

Community visioning launched in Walker

Guest commentary

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What's your vision of the Walker community? That question is being asked around town as the City of Walker and the Initiative Foundation launch a new community planning project.

It's a challenge to collect many points of view to create one that describes the community. How you see the community depends on who you are, of course. For some, Walker is fond memories on Leech Lake — a snapshot more than a place. If you grew up here, it's the sum of your learning and growing. If your child grew up here, it's the school and other families and the places your child passed through. If you run a business, it's your customers. If you use a business, it's where you shop.

The whole idea of community visioning isn't new to Walker. In the 1990s, the Blandin Foundation recruited community leaders, trained them, and helped them organize as Project Future. Project Future assessed the community's strengths and needs and wrote a community vision, published in 1998. A significant and outstanding outcome of this vision is Blandin's grant for the construction of the Walker Area Community Center and the grant to establish the Walker Area Foundation. Project Future distilled its work to a pledge: "Together we strengthen, grow, preserve and enhance the quality of life and resources in our community." The 1990s was a time of prosperity and security; so it makes sense that Project Future stressed sustainability — nurture the best of what we have and use that to keep us healthy. To achieve its vision of sustainability, Project Future made a "to-do" list for the community, and it's encouraging to see how many items have been addressed on the list.

For example, in the category of the environment, Project Future recommended information about how boaters can spread exotic species, and encouraged Leech Lake Association to take an active role in managing Leech Lake. Today, there are signs at all accesses and the Leech Lake Association has published a management plan for the lake.

In the category of education, Project Future envisioned a new school, with an up-to-date media center and increasing educational opportunities for all students. Today, the school has been expanded, the media center function and, because more teachers are receiving advanced degrees, course offerings are growing. The school also offers on-line instruction.

In the category of the economy, Project Future envisioned a sound economy, the ability to buy "everything you need" in town, and a livable wage for employees. Data for census tract 9605 (which includes Walker and extends into the surrounding townships) shows that our overall employment rate is lower than the nation's; slightly less than 57 percent of the population over age 16 is in the labor force; the national number is 63 percent of the population. But, most people are comfortable. About 8 percent of the families in the Walker area live below the poverty line; nationally, it's 12 percent of the population. Walker does well for income, overall. Median family income is \$44,000; the national median is \$50,000.

Not all of Project Future's needs have been met: items that earn the grade of "progressing" include weekend health service, some kind of public transportation, increasing high school graduation rates for Native American students, and building a community center. Project Future was sensitive to cultural conflicts between white and Native Americans and disparities between the two races; it's hard to measure progress on this issue.

Project Future wrote its recipe for the community's future in 1998. "A committee of interested and dedicated community leaders continues to meet; the existing vision is studied at least annually and, if deemed necessary, updated and revised at intervals of no more than five years from date of adoption."

"Among the laws that rule human societies," Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of the young American democracy in the early 19th century. "There is one that seems to be more precise and correct than all the others. If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased."

The new group can take a lesson from Project Future. Visions are achieved when people are involved, supportive and working together. Project Future's pledge to strengthen ourselves is powerful. That means working together for a healthy environment, healthy economy and opportunities for all, at all ages.

Molly MacGregor lives in Walker and will be writing a regular column for The Pilot-Independent about our community, taking a closer look at some of the events and issues that concern us.