

Action Research Helps Citizens Prepare Madison County, Florida Vision 2020

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Abstract

Madison County, in North Central Florida, engages its citizens in a visioning process about every 10 years. This paper reports the process as it involved the three elements of participatory action research as described by Herr and Anderson (2005), participation, research and action. The participants included Madison citizens, business representatives and government officials as well as University of Florida faculty facilitators. The research was conducted in a series of meetings which involved data collection and description from the participants using a structured continuum of questions. The action part of the process was the actual reports from the citizen groups that took the issues and concerns as expressed in the small group setting and prepared a report to use with the county comprehensive plan and the Madison Development Council. Evaluations were positive and the comments indicated that participants looked forward to continuing to meet in their respective interest group to push their particular issue of concern.

Keywords: visioning process, participatory action research, quality criteria, validity criteria

1.0 Background

In November 2007, the planning department of Madison County Florida contacted a group of University of Florida Extension faculty to assist in the development and delivery of a process that would enlist the citizen participation in all aspects of the process of preparing a vision for Madison County for the year 2020. The following is a description of the steps presented in the participatory action research model that includes the participants, as well as the researchers, involved in the decision making, data gathering and deliberations. The issue addressed in this study was to obtain citizen input and participation in defining a new Madison County vision statement for year 2020. The challenge was to develop a process and procedure to

achieve goals of action research that met the quality and validity criteria described by Herr and Anderson (2005, p. 45) (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Anderson and Herr's Goals of Action Research and Validity Criteria*

Goals of Action Research	Quality/Validity Criteria
1. The generation of new knowledge	Dialogic and process validity
2. The achievement of action oriented outcomes	Outcome validity
3. The education of both researcher and participants	Catalytic validity
4. Results that are relevant to the local setting	Democratic validity
5. A sound and appropriate research methodology	Process validity

2.0 Madison County Demographics

Madison County, Florida, with 692 square miles is located in the northern part of the state sharing a border with Georgia on the north and the Suwannee River on the east. It is not densely populated with 27 persons per square mile compared to the rest of the state with 298 people per square mile. In 2000 the population of Madison County, Florida was 18,733 with about 50 percent female and male. Madison is the largest city in the county, with a population of 3026 and two other smaller towns of Greenville, population 824 and Lee, population 346.

The economy of Madison County is largely based on agriculture with forestry and forest products as the leader. Education contributes to the economy through the presence of North Florida Community College which serves the seven surrounding counties. Tallahassee, Florida and Valdosta, Georgia are the largest cities in close proximity to Madison. Many Madison residents work in these two cities and commute daily.

3.0 Literature Review

Rural communities encompass those communities outside metropolitan statistical areas. Historically, community development management advocated hierarchies of authority, division of labor, adherence to rules and spans of control, but these are now thought to deny the flexibility and responsiveness that provide the necessary conditions for effective citizen participation (Ransom, 2003). A concept influencing the actions of rural communities is strategic planning (Kwon, Berry, & Feiock, 2009). An important aspect of strategic planning in rural communities is citizen participation. Citizenship participation in the context of strategic planning is defined as a process in which people influence decisions that affect them (Brett, 2003). Participation promotes a sense of community and empowerment (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

A challenge of citizen participation is facilitating a process in which local government can incorporate client's opinions into planning and implementation directly rather than indirectly. Brett (2003) suggested that the process of involving citizens should balance citizenship participation with expertise. This process will result in low cost decision making. Participatory action research is one strategy for bringing local county government experts and citizens together in a strategic planning process.

4.0 Methodology

Participatory action research was the methodology used in this project. It is defined as “inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them. It is a reflective process, but is different from isolated spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions” (Herr et al., 2005, p. 3). Greenwood and Levin (2005) state that three elements must be present if it is to be properly labelled action research. These are action, research and participation. Without the presence of all three elements it cannot properly be called action research: “AR is a research strategy that generates knowledge claims for the express purpose of taking action to promote social analysis and democratic social change” (Greenwood et al., 2005, p. 5). The action in this project was to develop a community vision statement that would be inspirational to the community in terms of development, government involvement and citizen participation until the year 2020.

The research component was the collaborative work that the participants undertaken in the preparation of each element of the plan. The multiple meetings included in this component allowed the 2020 Vision to evolve.

The participation element included the multiple groups and organizational representatives from the Madison community. The participants included the insiders (Madison citizens and officials), and the four University of Florida (UF) faculty and one graduate student from the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

4.1 Participation

This part of the action research study describes the mix of participants involved. This is an important part of the process because different groups are represented in the participation process. Using Herr’s term of “insiders” as those persons who are part of the process and not having things done “to” them, the “insiders” in this study represented three groups: the community participants, the county planning staff and Board of County Commissioners, and the Madison County Development Council. Madison participants represented the three municipalities and included three members of the Madison County Planning Department and the Board of County Commissioners.

4.2 Research

This research focused on the issues and needs in Madison County as reported by the participants. These citizen reports were to be the basis for the year 2020 vision for Madison County. The data were collected during a series of six meetings conducted over four months. All six meetings were conducted in Madison and the participants were the same except that numbers attending varied. The year 2020 was chosen because it was exactly 10 years between the first visioning process and the one conducted in 2008, as reported in this study.

Meeting 1. The first meeting, November 2007, was on the UF campus with four UF faculty and three members of the Madison Planning Department. This session was to agree on the goal, the dates and some loose guidelines for the process. The invitation was for UF to participate in and facilitate a visioning process that would update the Vision 2010 to Vision 2020

Meeting 2. The second meeting, January 16, 2008, was by teleconference in which the Madison Group presented a set of dates and locations for the meetings for the UF group's approval. At this same teleconference, the researchers presented a flexible plan for the process for agreement and acceptance by the Madison Group (MG). In addition to establishing goals and dates, the first two meetings sought to establish the philosophical underlayment or guiding principles used in the process. Madison citizens and leaders would guide the process and provide maximum involvement and collaboration.

Meeting 3. The third meeting, held January 30 in Madison at the Cooperative Extension Office was to meet with citizens interested in the process and to help plan the schedule and agenda of the first large group meeting. The day was also used to prepare citizen discussion leaders to work with the small groups that would evolve as the needs and issues were presented. The discussion leaders were an important part of the collective team that would facilitate the citizen development of Madison 2020 vision.

Meeting 4. The purpose of this session was to stimulate interest and discussion within the group, the "insiders," referred to in the PAR terminology. To launch the session, the Board of County Commissioners Chair opened the meeting stating the purpose and desired outcome. This was followed by two speakers both of whom spoke to what had transpired between the last visioning process and the current one (see Table 2). This presentation was particularly compelling because it provided a historical perspective. An asset mapping strategy was used to assess participant perceptions of strengths and weaknesses. These responses were used by groups in their determination of a priority of needs.

Meeting 5. The participants were clustered in groups representing their primary interest. The self selected discussion leader worked with their group. The specific task of each individual group was to:

- Prepare and refine a goal statement based on your topical issue.
- Prepare a rationale to support the goal statement, i.e. justify why this goal is important.
- Choose priorities from the listing of the fourth meeting.
- Rank these chosen priorities in order of importance.
- Prepare a report for the total group based on the four items above.

Meeting 6. The sixth meeting was held on March 18, 2008 in the Madison County Cooperative Extension Office. The planning team that made the original schedule thought that one meeting to identify the details of their broad issue or concern was not enough time for all participants to have an opportunity to express their thoughts. Further they wanted these two group discussion meeting close together in time proximity so that there would be continuity in the process.

Table 2: *Comparison of Madison 2010 and Madison 2020 Vision Elements*

Elements of Madison 2000 Comprehensive Plan	Madison 2010 Vision Elements	Madison 2020 Vision Elements
Future land Use	Strategic Planning	Land Development regulations
Traffic Circulation		
Housing	Housing	Housing
Sanitary Sewer, Solid Waste, Drainage, Potable Water and Natural Groundwater		Land Development Regulations
Aquifer Recharge		
Conservation		Environment
Recreation and Open Space	Recreation	Tourism and Recreation
Intergovernmental	Government	
Coordination	Community Info.	
Capital Improvement		
Economic Development	Economic Development	Economic Development
School Concurrency	Education	Education and Youth Opportunities
	Health Care	Health Care Public Safety

4.3 Action

The action step in the participatory action research process was evident in meeting 6, the final meeting of the Vision 2020 group held on March 27 at North Florida Community College. The agenda was more formal and each group presented their report based on the format for identifying and defining their issue of concern. Following each presentation, the topic and suggestions were discussed by the total group. When all topics had been presented, the reports were submitted to the county planner for her work with the upcoming comprehensive plan.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Outcomes

The product that resulted from the six meetings and many hours of reflection and discussion among all the participants, insiders and researchers, is titled “The Vision 2020 Process: A Clear and Concise Roadmap on the Direction and Goals of Madison County, Florida.”

The expectations of the participants are the most important outcome, and these were evident from the comments and suggestions. Those persons choosing to

comment made positive statements about their future plans. When asked to tell how they would use the information, several indicated they would use the information on their job or in a position they hoped to attain. Others said they wanted to help the community in specific ways such as, “(a) to develop a community where every child can thrive to be the best, (b) to attract business, (c) to continue to work with the housing committee.” The need to continue the discussions started within the work groups and to make sure something happened as a result were two prominent themes in the responses, as indicated in this comment: “I intend to work with my committee to see our projects implemented.”

5.2 Implications for Intervention

Did this research meet Herr and Anderson’s goals and criteria of action research? Each goal and the associated criteria will be examined in the context of the research reported here. The first goal, the generation of new knowledge, was achieved over a period of time beginning with the development of the issues of concern and culminating in the analysis of the issue by the discussion groups. The process of having ongoing discussions among the work groups as well as making the various iterations available to the entire group was most useful to each group. It was a setting in which each group learned from the others and they were all glad to share. Achieving action-oriented outcomes, the second goal, is clearly attained since the whole discussion and process was aimed at developing statements that would focus the resolution of problems into a reality setting pertinent to Madison County. Outcome validity is achieved because all the discussions related to “what can be done or where do we want to be in the year 2020.”

The third goal related to the education of the researcher and the participants. Clearly this was an ongoing process from the very beginning and continues after the project was completed. This is seen in some of the statements in which participants indicated they might want to participate in a leadership series in Madison County. Those responding indicated the topics of interest to them for conducting a workshop or discussion group. Catalytic validity means that the individual has to know the reality of a situation in order to change it. These participants had a firsthand knowledge of the situation and this knowledge and desire to change it was part of the motivation to attend and participate in the process.

The goal of having results relevant to the local setting is built into the research. While some of the processes may be useful in other settings, the specific issues with priorities established by the work groups are only relevant to the Madison County context. Establishing democratic validity was the underlying philosophy that guided the researchers in all their interactions and communications with the participants. All conversations were on a level of respect and equality among peers. Participants and researchers were on a first name basis with each other and the use of titles such as Professor or Dr. was discouraged.

Action research methodology was utilized in this project and it was employed according to the principles and practices associated with a process that can be replicated and a philosophy that reflects the practices of adult education theory and methods. Process validity asks “to what extent problems are framed and solved in a manner that permits ongoing learning of the individual or system” (Herr et al., p. 55). This process evolved as the events took place and the participants continued to be engaged because they were challenged and interested in the process and the outcomes.

6.0 Conclusion

The vitality of a community can be seen in the willingness of its citizens to participate in activities and organizations that make a positive impact. The term “social capital” is used to describe this willingness to be citizen leaders. Madison County is a place that has an abundance of social capital and citizen vitality. The changes that have been made during the time between the first vision for Madison 2010 and the present, spring 2008, for Madison 2020 show a community aspiration and entrepreneurial capacity to make positive changes. This is not to say that everything in Madison County is perfect. Clearly it is not. The problems of small rural communities are present in Madison but there are indications that the citizens are willing to identify these and work together to make a positive difference.

7.0 References

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