

Jonathan Schechter “Corpus Callosum” Column
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Two columns ago, I began a two part discussion of a Statement of Ideal, something I’d like to see incorporated in the upcoming revision of the Comp Plan. Last time, I discussed the concept in a broad-brush fashion; today I’ll review the broad-brush, add a few more details, then talk about how I hope planners and elected officials will use a Statement of Ideal in the Comp Plan.

Toyota is the most successful car manufacturer in the world, and a Statement of Ideal is the cornerstone of its success. Like most successful enterprises, Toyota is a mission-driven organization; unlike most successful enterprises, Toyota doesn’t have traditional mission, vision, or values statements. Instead, core to everything Toyota does is a Statement of Ideal, a tool which not only combines the inspirational qualities and long-term orientation of vision and mission statements, but adds a very practical management tool for assessing day-to-day activities. Equally important, unlike typical mission and vision statements, there’s nothing ambiguous about a Statement of Ideal: parse a good Statement of Ideal, and every bit of it can be precisely defined and, in turn, measured. Why is this important? Because if you can’t measure something, you can’t evaluate it; and if you can’t evaluate it, you can’t determine progress (or lack thereof) – all you’re left with is opinions.

Here’s an example of what I mean. In 1999, as a St. John’s board member, I helped draft the medical center’s vision and mission statements, both of which are still in use today.

Here’s St. John’s vision statement: “We are the medical center of choice for family, friends and visitors.” Here’s its mission statement: “St. John's creates a healing environment, with a passionate commitment to healthcare excellence.”

While both are perfectly nice, in hindsight I would not vote to approve either. Why? Because both are so vague as to be meaningless, if not useless.

The vision statement is less problematic – it’s clear, and like any good vision statement, it’s inspiring. However, its imprecision creates all sorts of problems. For instance, what if I need a heart transplant or radiation therapy? St. John’s won’t be my “medical center of choice” because it doesn’t offer those procedures. While this sounds trivial, one of Toyota’s fundamental tenets is that imprecise words lead to ineffective systems. So a more precise vision might read something like “... medical center of choice for those procedures we offer...” Unfortunately, such language doesn’t offer much inspiration.

St. John’s mission statement is worse, in two distinct-but-related ways. First, it is hopelessly ambiguous: Who is to say what a “healing environment” is? What is commitment, and when is it sufficiently passionate? Most critically, who defines “healthcare excellence”?

Second, because of this ambiguity, the mission statement does not give employees, administrators, board members, or any other observer tools for judging day-to-day actions. For example, if a nurse spends an extra couple of minutes tending to a patient, has he been passionate in his commitment to healthcare excellence, or has he simply done his job? What if he’d spent three minutes? Four? Similarly, if a board member attempts to change a policy with which she disagrees, is that contributing to “healthcare excellence” or simply being disruptive?

Like beauty, qualities such as “passion” and “excellence” are in the eye of the beholder. In St. John’s case, because its vision and mission statements are replete with such terms, they provide little useful guidance to anyone. As a result, after adoption, St. John’s vision and mission statements were quickly ignored by all; a reality which, to the best of my knowledge, continues to this day.

In contrast, consider a generic Statement of Ideal for a hospital: “Every patient, every time, will receive exactly the care he needs, at exactly the right time, with no waste, in an atmosphere of complete safety for all involved: patient,

provider, and family member.” This one statement combines both an inspiring long-term vision and mission for the hospital – providing the exact care every patient needs, every time – as well as a way of judging every activity that goes on in that hospital: Did we provide exactly the right care, at exactly the right time, with no waste, and with complete safety?

In industries as diverse as auto manufacturing and health care, a Statement of Ideal has proven to be an extraordinarily powerful tool for orienting a highly complex, rapidly-changing series of activities toward a clear, easily-understood goal. Equally important, it’s also proven to be an extraordinarily powerful tool for evaluating progress toward that goal on moment-to-moment basis. Accordingly, I hope the planning consultants and town and county governments will make a Statement of Ideal the cornerstone of the updated County Comprehensive Land Use plan.

Right now, that’s not the case. Instead, they’re using something different: a “Community Vision,” under which are six “Themes and Guiding Principles,” under each of which is a series of objectives. Here’s the “Community Vision”:

Our vision is that Jackson and Teton County will have a land use pattern that preserves and balances our region’s natural environment, livability, and sense of community. By directing the development to well-defined contiguous areas, growth can be organized in more efficient land use patterns; open lands and natural resources can be better protected; and public facilities and services can be delivered more effectively. With a finite supply of land, our community shall provide for the region’s growth in a long-term, sustainable manner that balances growth, conservation, and community well-being.

To me, such a vision is doomed to failure from the get-go, just like St. John’s was. Why? Because while the statement sounds good, it shares the fundamental problem inherent in the St. John’s vision and mission statements: ambiguity. As a result, reasonable people will differ – wildly – over how to interpret the vision’s language, which in turn will lead to all sorts of completely avoidable problems.

For instance, consider the last half-sentence: “...our community shall provide for the region’s growth in a long-term, sustainable manner that balances growth, conservation, and community well-being.” What is the region? If it includes areas outside of Teton County, how do we “provide” for their growth? What is sustainable, much less a “long-term sustainable manner”? Most importantly, how do we balance “...growth, conservation, and community well-being”?

Adopt such language, and one of two things must inevitably happen: People will stage pitch battles over how to strike that balance, or people will simply ignore the language because no one can figure out exactly what a “long-term, sustainable balance” between growth, conservation, and community well-being actually means.

As I note, this is just the “Community Vision,” and it may be that the language in the six “Themes and Guiding Principles” is meant to add rigor to that vision. However, in my view, the “Guiding Principles” are even more ambiguous: they certainly don’t clarify anything, and clearly cannot be used as management tools.

For example, here’s the first of the “Guiding Principles,” the one relating to the theme of “Stewardship of Natural, Scenic, and Environmentally Sensitive Areas” (For a listing of all the “Themes and Guiding Principles” and “Objectives,” go to www.jacksontetonplan.com/plan/project-phases-and-work-products):

Teton County’s natural and scenic resources are a local and national treasure and the community recognizes a stewardship responsibility for their protection. Future development in Jackson and Teton County will take place in this context. The forested lands and meadows throughout the county are a precious resource that all agree must be preserved and maintained. At the local scale, a compact development pattern can preserve land for open space within the town as well.

On a practical basis, how will such language actually guide development? What exactly does it mean that “the community recognizes a stewardship responsibility for their protection...” and what is the “context” such language creates for future development? Whatever the answer, I think it would be one over which reasonable people could disagree; certainly any land use lawyer worth his salt could drive a truck through it.

Of greater concern is the absence of any mention of natural resources that aren’t “forested lands and meadows;” greater still is whether they are to be “preserved and maintained” simply as open space, or as habitat that is part of a viable, healthy ecosystem. Conceivably, using this language, we could develop lands in such a way that we lose most of our native fish and wildlife but still hold true to the Guiding Principle.

I could go on, but you get the point: language matters, and while there is a political argument for intentionally creating ambiguous phrases, from a management and planning perspective, ambiguity creates a lot more problems than it solves. As an alternative, instead of the long and murky “Guiding Principle” for “Stewardship of Natural, Scenic, and Environmentally Sensitive Areas,” consider this much shorter, much clearer Statement of Ideal:

Human activities in Teton County will allow for viable populations of all native species, and the preservation of all natural scenic vistas.

Substituting such a Statement of Ideal for the “Stewardship Guiding Principle” would create no downside (save, of course, forcing people to think differently about things...), while offering three huge benefits:

1. Community support. This language is already being used by five Sustaining Jackson Hole Working Groups in their Statements of Ideal: Business and Economy, Environment, Land Use & Housing, Recreation, and Transportation. If groups as disparate as these can find common ground in this Statement of Ideal, there is every reason to believe it will be well-received by most of the community.
2. Inspiration. In its clarity and simplicity, this statement describes a community in which humans and the natural world successfully co-exist, something no industrial society has been able to accomplish, yet something core to why most people live and visit here. What could be more inspirational than that?
3. Practicality. Since every land use issue would be passed through this filter, it would create a very clear criterion for land owners, applicants, planners, and elected officials alike. It would also help guide scientific research into Teton County’s ecosystems, currently a rather-random process.

The same type of Statement of Ideal could be created for each of the other five “Themes”: Housing, Transportation, Managing Growth, “Heart of Region,” and “A Diverse and Balanced Community.”

Would Statements of Ideal solve Jackson Hole’s land use challenges? Of course not. But at a minimum they would bring a new level of objectivity, rigor, and clarity to land use decisions, a nice change from a process increasingly marked by vitriol and a feeling of chaos.

For me, though, the primary argument for substituting Statements of Ideal for the current “Community Vision” and “Guiding Principles” boils down to results. I don’t disagree with the motivation behind using vision and mission statements; instead I fear they will not work to achieve the underlying goal.

Both mission and vision statements have been a fundamental business tool for decades, and most businesses have them. Yet many of those which do – for instance, the Big 3 automakers – are not doing so well. In contrast, Toyota doesn’t have them, a distinction which, in the words of Robert Frost, “...has made all the difference.” As we re-think our Comp Plan – and with it, our approach to the future – why should we use anything other than the best available tools? Put another way, having two clear examples out there, would we rather model ourselves after GM or Toyota? Should we choose the road less taken, future generations will thank us.