

Excerpt from 10/02/06 Stakeholder meeting notes

How have plans been implemented elsewhere? (Planning J)

Chris Beck

Chris Beck is a planning consultant from Anchorage who has been hired to help guide this process toward the final product. He is in Sitka today to present to the Stakeholders a better idea about what tourism plans do, and how they've worked in other communities. Chris has a small consulting business with a partner in Anchorage (Agnew::Beck). They mostly work with small communities, like Sitka, that are struggling internally with what they want to become – they may be seeing things that they value about where they live slipping away, but it's complicated by inevitable growth and a need for jobs. They work to help these communities minimize the impact and maximize the local benefits from tourism.

Chris presents a generic tourism plan template, which outlines these elements as typically included in plans:

Getting started

Planning Process – who must be involved to successfully create and implement the plan?

Community values and resources – what's unique, special?

Tourism trends – who's coming now, who might come?

Vision and Goals

Overall vision – in less than 30 words

Specific goals – for example...

Economy: diversify the economy, benefit local business

Fiscal: tie increased demand for services to increased revenues, growth in capacity

Environment: protect water quality and specific vulnerable places; limit noise

Quality of Life: maintain community character, improve recreation opportunities

Overall Tourism Strategy

Target markets – who to invite, what activities to emphasize? E.g. independents, small groups, large groups, heritage, adventure, hunt/fish...

Market image – what to “sell”?

Pace and scale?

Management – how actively to steer tourism growth?

Chris said that in the vision/goals phase, he tries to set up a framework where people of opposing views can dialogue and agree on a general course of action. He usually has the group articulate their goals before going into the details of those goals. In setting the goal, he said people may not be as divided as they think they are. For example, he did some work in Talkeetna to help them manage their tourism. In the early stages he did a series of interviews with people, and it was interesting that he always heard accusatory comments about “those people,” but in fact, during those interviews, people had strikingly similar ideas and goals despite the perceived divisions.

He believes the next key step for Sitka's process is in the “overall tourism strategy” phase. The questions he believes will be important for the group to agree on are who (types of visitor markets to reach out to), when (do we broaden the season), how many visitors (compared to now – more or less?), image (what to market), and management (how much intervention).

These things then set the stage for determining the action steps toward the goals. These goals tend to fall into the following categories:

Improving and protecting tourism resources

New and improved attractions and events – in town, near town; winter and summer; active and passive

Town itself – new public buildings; sidewalks, landscaping, historic preservation, zoning

Infrastructure – trails, roads, docks, airport, utilities

Tourism Marketing

Covering the essentials – local organization, website

Creating partnerships – other towns, agencies, businesses, regional and statewide orgs

Capturing benefits for locals

Training, entrepreneurial support

Protecting what is special

Vulnerable places

Carrying capacity

Tourism organization – managing growth

Who decides; what is the decision-making process?

Information and monitoring – keeping track of change

Near Term Actions – What to do First?

Q: We've been in this phase of needed information, finding common ground – does that fit into the outline you just gave us somewhere?

A: Yes, your process is somewhat different than how I typically do it, but essentially you're in "getting started" and just starting "vision and goals." You probably have a good start so far. I think it's good to do a first big sweep through the information needs, then come back to get more specifics when you're in the action planning stages because you'll find out what more of what you'll need then. What you've been doing is valuable – it just frontloads the information more than what I do.

Chris went on to say that the drawback of these steps, especially to skeptics, may look long. He really encourages groups to try to set tangible near-term goals. Working through short-term goals helps to make sure the community is on board.

Q: I'm curious about the other communities you've worked in – who's inviting you there?

A: The answer will be different for each. In the city of Palmer, it was a top-driven planning process. The city government was willing to listen to folks but not bound to honor what they suggest. In Talkeetna, it's not an established city, but they had federal money for ad hoc group. Since there was no authority there, it couldn't be successful unless everyone was on board. In Cordova, it started with the Copper River watershed group, a non-profit with no authority. I pushed them to get their business community on board, and they ultimately produced a plan that the city council approved. Usually it's a local government that is the crux to controlling the implementation of a plan.

Q: When you address marketing, how complex is that vision? For example, you referred to Sitka as a Russian town – do we strive to live up to an existing marketing image or create a new one?

A: You have to have different marketing for different categories, such as independent travelers, a certain amount of cruise traffic, fishing/hunting – you’ll have to have specific strategies that address each of those groups.

Q: When you’ve gone through these goal-setting processes, have you resolved differences where they exist?

A: Yes, but let me come back to that later when I talk about Cordova.

Chris then presents a few examples from work he’s done in other communities, including Palmer, Talkeetna, Valdez, and Cordova. He provides some “lessons learned” in a handout. Palmer’s case study is called “Giant cabbages” – Chris said when he started working with Palmer, no one realized how much of a draw their agricultural background is, but they really got behind the idea and started to create things around that. Chris pointed out that a town should really try to build things for themselves that visitors would like to do also, not just build for visitors. Also in Palmer, the plan didn’t really mesh with what the city council wanted it to be, but they were able to get new organizations to carry out some of the strategies even without the council’s support. Chris says the bottom line is if you want them to back it, need to keep them actively involved.

Talkeetna is a little town that’s seen dramatic tourism growth. They went from dogs sleeping peacefully on streets to seeing 50,000 annual visitors. People there were feeling like everything they cherished was being destroyed. The time was ripe - people were ready to solve problems there; for 20 years they had been talking about this, but finally they were really ready to tackle these questions – there was a sense of urgency.

Cordova started their process in 1998, with a group of well-meaning folks that were seen as wholly anti-development by business community. It took several years to prove that that wasn’t the case and get a balanced group there.

Q: Did you have to guide them in Cordova, to get both sides talking and reaching consensus?

A: Yes – it was typically messy. We thought a lot about how to help downtown businesses, and worked to set goals everyone could agree on.

Q: Were you able to keep both sides coming to the table?

A: Yes – everybody concluded that the Assembly would support it, and if they wanted their voice included they needed to be involved. The project eventually built enough momentum to get all those players involved. Even if people didn’t agree with all the goals that were set, they liked that it would help with marketing, so they reluctantly agreed to attend the meetings. They had good information, the right people, and they demonstrated progress – but it took multiple years. They held monthly meetings, though, and it was a smaller group. There are lots of ways to do this – we had a fixed amount of money also, which required us to pull some things out to subcommittees. In Talkeetna, we hosted public meetings 3 times, and did the in-between work with their Appropriations committee.

Q: There are people who are not here that would benefit from hearing this presentation – are you going to talk with them? Maybe give a Chamber presentation? The message is there’s benefit in this effort as a whole. We’ve been having this discussion about losing people, and I think they’re seeing it as something negative rather than positive.

A: We’re not planning a formal presentation to Chamber, but the Steering Committee is having conversations with them about where we’re going and how.

Other SH comments:

- To me, there’s a real benefit in hearing someone talk about it who’s been through it, showing how it works. Presenting to them could work to reenergize this group.

- Along that same line – maybe you could be available for radio interviews sometime, even by phone, perhaps.
- I'm interested to hear feedback from people who aren't here about what they think about this list of contributions we just came up with.
- It's just so important to reinfuse into that this is not a punitive process for the businesses
- There's a feeling of purposeful boycotting, at least from some of the Chamber businesses, maybe from charter and Native community too?

A Steering Committee member responds that the Native community has appointed someone to be a liaison to this group and have consistently indicated their intent to be involved.

Chris wraps up his presentation by telling the group he's really impressed with all the work they've done; that there is a lot of valuable information, and good people involved. He recognizes it must be frustrating that there are some missing voices, but it's good to hear some of them say they want to be involved. He says he thinks it's reasonable for them to ask for involvement on their own terms and for the Steering Committee to find a way to include their voice. His ethics are about whatever works – if they're not coming, find some way to get that voice incorporated. He has the sense that, based on the reading he's done from the website and the conversations he's had, there is a huge amount of common ground here, and not that big of a gap in the community's vision or goals. He doesn't believe it will be too difficult to get from where we are now through the strategy steps. He says we're well positioned to make good progress.

The SH ask for a little more information about how plans get implemented. One person asks if he can talk a little more about what happens after a plan gets written and endorsed. He offers the following:

“Tourism is a diverse word, and implementation is equally as diverse. You need different actions for specific policies, i.e. to answer “how to keep the downtown physical character like it is,” you draft a zoning ordinance. If a city government adopts those policies, the staff is instructed to do that. In marketing, you'll have to pause and revisit current marketing strategies and their effectiveness – this is where you have to have SCVB and the Chamber involved. Without them, it probably won't succeed even if 99% of the community agrees. They need to be involved to invest money in marketing those messages agreed on by the group – they have tools to reach some of your goals. For fiscal policy – most small towns can't get everything done on it's own, so they partner with people/organizations that have money, or control land and marketing. This includes the cruise companies – they have deep pockets and an interest in providing a quality product in your community. You can carry out some of your action steps through partners with resources and money. You'll want to create a long list of priorities, establishing when things happen, who does them, etc.”

Q: When you're scoping out a plan, how many years into the future do you look, how long is a plan good for?

CB: You can usually have a vision way out there, maybe even a couple of decades, in a very general sense. There are things you'll want to be clear about for your kids and your kids' kids. In implementation, though, typically don't set goals over 5 years, and you'll particularly focus on the next three years for action steps. Beyond that, there's too much fiscal uncertainty and things change – you generally have to change comprehensive plans every 3 years.

This dialogue has satisfied the SH, and a red dot is placed on the card for “how have plans been implemented elsewhere.”