From Idea to Action

I often meet with community groups who have a lot of good ideas about ways they wanted to improve their community. One of the questions I usually hear is “How do we make these ideas really happen?”

This is a common challenge for community groups. Good ideas get discussed around the coffee table or in committee meetings, but they never get implemented because after all the talk there’s no action. So here are some steps that have helped many groups move from idea to action.

First, do your homework. Before developing your ideas too far, talk to people both in your community and outside of it. Find out if there are already other groups working on or interested in your idea – if so could you join forces? If you move ahead without them, will they block your efforts? Also ask if a similar project has been attempted before. Find out who was involved in that effort and ask them why their efforts succeeded or failed. Perhaps they would be interested in working with you.

Take time to find out if other communities have conducted similar projects. Learn what you can about their efforts. What lead to their success or failure?

Be sure you know how important decisions that affect your project are made. Will decisions pertaining to your project be made by some unit of government, at civic club meetings or in the coffee shop? Perhaps all three will be true. Will a public vote be required or a public hearing have to be held? What is the timeline for making those decisions? If you are asking for money, when are those budgets developed so your project can be included?

Begin early to involve others in your efforts. People are more likely to support a project that they have had a part in developing. Don’t complete a plan and then ask for public approval. Look for opportunities to seek input early in the process. And make sure you have the right people involved. Don’t just contact the people you know or who you have worked with before. Try to include any segment of the community that might have an interest. And don’t ignore those who might oppose your project. Talk to them about your idea and find out why they oppose the plan. They may have legitimate concerns. This gives you the opportunity to adapt your idea to alleviate those concerns.

One of the big challenges in working with community projects is keeping the effort moving forward. It takes effective, committed leaders to maintain the effort. And don’t underestimate the importance of keeping all of the players informed. When someone misses a planning meeting it’s so easy for them to fall out of the loop and eventually quit the project. Be sure you have a plan to communicate with your volunteers and the rest of the community.

And most important of all – write down your plan. Set specific goals and action items, then make note of who is going to do what, and when. I don’t know how many times I have been in meetings where we generated a lengthy “to do” list, only to come back to the next meeting and find that nothing has been done. It usually comes down to comments like “was I supposed to take care of that?” With a written plan it is clear who is responsible for what – and this will make a huge impact on your chances of seeing your idea become a reality.