

Case Study

**Aiken, South Carolina:
Strategizing One Step at a Time**
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Case Study

Overview Aiken, South Carolina: Strategizing One Step at a Time

In 1997, the National Civic League dubbed Aiken an "All American City," an honor it shared with nine other cities across the nation. This is quite an achievement for a community that experienced significant job loss during the post-Cold War period.

Facing the loss of more than 10,000 U.S. Department of Energy jobs, the City of Aiken began a strategic planning process in 1992 that identified goals related to four themes – Historic City, Family City, Green City, and Business City - and specific action steps for meeting those goals by 2010. These action steps have ranged from improving pedestrian walkways to assisting small business development to expanding health care and social services.

By February 2000, more than 30 key initiatives called for in the strategic plan were completed in Aiken, changing the face of the community. A review of these accomplishments illustrates how the strategic planning process has enabled residents in Aiken to control their destiny in the face of adversity.

Conditions Leading to the Practice

During the early 1990s, the City of Aiken was facing an economic crisis. The rumor that its largest employer, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) - which had employed an estimated 25,000 workers at its peak¹ - would downsize significantly at its Savannah River Site location caused city leaders considerable concern. The DOE had been Aiken's major employer and significantly dominated the community's economic base.

Despite its overwhelming dependence on one employer, Aiken had reaped significant benefits for more than a decade. DOE salaries were higher than the regional average. As a result, the city did not have to raise taxes during the 1980s. It was expected that more than 10,000 jobs would be lost.

In 1992, then-City Manager Steven T. Thompson began to convene a group of city leaders together to develop a plan for helping the community adjust to the eventual DOE downsizing. While city planning was not a new concept, "strategic" planning was a fairly untested concept at that time among cities, though it was prevalent in the private sector. Aiken's City Council, interested in

¹Part of this workforce includes contract employees from Westinghouse.

strengthening and diversifying the economic base, officially approved the city's efforts to engage in a strategic city planning process.

Thompson hired Joe Langford, a strategic planning consultant and former City Manager of Rock Hill, to work with the City of Aiken staff on this initiative. Rock Hill was the only other city in South Carolina that had implemented a planning process that was strategic in form. During the summer of 1992, Langford led city staff and the 30-member planning group on a two-and-a-half day retreat to Rock Hill. It was then determined that Aiken would model its strategic planning process after Rock Hill.

Organization

The City of Aiken's eight-person City Manager office coordinates the strategic planning process and implementation of planning initiatives. Four individuals have direct responsibilities concerning Aiken's strategic plan - the City Manager, Assistant City Manager, Special Projects Coordinator, and Community Relations Coordinator. The City Council must approve all changes and updates to the strategic plan.

The Practice in Operation

The main objective in developing The City of Aiken's strategic plan was to engage in a community wide visioning process that would generate a "living" plan, rather than a static document.

Steering the Strategic Planning Process. In 1993, Thompson and Langford formed a steering committee of more than 40 leaders representing every sector of the community (e.g., public office, private industry, health care, school system, utilities, civic organizations, etc.). The steering committee decided that the plan should have the following attributes. These attributes are what have made Aiken's strategic planning process unique.

- (1) The strategic plan should reflect an "incremental" approach. In addition to establishing broad-based goals, Aiken's plan would identify every specific action step - however small - that would need to be taken to reach those goals.
- (2) The strategic plan should encompass a broad scope of community development issues (e.g., not just economic development).
- (3) The strategic planning process should involve extensive participation and input from Aiken's citizenry from start to finish. Rather than present a plan created or commissioned by city officials to the citizens for their

input, Aiken would ask the citizens to participate in designing the plan itself.

Forming Study Committees. A community wide kick off meeting took place during the fall of 1993. Attending this meeting were residents of varied occupations and age groups, including Aiken's growing elderly population. At this meeting, the community participants identified a dozen "study areas" that became the basis for forming independent study committees.

Each study committee was co-chaired by a steering committee member and an individual from the community with unique expertise in the study area. The study committees were provided a time frame of up to nine months to report back to the steering committee. While the steering committee met with each study committee to determine its role and select participants, no other restrictions or guidelines were imposed as flexibility was viewed as a critical factor to innovation. Some committees deliberated for three months while others deliberated for the full nine months. Some committees went on field trips while others sought advice from experts. More than 350 citizens representing all sectors of the community participated in the planning process through membership on a study committee.

Developing the Strategic Plan with Four Themes. During the summer of 1994, the steering committee and study committees convened in a day-long session to report findings and recommendations. In reviewing these reports, Thompson, Langford and city staff discovered four central themes to the recommendations made by the 12 study committees. The recommendations could be classified as relating to either (1) preserving Aiken's historic roots, (2) preserving the natural environment, (3) diversifying and improving the local economy, and (4) improving community life for families. Accordingly, the strategic plan includes four themes - (1) Historic City, (2) Green City, (3) Business City, and (4) Family City - with each study committee recommendation falling within its respective theme.

During the fall of 1994, Aiken's first strategic plan was completed, officially approved by the City Council, and celebrated with a community wide event. The strategic plan outlined action steps or projects to take place from 1994 through 2010, with the premise that the implementation of the plan would undergo continual monitoring and evaluation.

Implementing the Plan. Each theme includes three types of projects that follow a sequential order - (1) demonstration projects, (2) expansion projects, and (3) realization projects. Specific tasks were assigned to groups based on the general area of responsibility. Accordingly, Aiken through its various departments assumed significant new responsibilities pertaining to each theme. Other groups responsible for implementing the plan include the steering committee, the Chamber of Commerce, the Aiken Development Corporation, Park Commission,

and Planning Commission, to name a few. A review of these projects reveals the small step incremental approach of the strategic plan.²

In 1995, the community created the Aiken 20/20 Board to raise and allocate funds for implementing the plan. The board was established with a sunset clause that would enable it to disband itself once its responsibilities were completed. The board raised \$3.5 million in five-year pledges.

Modifying the Plan. The steering committee usually reconvenes every six months to review progress and re-evaluate the strategic plan. Since its 1994 inception, the plan has been updated twice (1996 and 1998) and is currently undergoing a third update. With each update, the steering committee, city staff members, and citizens are invited to review projects that are complete and incomplete, and help identify projects that should continue or be added.

Outcomes

Since 1994, more than 30 projects outlined in the City of Aiken's strategic plan have been completed. As intended, the strategic planning process has been continual resulting in an ever-evolving plan.

Major Accomplishments. Though the timeframe for implementing the strategic plan is through 2010, Aiken has already experienced success in implementing several key action steps. It is this implementation that has validated the strength of the strategic planning process.

Completed Actions, 1994-2000

Theme	Actions
Family City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updated comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance • Completed phase I and began phase II of Citizens Park complex • Began planning for Tennis Complex expansion • Began development of Festival Market site on Newberry Street • Commenced work on neighborhood initiative strategies to enhance neighborhoods and empower citizens • Supported Center for the Arts renovation/program improvements • Completed several improvements to recreation facilities (e.g., gymnasium addition, walking track improvements) • Established Free Medical Clinic • Provided assistance to reduce infant mortality rate ("Growing Into Life") • Moved forward with project to resolve storm drainage issues in Hitchcock Woods • Began plan for new airport terminal • Began water extension along S.C. 19 to I-20

² See "Major Accomplishments" starting on the bottom half of page 5.

Completed Actions, 1994-2000 (cont'd)

Theme	Actions
Historic City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed incentives to encourage residential development in downtown • Enabled downtown housing projects - adopted zoning changes to encourage downtown and Old Aiken housing • Developed new downtown parking area
Green City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed and implemented landscape plans for entrance corridors into Aiken • Developed parkway master plans and improved parkways for Hampton Avenue and York Street • Provided public restroom facilities
Business City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created the Aiken Development Corporation • Established marketing campaign • Completed speculative building • Continued to attract substantial jobs and investments in smaller industries to Aiken (Summit Business Park and Ventures Industrial Park) • Developed small business loan program • Established a visitor center in conjunction with new Chamber of Commerce facility • Attracted visitor-related businesses to downtown • Established horse drawn carriage tours for downtown area • Established the Greater Aiken Local Education Foundation (GALEF) which has established high educational goals and performance measures for Aiken schools • Educational improvements - e.g., developed programs to reduce drop-out rate, completed expansion of Kennedy middle school

Source: Bill Huggins, City of Aiken, February 2000

Recognition as "All American City." The community activism that was launched through the strategic planning process in 1992 has continued to reveal itself in several different initiatives. Three of these initiatives earned Aiken recognition as an "All American City" by the civic league - "Stone Soup" (a neighborhood community action program), "Growing Into Life" (a program geared towards reducing the infant mortality rate), and "Show Your Heart Community Task Force" (a task force that successfully lobbied for permission to have open heart surgical services available in Aiken).

Value of the Process Itself. By the end of the strategic planning process, Aiken had gained a general community cohesiveness that had not existed beforehand. Prior to the process, there was not a prevalence of partnerships or integration among organizations in Aiken. At the same time, the city did not enjoy significant citizen input so it was difficult to gauge what the citizenry actually wanted. The process has established a precedent in Aiken, opening communication channels between citizens and their government, public and private sector organizations, and individual neighborhoods.

Re-Evaluating Broad Scope of Plan. In early 2000, Aiken began its periodic review of the strategic plan. Since 1994, the city had been involved in implementing the plan in two ways - (1) directly undertaking actions that fell within the city's responsibilities and (2) coordinating the efforts among other organizations that were responsible for certain actions called for in the plan. This approach was deemed necessary at the time the original plan was conceived due to the broad scope of work that needed to be done and the urgent need for community wide action.

With the updated plan, the city will take another approach. The 2000 plan will focus on projects with direct city involvement and therefore have a more limited scope. There are two main reasons for this.

- (1) *Need for Greater Community Empowerment.* Several of the projects that do not require direct city participation are underway and no longer need the city to coordinate efforts. Organizations responsible for these projects will be encouraged to continue their work and also share their progress with the city and each other.
- (2) *Need for Greater City Resources for Direct Involvement Projects.* Coordinating the efforts of other organizations has also consumed considerable staff time and resources. The city's withdrawal from its coordinator role will enable it to focus more on the projects it is directly responsible for.

Due to this new approach, the city has initiated another community wide strategic planning process, inviting both original participants and new participants to the table. The new plan will include a fifth theme - Neighborhood Initiatives - to encourage a greater consideration of neighborhood issues. The number of study committees involved in the strategic planning process will be reduced from twelve to five committees that will focus on the specific theme areas. While the 1994 plan attempted to cover a 15-year timeframe (1995-2010), the new plan will be designed to cover a shorter time period (2001-2010).

Conclusion

While the downsizing of over 10,000 jobs by the U.S. Department of Energy certainly affected Aiken, a city with approximately 25,000 residents, its impact was not as dramatic as it could have been. Aiken leaders decided to take pre-emptive action to help the community survive a potential economic catastrophe. However, their action - namely, the launch of a community wide strategic planning process - has effectively provided a community with an asset it did not have before. Today, the Aiken community is bound together by shared trust, responsibilities and expectations. It is bound together by community capital.

The strategic planning process has also enabled Aiken to be a learning community that is effectively applying past experiences to its future efforts. The changes in structure and scope of the 2000 plan reflect this evolutionary process.

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Chronology

1990-1992	Rumor spread that U.S. Department of Energy would significantly downsize its Savannah River Site operation
1992	City of Aiken launches strategic planning process
1993	City Council supports process Steering committee of more than 40 community leaders formed Community wide kick off of strategic planning process takes place
1994	Study committees created to evaluate community development issues More than 350 citizens participate in planning process Strategic plan for 1995 to 2010 adopted by City Council
1995	Aiken 2020 raises \$3.5 million for implementation of strategic plan
1996	Strategic plan reviewed and updated by steering committee, original participants, and city staff
1997	Aiken receives "All American City" award by the National Civic League
1998	Strategic plan reviewed and updated by steering committee, original participants, and city staff
2000	New strategic planning process launched to revise plan for 2001 to 2010