

How to Create a Strategic Plan for Fairfield

General Recommendations

1. The Strategic Plan (SP) should be viewed as a means to change Fairfield for the better in many ways, tangibly and intangibly, not simply as something to put in the file in case someone asks if we have one (like the POCD). Perhaps the biggest intangible benefit is a much better informed citizenry, which is very important in a Town that is governed primarily by volunteers.
2. The SP should be should be viewed as a continuing part of Fairfield's governance and public discourse, not as a discrete task that must completed and then updated after 10 or 20 years.
3. The BOS should structure the process to provide multiple opportunities to change and enhance the leadership of the SP process, rather than giving one small group control from beginning to end. Indeed, one of the major objectives of the SP process should be to engage as many of Fairfield's talented and resourceful citizens as much as possible in its future.
4. The BOS and SP committee (SPC) members should resist the temptation to hire and simply defer to a consultant who will drive and dominate the process, although one or more consultants may be very helpful at various stages to gather and structure information, and to facilitate public engagement.
5. Remember that in the SP process, there are no irrevocable decisions as there are for a building committee or an issue like whether we should have one or two high schools. Anything and everything in a SP can change over time in response to new information or to changes in circumstances or public opinion. Also, there are no hard deadlines; it is always better to take more time than to rush to judgment based on incomplete or faulty information. Accordingly, we should plan a SP process that will take approximately one year and expect it to take two years.
6. Remember that in the SP process, there is no reason to force specific answers to important questions for which there are none. Uncertainty is a natural part of the process, and it should be highlighted rather than suppressed. In short, when necessary, it is okay to say, "We don't know" or "We are not sure." It is okay for reasonable people to agree to disagree on SP issues.
7. During the process, invite experts on subjects relevant to Fairfield's SP to speak to the entire community at public meetings (and on FairTV), such as experts on national and state economic trends, Transit-Oriented Development and Aging in Place.
8. If a really great strategic plan for a town or city has been created before, it is not easy to find, and so Fairfield has an opportunity to be recognized as First in Planning, if not First in Flight.
9. Use the FT SP as a straw man to jump start the SP process.

Specific Recommendations

Create a **series of committees**, each of which is responsible for one of the five distinct steps in the strategic planning process, and each of which may or may not (at the discretion of the BOS) include members of a preceding committee. At all stages, the committees should have *ex officio* members from each of the key town bodies and commissions (the BOF, the BOE, the TPZ and the RTM) as well as the Town's Chief Fiscal Officer and the Director of Economic Development. At all stages, the committee should be encouraged to create subcommittees that will facilitate its work (e.g., special committees on Retirement Liabilities or Labor Contracts). ~~If possible, subcommittees should not be subject to FOIA requirements.~~

Stage One: A PLAN FOR THE PLAN

A small steering committee of two or three members¹ (some of whom have prior experience with strategic planning), that is responsible for recommending to the BOS “**A Plan for the Plan**” (i.e., a roadmap) that describes how a Strategic Plan will be created and what principles will guide its creation. Stage One should require **2 months** to produce an initial draft to the BOS and obtain the necessary approvals and authorizations.

Stage Two: WHERE ARE WE?

A committee of four or five members (some of whom have prior experience in financial, economic and/or business analysis), that analyzes (probably with the assistance of a consultant), what is happening in the Town, State, Nation and World, and how what is happening affects Fairfield (including what Fairfield’s major strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges are), in order to answer the questions: “**Where are we and how did we get here?**” This stage will benefit from inviting contributions from any and all interested citizens and institutions, and perhaps from establishing formal competitions (with prizes and recognition to the winners) that encourage the business departments of local schools and colleges, and others, to submit their best answers to the question. Stage Two should require **3-6 months** to produce an initial draft to the BOS, and then a final draft to all Town bodies. At least one member of this committee should join the next committee to provide continuity in the analysis of any unresolved or new issues. The analysis and conclusions of this committee should be presented to both all Town bodies and the public.

Stage Three: WHERE SHOULD WE GO?

A committee of six or seven members (some of whom have prior experience with formal planning, and in-depth knowledge about the Town), that builds on and is informed by (but not limited by) earlier conclusions about where we are and how we got here, by analyzing (probably with the assistance of a consultant) what **core values, beliefs and priorities** should guide our strategy, what **measures of success** (a.k.a., key performance indicators) we want to adopt, what our **major strategic options** are, and what **major strategic goals** we should adopt. This is the stage that will involve maximum community engagement with all interested stakeholders through surveys, charrettes, invitations for written commentary and other means. This stage, like the second, might benefit from creating competitions for the best proposals about where Fairfield should go, such as getting architects and urban planners to submit their designs for how Fairfield Center could be transformed. The choice of strategic goals must balance vision with practicality.² If there are major strategic issues upon which the committee cannot agree, each of the alternatives and their costs and benefits should be described, and formal dissenting opinions should be encouraged and published. Stage Three will probably require **5-8 months**, in part because maximum civic engagement cannot be achieved quickly. At least one member of this committee should join the next committee to provide continuity. The analysis and conclusions of this committee should be presented to both all Town bodies and the public.

¹ A larger committee at this point would be cumbersome.

² For example, it would be visionary but not practical for a 70-year old man to adopt the goal of being an NFL quarterback.

Stage Four: HOW SHOULD WE GET THERE?

A committee of ten or more members (some of whom have prior experience with urban planning, real estate development and state, federal and foundation grants and finance), that builds on and is informed by (but not limited by) earlier conclusions by analyzing what **specific policies, objectives, timelines and action plans** we should adopt to achieve our strategic goals. This is the stage at which it will be important to collaborate and coordinate with other Town commissions like the TPZ, Conservation, and the WPCA, and with any relevant State commissions and regulators. State Four will require **3-6 months**. The analysis and conclusions of this committee should be presented to both all Town bodies and the public.

Stage Five: MONITOR AND UPDATE

A committee of three members, some of whom have prior experience with planning, that: **monitors** how the implementation process and any changes in the environment; **reports** annually to a combined meeting of the BOS, BOF and RTM; and **recommends** any need for course changes along the way. Over time, good plans become even better when there is flexibility and a willingness to reconsider earlier assumptions and choices, and to adapt opportunistically to changing circumstances.

Companies / Sectors / Groups that Should Somehow be Represented in the Process

Educational (Fairfield U., Sacred Heart U., Fairfield Prep)
 Financial Services (People's Bank)
 Major Employers (Bigelow)
 Medical (Yale-New Haven, OSG)
 Developers / Builders (Kleban, Scinto)
 Non-Profits (Save the Children, Audubon, Pequot Library, Operation Hope)
 Local Businesses (Chamber of Commerce)
 Service Organizations (Rotary)
 Religious
 Architects / Urban Planners
 Conservation / Environmental Groups
 Neighborhood Associations
 Adjacent Cities and Towns
 Service Clubs (Kiwanis, Rotary, Knights of Columbus)

Some Relevant Excerpts from the FT SP

A strategic plan for Fairfield **can only be created by engaging all interested residents, businesses and other stakeholders in a systematic and collaborative effort** to analyze all of our major strategic options (including the *status quo*) and their likely consequences.

Even though there will never be perfect agreement on all the potential consequences or on their relative importance, participants should at least come to understand better the forces that will determine our future, and what, if anything, we might be able to do about them.

Unlike most companies, for which there is widespread agreement that decisions should be made in the best interests of the shareowners, it is not even clear **who in any town or city are the people for whose benefit that town or city exists.**

Even though planning requires choices between competing values and interests, and **even though it is therefore inherently political, this does not mean that it must necessarily be adversarial, contentious and divisive.**

Everyone should be willing at all times to challenge their own as well as others' views by the standard of what is in the best, long-term interests of the Town.

Along the way, we should not underestimate the benefit to our community and its quality of life merely as a consequence of being willing and able to engage constructively with one another on where we think our Town should go and how we think it should get there.

One common framework is as follows:

1. **Core values and beliefs**
2. **Mission (and/or Vision and Purpose)**
3. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats ("**SWOT**")
4. **Major strategic alternatives**
5. **Goals and priorities**
6. Key performance indicators ("**KPI's**")
7. **Strategies** to achieve goals
8. **Objectives** to implement strategies
9. **Action plans** to achieve objectives
10. **Key assumptions and success factors**

One way to think about many of these planning terms is by their timeframe: some are **long-term** (e.g., values, beliefs, mission, vision, purpose); some are **intermediate-term** (goals, priorities, strategies); and some are **short-term** (e.g., objectives, specific action plans). The remaining terms are tools for analysis and measurement (SWOT, major alternatives, KPIs, key assumptions and success factors).

As soon as possible, the SPC should create subcommittees and retain experts to address specific needs for additional information and analysis on what it considers to be key issues. For example, consider whether to conduct a town-wide survey that would give all residents an opportunity to express their opinions. Farmington CT conducted a survey of this kind as part of its planning process, the results of which can be found at the following site: http://www.farmington-ct.org/docs/StrategicPlan/Final_Plan.pdf.

The SPC should **create a user-friendly website** dedicated to the strategic planning process where any stakeholder who is interested can find out what is happening and offer comments, and it should consider other ways to ensure maximum practical engagement by all interested parties.

The SPC should provide **quarterly progress reports to a combined meeting of the BOS, BOF, TPZ and RTM.**