The West Bay Sector Plan Visioning Process
A Case Study

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In Florida, a pilot program, called the Optional Sector Planning Process, has recently been established as an alternative to the Development of Regional Impact (DRI) process that has been in place for about thirty years. There have been many complaints over the DRI process and developers have especially been vocal in advocating for a new less costly and tedious process to approve large-scale developments. The sector plan is an attempt for planning agencies and local governments to collaborate with developers in producing a long-term conceptual plan, as well as, detailed specific area plans that emphasize public participation and protection of regional resources. The Department of Community Affairs has approved just three official sector plans for this pilot program, one of which is for the western portion of Bay County in the Florida Panhandle. (www.dca.state.fl.us)

The West Bay Sector Plan was initiated by Bay County, the St. Joe Company, and the Panama City- Bay County Airport and Industrial District (Airport Authority). The St. Joe Company owns about one third of the county’s land and has transitioned from a timber company to a developer on a grand scale. (see Map 1.) As they have been developing “places” all along the Florida Panhandle, residents and community activists have become aware of the inevitable changes that St. Joe is bringing to the “Forgotten Coast”. St. Joe being well aware of the fear and opposition its proposed developments have been conjuring up, has decided to embark in several areas in community planning initiatives to incorporate the community’s values into their designs to build successful new places and limit opposition to their projects. The western area of Bay County
bordering the northern and western edges of the bay is almost entirely owned by St. Joe and is the largest project they have taken on so far. The designated planning boundaries of the West Bay Sector Plan are shown in Map 2 and encompass 72,500 acres previously dominated by silviculture land uses. (West Bay Area Vision Scoping Document)

Map 2. West Bay Sector Plan Boundary

Source: West Bay Area Vision Website
Many stakeholders in the outcome of West Bay were identified to share their vision for the area and participate in the sector plan process. These stakeholders included the residents of Bay County, environmental advocates concerned with development on these sensitive lands, the property owners (mainly St. Joe), the government officials responsible for making decisions on what development could occur there, and the airport authority and other economic interests since St. Joe’s proposal included relocating the airport and creating a new commercial district. Rather develop a plan and than hold public hearings to obtain citizen feedback, several facilitated forums were conducted to gather the visions and a final charette was conducted to shape the sector plan according to the shared vision that was developed. The issues these stakeholders were to discuss and hopefully agree on was to what extent West Bay could be developed without trampling on the visions that many different groups had for the sector, county and even region. The main issues evolved into open-space preservation, environmental protection, economic development, and transportation and public facilities. (FCRC Facilitator’s Summaries, 2001)

To investigate this visioning process for the West Bay Sector Plan, I used documents provided by the Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium (FCRC) that had been hired to conduct the facilitated forums, information available on the Bay County Planning Department’s website and the West Bay Area Vision website, news articles and editorials related to the West Bay Sector Plan, and interviews. Through this data collection and analysis, I attempted to answer three overarching questions on the successfulness of the process, as well as touch on power, roles, and responsibilities among the stakeholders:
- Did a facilitated visioning process calm the perceived fears held by Bay County residents that the St. Joe Company was going to transform their county?

- Did the major stakeholders achieve their goals for the sector plan?

- Was the sector plan visioning process a better alternative to a non-facilitated traditional approach to planning in Florida?

The four facilitated forums and charrette took place between October 23rd and December 11th in 2001. These events were advertised to the public and by most accounts the turnout was adequate in that most stakeholder groups were represented. The input forums were well structured with agendas and guidelines for how the meeting would be run and what everyone’s roles were in the process. The forums were led by a facilitator and brainstorming sessions using post-it notes or small group sessions drawing on large maps used to gather ideas and foster creativity and equal participation. The sessions ran smoothly and were almost text-book perfect examples of facilitating public disputes. I used criteria from public dispute authors, Carpenter and Kennedy (1988), to judge one aspect of the successfulness of the process. These authors set forth a set of steps that should be followed to manage a public dispute involving procedures, educating parties, and developing options which were all very apparent in the West Bay forums. It was the steps of reaching an agreement and carrying out the agreement that it became less apparent whether this was a successful case. Since the purpose of the West Bay Sector Plan was more to avoid conflict rather than mediate an occurring one it is hard to say whether an agreement was reached. At the charrette, consensus was sought on the draft
vision plan and specific issues were addressed and refined, however, the participants at the charrette didn’t really have the authority or final say in what would end up in the sector plan. In fact, the compilation of the visioning comments from the forums into the West Bay Sector plan map and design was actually performed by the technical consultants working for the St. Joe Company. This was a practical solution, saving participants time and insuring that experts were involved in the design process but it did take away some of the participation opportunities. The forums and charrette were kept as input and consensus seeking opportunities for all the different stakeholders, limiting the feeling of agreement and shared responsibility in the final outcome. It also left the door open on how the agreement would be carried out, making some participants feel as if issues had not been completely resolved. Throughout all of the sessions’ comments recorded by the facilitators, there was a theme of distrust for both the St. Joe Company and the County officials. By not specifically addressing issues on how the public would be involved later in the process and what authority the government and St. Joe Company had to override or ignore components of the vision that was being created, the trust issue was left unresolved.

I also based my judgment on the success of the visioning process, on ten principals of effective conflict management advocated by Carpenter and Kennedy (1988). Their first principal, “Conflicts are a mix of procedures, relationships, and substance” (pg. 52), is especially relevant in this case. There was a definite interest by all parties involved that this process be an example of how planning could bring people together to jointly produce a vision for the future. I think it was acknowledged from the start that the procedure by which this was done and the relationships that were formed through the
process were almost as important for avoiding future conflicts as the actual product of the sector plan.

The fourth principal of “Progress demands positive working relationships” (Carpenter and Kennedy, 1988, pg. 57), also touches on the reasons the sector plan process was initiated. I think St. Joe realized early on that its obvious power in terms of money, land, and political connections could also be a weakness in attracting scrutiny from the government, as well as the public, that most developers don’t have to contend with. They might be able to fulfill their interests by steamrolling over the communities and dealing with litigation and bureaucracy but the path of collaboration that they and the county chose should benefit all in the long-run. Simply by the effort of including all interested stakeholders in the process and not just by allowing them to make statements at a public hearing, I believe the county and St. Joe have made a lot of progress in building a better reputation with the citizens. This leads to Carpenter and Kennedy’s sixth principal: “Parties should help design the process and solution.” (pg 59) While participation in the designing steps was limited, as I mentioned previously, citizens were much more involved than they normally would be if the DRI process had been used rather than the pilot sector plan process. In a case such as this it is almost impossible to have full involvement in the design of the process and solution since the goal of the process was to “efficiently involve everyone”. (FCRC Facilitator’s Summary, 2001, pg 1) If the process had been limited to representatives of each stakeholder group and had not been open to the public then perhaps it would have been practical to allow more real involvement rather than just input.
The outcome of the visioning process was a sector plan for the West Bay area that was represented by a conceptual overlay map. (See Map 3) For each of the subjects that were discussed at the forums, i.e. open space, environment, transportation, a layer was created that was based on the principals of that portion of the shared vision. The staff and consultants for the county and the St. Joe company who worked on this final product did a good job of producing a plan from the vision. They designed wildlife corridors and set aside large blocks of land for protection of the St. Andrew’s Bay which were major concerns of the participants of the Environmental forum. In fact, it seems that the concerns over environment, open space, and well planned roads were the best displayed results of the vision. Other issues involving containing sprawl and providing well-paying jobs are more controversial and harder to overlay on a map. Issues that were often brought up but never fully addressed during the forums, such as who will pay for infrastructure and whether an expanded airport facility is really necessary for the region, were ignored for the most part. The detailed specific area plan that has been created since the forums also seems to closely mirror the shared vision that was refined during the charrette.
Overall, from my research, it seems that the facilitated visioning process has allowed for the St. Joe Company to gain more approval for their development plans from the public than they probably would have achieved by simply presenting their plans and giving the public a chance to comment on something that had for the most part already been decided. The West Bay Sector Plan is still a controversy in the region and letters to the editor pour into The News Herald of Panama City but not all of them are negative. In fact I think this whole process has probably been enlightening for the community. I even read a letter to the editor that was pleading with people to understand that their best alternative to the sector plan was “development under Bay County’s present land-use
comprehensive plan. This plan has fostered urban and suburban sprawl and development along the edges of St. Andrew Bay and its tributaries.” (The News Herald, 3/6/04) To me this makes the case that the citizens and environmental stakeholders did achieve their goals with the vision process. They were able to negotiate a better plan than what the status-quo would have produced. They were able to ensure that the bay ecosystem was protected and that sprawling commercial strips didn’t stretch from the incorporated areas into these new developments.

I think the St. Joe Company and the County planners achieved their goals as well. They were able to cooperate to create something that would meet the county’s interests in providing new economic opportunities for the county and keeping with some of the rural characteristics of the region. The St. Joe Company was able to get approval for developments that are sure to be profitable and save themselves a lot of hassle and money in the process. If this optional sector plan had not been initiated St. Joe would be going through the process of trying to get comprehensive plan amendments passed and the DRI approved and mitigated and during all of this they would be fighting opposition from citizen groups and environmental groups, etc. This process was a much better alternative to the traditional planning procedures and is a unique example of success because of the way the developer and county worked together to achieve public support of the project. This process had its problems and in hindsight certain aspects could have been handled better like determining whether the airport relocation was set before the forums and following up on concerns over taxpayer costs for infrastructure involved in the West Bay area. They also could have done a better job at making St. Joe seem like a equal partner with the other stakeholders at the charrette by having them participate as everyone else
and not appear to be running the show from behind the scenes as when they presented the consultants draft of the citizen’s vision combined with St. Joe’s plans. Addressing these issues would have led to even better relationships between the different parties and a better understanding of the situation. Despite this I think that this sector plan visioning process is a good example for how planning can be more proactive, rather than reactive, to developers and how it can involve the public and other interested stakeholders in a more meaningful way.
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