception remains that Noblesville is an upper-middle class community whose citizens can and do provide care for themselves in issues of risk. However, benchmark data indicates that Noblesville is not immune to the pervasiveness of abuse and domestic violence. Benchmark goals seek to increase awareness of all forms of abuse and violence, which should result in an increased number of cases reported. The collected data verifies that the number of reported incidents has increased in most instances. The increase in incidents should continue to be monitored for detection of any significant changes in underlying conditions.

Student substance abuse became a notable issue during the time of Benchmarking in part because of the results of a survey that were made public by Noblesville Schools. Consequently, student support programs at all educational levels have increased in number and services, and voluntary drug testing at the high school, participation in which permits students to leave the campus at lunch, has enrolled a large percent of the student body. Recent state law protecting the privacy of information for students has made the repetition of the initial survey impossible without parental permission. An attempt to duplicate the survey during the 1996-97 school year failed when an insufficient number of students returned signed permission slips.

Although programs have begun to treat the symptoms of substance abuse and professional counseling is locally available, the community as a whole has only just begun to make a coordinated or concerted attempt to address the problem.

In August of 1996, the Mayor formed a Task Force on Family Violence. Comprised of members who have professional and volunteer positions within the public agencies and community organizations that address this social problem, the goal of the Task Force has been to improve local awareness and education. Their initial goals has been to improve the training of local law enforcement officers, specifically in their responses to and treatment of family violence calls.

CONCLUSION

In issues that affect the quality of life, Noblesville has taken positive steps, but the frequency and size of them remain uncertain. Volunteerism will be a key to extending quality of life opportunities to all of the residents of the community regardless of income, age, or capacity. The willingness of the residents of Noblesville to volunteer should be supported by a fuller understanding and a greater coordination of the services we freely offer each other. Several benchmarks indicate that Noblesville is willing to approach problems concerning the physical and mental health of its citizens, and the coordination of programs, departments, businesses, and persons that respond them has grown.

Noblesville has begun the foundations for a "life-cycle" community through expansions of infrastructure, facilities, and programs that respond to the needs and interests of children, adults, and the elderly. We can retain the small-town values that embrace across income levels, gender, ethnicity, and generations, but only if this becomes a clearer target of coordinated community policy. The risk remains that Noblesville will devolve into a suburb that serves only the prevailing economic interests dictated by forces beyond our control.