

Creating a Shared Vision and Action Plan for Economic Growth and Social Development Within a Multi-Community Region

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Introduction

This paper presents a snapshot (as of July 2001) of an ongoing action-research effort wherein the authors are currently engaged as consultants to design and facilitate the development of a vision and related actions effecting economic growth and social development in a multi-community region within the southeastern area of Washington State. We describe the multicomunity scenario, desired outcomes, and methodological approach used by the authors to help transform a region of 120,000 people from an as-is status to a preferred future that successfully overcomes current socioeconomic challenges.

As a preface to specific discussion of this case study, the authors recognize the value of pausing at the inception of a consulting project to reflect on declaration of the pending work as action research, participatory research, or, as Dr. Peter Park suggests, “participatory action research” (see Park as cited in Reason & Bradbury, 2000). Why such pause for reflection is important is not just for philosophical reasons but more so to identify the dimensions and scope of research work that the practitioner would pursue. In this case study, it was clear at the outset that the study was not being done for a particular organization, but for a community comprising many organizations and individuals with various perspectives, agendas, and sensitivities. The noble goal of seeking a shared vision among diverse communities who co-exist in the given region presented challenges to the development of an effective approach. Realizing the need for representation and participation by members of the community, the consultants incorporated broad public dialog mechanisms in the design and implementation of the research process. While public dialog was effective in hearing many voices and collecting relevant data about the issues, a different means was necessitated in the pursuit of actions that would move the regional community in the desired direction. That is, we found it essential to have a structure for bringing together the leaders of business thrust and resource areas, and to provide a platform for interactive dialog and cooperation.

Case Study

Presenting Situation

The region of interest is composed of three adjoining cities, plus several small towns in the southeast portion of Washington State. The population is about 120,000 people. The major cities of Kennewick, Pasco, and Richland have diverse histories and cultures--Kennewick features retail and commercial industry; Pasco is predominately an agricultural and railroad

center; and Richland is regarded as a bedroom community supporting Federal Government projects, especially the huge nearby Hanford site. Although these communities are collectively known as the “Tri-Cities,” their differences on politics, economics, and social issues have exceeded geographic and other commonalities that might have prevailed in forming one large municipality. The major geographic feature of the area is the local confluence of three waterways--the Columbia, Snake, and Yakima rivers--which offer significant hydropower, irrigation, transportation, and recreational resources.

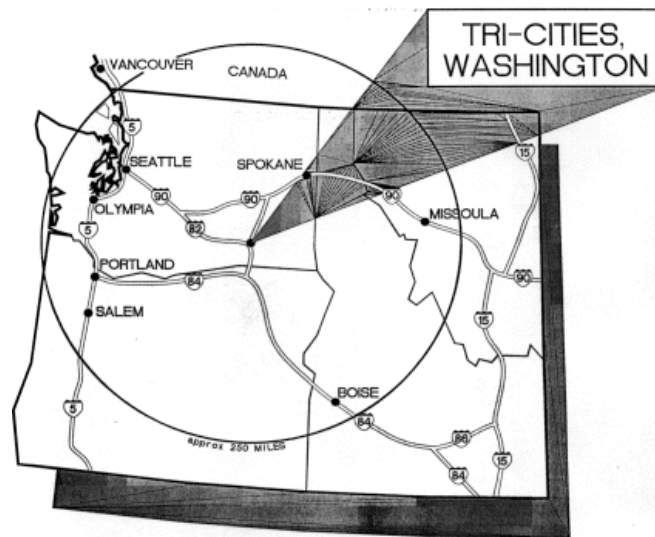


Figure 1. Tri-Cities Location

About 6 years ago, the Tri-Cities did attempt to create a regional vision for economic development in an attempt to bring together the resources and energies of these multiple communities in a mutually favorable collaboration. There were some good outcomes from this effort (e.g., the Tri-Cities Cancer Center) but the idea had no staying power because of few follow-up actions, little accountability for plans, and lack of an organizing structure.

Now, certain economic trends have been identified and posed as driving forces that generate an imperative to revitalize plans and coordinate actions in order to avoid an undesirable future state of the region. These planning drivers are:

- A growing population--the area is attracting new businesses and retaining more and more retired individuals.
- An increasing infrastructure--in recent years Interstate roads have been constructed to provide both East-West and North-South major routes in/out of the region.

Concurrently, railroad development and local transit systems have grown, as well as the use of two major waterways for barging.

- More pressing confliction among issues revolving around water usage such as dams for river level control and hydropower, salmon fisheries, and irrigation for the agriculture industry.
- A traditional dependence on Federal Government projects. An estimated two billion dollars flows annually into the Tri-Cities economy from the Department of Energy and other government agencies to support national level projects at the Hanford site. This government reservation was an original member of the Manhattan project for the production of nuclear weapons materials, and now is engaged in decontaminating the production facilities and removing or containing toxic waste products.
- The pending closure of the Hanford site after clean-up. There is little doubt that this is the principal driver in the current economic and social situation. It is expected within one or two decades that the 500 square miles of the Hanford site will be cleaned up and available for regional use, and, more strikingly, the currently very large Federal budget will be steadily drawn down.

Objective

The potential consequences of the driving forces, especially Hanford closure, are tremendously impactful on the region. Rather than “let nature take its course,” many voices in the community have expressed the need for assessment, planning, and actions that will mitigate negative impacts while fostering positive outcomes. The broad community objective is to: “Establish a Vision, Strategy, and Implementation Plan in order to create a desired future state of economic growth and community development.” Toward this end, the authors were engaged as consultants to community leadership who are intentional in achieving the Objective.

Design

The path forward to achieving the objective for the collective community is to design and pursue an action research process that:

1. creates a common ground of mutual interest for a shared vision, and
2. ensures participant commitments to joint actions and reconciliation in face of challenges.

Approach

Three groups of generic activities were established and guided by the above project design principles:

- A. Foster a collaborative effort among three prominent local organizations with high interest and willingness to sponsor action research. The cooperating organizations for initial support of consulting efforts were the Tri-Cities Development & Economic Council, the Tri-Cities Visitors & Convention Bureau, and the Battelle Memorial Institute (operator of the Pacific Northwest National Lab for the Department of Energy).
- B. Bring together leading citizens from various sectors in a series of forums for creating consensus and action planning. Three of these forums were held within 4 months, with an average of 60 participants at each event. See Figure 2.
- C. Seek a unified front about future direction, rather than political consolidation, in presenting regional needs to the State and Federal governments, and to external businesses considering expansion into the Tri-Cities area.

Iterative Process for Economic/Community Development

A sequence of activities was designed as an ongoing recursive process to guide the visioning and planning activities of the regional community. The process begins with assessing the present (“as is”) state of the regional economy. Then, a shared vision of the future is created with a 10-year horizon wherein adverse trends are addressed and unwanted gaps are filled. Sponsoring organizations provide individuals who are recognized “champions” in defined focus areas of business thrusts and regional resources. Action plans are developed through communication and collaboration across selected focus areas. Measurable goals are established along with accountability for action plans. Overall success is assessed on an annual basis and the process cycle is repeated. This is graphically described in Figure 3.

An Early Outcome

As a result of the three initial forums, discussed above, a first draft of a shared regional vision was developed, as follows:

(The Three Rivers) is a healthy, growing community with a broad and robust economy. Many opportunities for business development are created through a blend of private and federal businesses related to high technology, agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism.

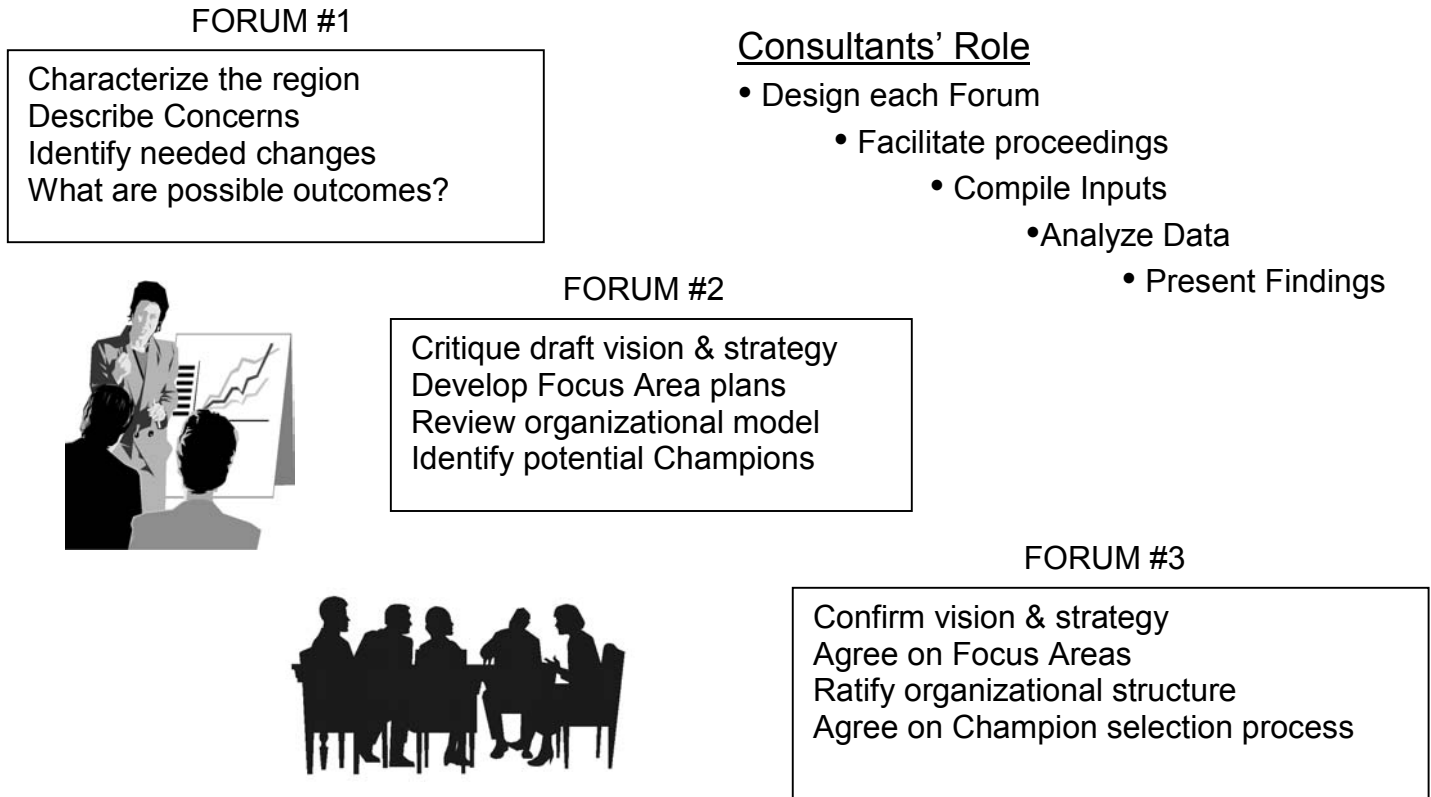


Figure 2. Leading Citizen Forums

Economic and community excellence is fostered through availability of extensive water resources, supportive R & D, focused education & training, and multiple transportation systems. The inviting quality of life reflects natural frontier living and a wide variety of recreation for individuals and families. It is THE place to live and prosper!

It is noted that a grass roots movement is emerging with the intent to change the term “Tri-Cities” to “The Three Rivers” or some other appellation that is more encompassing and sustainable over time. With the growth of multiple smaller towns interspersed among the three major municipalities, “Tri-Cities” identification has been a source of irritation among those developing independent communities. Also recognized is the reality of adjusting the regional vision statement as the planning process evolves and takes hold in the broad community.

Desired Outcomes

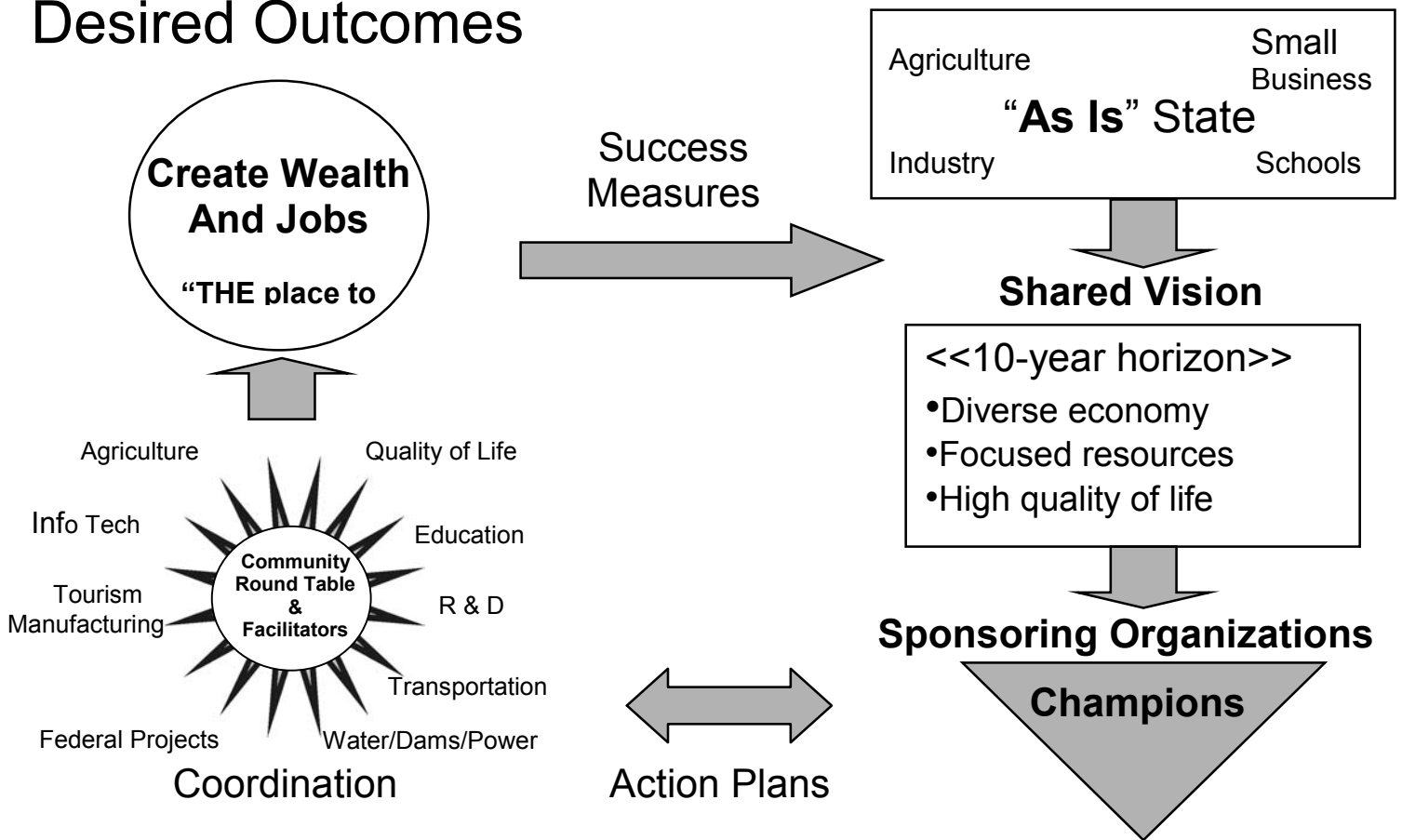


Figure 3. Iterative Process Cycle

Focus Areas

Another outcome from the public forums was identification of principal focus areas in two major categories--*Business Thrusts* encompassing Agriculture, Information Technology, Tourism, Manufacturing, and Federal Projects; and *Resources* composed of Water/Dams/Power, Education & Training, Research & Development, Quality of Life, and Transportation. A Champion (recognized leader and action-oriented person) was identified for each of the 10 focus areas. Each one was given the challenge to develop a respective focus area vision, a set of goals, and an action plan.

Organizing Construct

To assure accountability, continuing communication, and opportunity for coordination, the consultants designed a construct that engaged sponsoring organizations and the various

Champions. The outcome was a platform called the “Community Round Table” that meets monthly, is chaired by a respected civic leader, and is actively facilitated. See Figure 4.

We note that several of the Focus Areas are jointly sponsored because of vested interests by more than one agency. The community and the active participants in this endeavor are very sensitive to the political, fiscal, and social complexity of each Focus Area as well as their intimate relationship and frequent co-dependency with one another. As an example, Quality of Life focuses on issues of health care, social services, arts & entertainment, recreation, and crime and security. Quality of Life status and issues are closely related to Transportation, Water/Dams/Power, Tourism et al. The Chamber Alliance is a co-sponsor and comprises five regional Chambers of Commerce. The other co-sponsor is the Tri-Cities Visitors and Convention Bureau, which relies on favorable integration of Quality of Life factors to influence tourism and attraction of conventions. A description of similar co-dependencies and co-factors can be generated for the other focus areas. The notion of a Community Roundtable is 1) to promote the creation of a common vision, 2) to enable the sharing of goals and actions, and 3) to encourage productive feedback and influence among the Focus Areas. There is allowance for more or fewer Focus Areas as the process for economic and community development unfolds. See Figure 5.

Project Status

This action research project has a horizon of 10 years, broken down into two 5-year phases. We are in the latter part of the first year, which was dedicated to data gathering, preliminary analysis, organizing and forming operational structure, and early implementation (first cycle) of a recursive process (see Figure 3). The Community Round Table had an organizational meeting in April 2001 and has met monthly four more times, to date. The 10 Focus Groups, with Champion leadership, have also organized and conducted various numbers of meetings as separate groups. There are agenda scheduled presentations from the Champions at each Round Table meeting, along with special topic discussions of mutual interest to the participants. Some of the observed positive outcomes and trends are:

Organization & Sponsorship Champion Construct

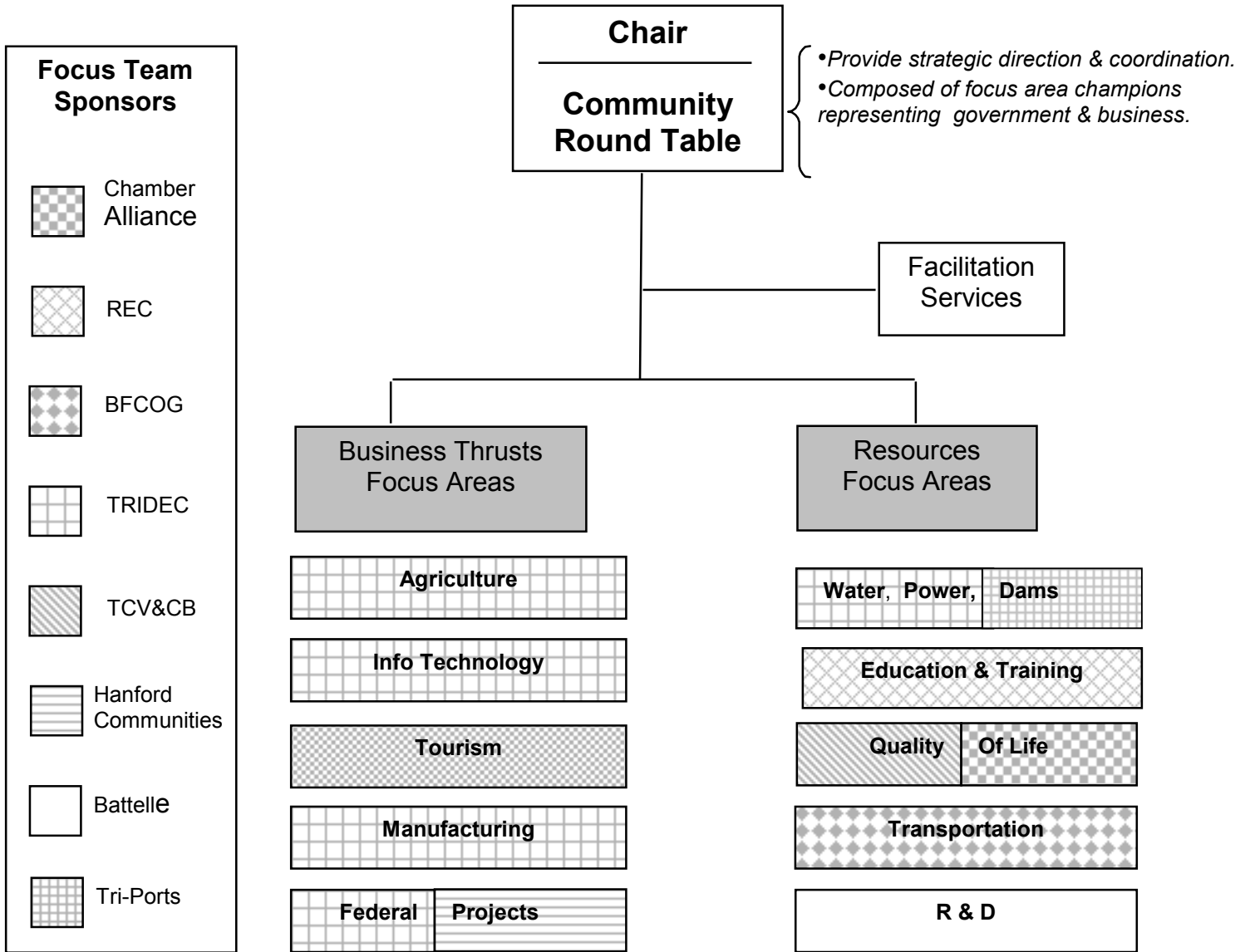


Figure 4. Organizational Construct

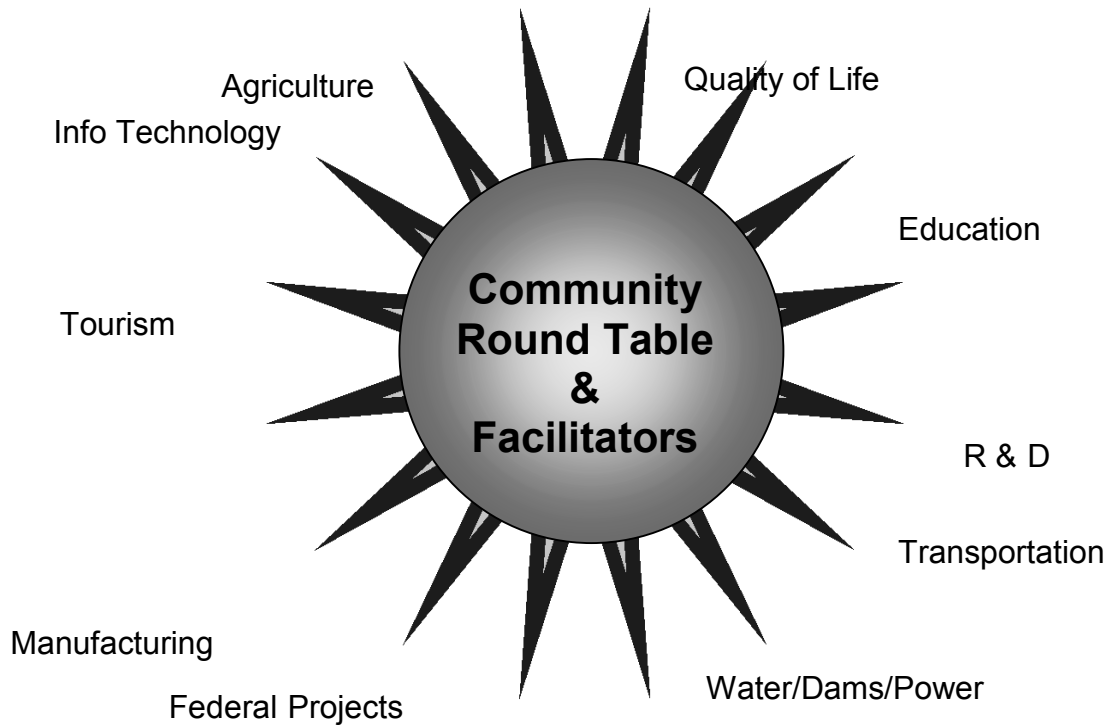


Figure 5. Community Round Table

- The Champions are effectively leading and fostering actions in their respective planning and visioning meetings.
- The Focus Area groups are expanding the involvement of the broader community in their respective areas of concentration. For example, the Quality of Life Focus group held a major forum (60+ people) to gather inputs on five topical dimensions of their area. The Transportation group is planning to have a similar community forum.
- The movement to change the name “Tri-Cities,” discussed above, was manifest in the action of the five Chambers of Commerce to rename their linked organization as the “Three Rivers Chamber Alliance”--and to produce a corresponding logo.

- An unprecedented and creative campaign was initiated by the Water/Power/Dams Focus group to conserve use of water and power across the region. This effort adopted the slogan “Just Save It” which has become very visible through media messages, use of logo pins, etc. A similar concept is being considered by the Transportation group to “Just Move It.”
- The Community Round Table is bringing together the Champions as regional leaders in periodic meetings where unique opportunities exist to present ongoing activities and plans, to receive feedback, and to influence respective planning goals and actions within the cross-section of 10 business and resource Focus Areas.

The project has continuing challenges to meet and gaps to fill as it moves through the overall process. At this time, some of the key issues are:

- There is immediate need to expose the project to media coverage and wider dissemination of its purpose, progress, and planning to the general public.
- Although diversity assurance and equal opportunity for minority group involvement is an accepted operating principle, more pro-active efforts are needed in practice.
- Accountability and measurement of success are essential elements of the overall process. There is need to complete the first round of action plans for each of the Focus Areas and to thus establish the baseline for assessment and continuous improvement.
- At a macro level, there is need to establish the status quo of the regional economy in terms that are amenable to determining the net increase of jobs and “income” across the region. In this context, there is need to determine the economic and social impact attributed to the introduction of this action research project--is it making a significant difference?

This action-research work is expected to continue through the time horizon of 10 years when the regional community expects to be in sustainable prosperity and growth. The measure of success for current and planned efforts is that in 2011 community members will reflect on the past decade and appreciate their present as the preferred outcome of planners in 2001.

References

Park, P. (2000). Knowledge and participatory research. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. 81-90). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.