

# Strategic planning: what is it?

**S**trategic Planning – what is it? Strategic Planning is a method that is used to determine a city or rural water district's short and long-term goals. Determining these goals is the first step to developing a plan on how to achieve these goals. Strategic Planning can be done using one of the following three methods:

1. focus group research
2. survey research
3. a combination of these two methods can be employed.

Focus groups, as defined by Webster's New World Dictionary, are small groups selected from a larger population and sampled, as by open discussion, for its members' opinions about or emotional response to a particular subject or area.

Focus groups are often used in market research or political analysis.

Survey research is used to gather information in many fields such as political polling and governmental issues. Surveys are

designed to collect information on opinions and fact based information. There are many different ways a survey can be administered to collect information. They include: 1) through the mail; 2) by telephone; 3) in person; and, 4) on the Internet. Survey research is similar to focus group research because it is used to gather information from people about their opinions and feelings about

specific issues. On the other hand, survey research is different because a large number of closed-ended questions can be asked in a relatively short amount of time, anonymity is provided, and you

a survey tells us what citizens concerns are, a focus group provides more information about how people think and feel about certain issues. Focus groups and survey research analysis can also

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can typically reach a larger audience as compared with focus group research.

For example, in the fall of 2005 Ranson Financial Consultants was employed by Sterling, Kan. to put together a strategic plan using focus groups and survey research. Part one of the Sterling survey asked participants this question: "Think about your vision for the future of Sterling, Kan. How important are each of the following issues?"

(Scale: 1= Not Important,  
3= Somewhat Important,  
5 = Very Important)

- Attract and keep young families  
1 2 3 4 5
- Continue to improve Sterling's downtown area  
1 2 3 4 5
- Promote redevelopment of commercial properties  
1 2 3 4 5

Survey participants were able to move through the questions and select answers based on how they felt about their community. While

help a city or rural water district plan for long-term and short-term goals. The results from the Sterling strategic planning project helped the city to define what it does well and what could also use improvement.

## **Strategic Planning Synopsis: the city of Sterling, Kan.**

At present the city of Sterling has a total of 2,586 residents; there are nine churches and four schools. Sterling, Kansas is located in Rice County. In summary, Rice County is home to a total of 10,761 people and Sterling is the second largest city within the county with 15 surrounding cities.

On Saturday, November 12, 2005 Ranson Financial conducted two focus groups in the city commission chambers. This was a nice central location for everyone to meet. Both groups represented a cross-section of the Sterling community. Each group lasted about 1.5 hours. Participating residents had a chance to voice their opinions and concerns about a variety of issues. The issues



*M.E. Yeager  
Ranson Financial  
Consultants, LCC*

identified ranged from local school activities, things to do in Sterling, dining out, outdoor life, enjoying nature, family activities, sporting events, religious activities, the city arts scene, concerts, and night time entertainment.

After the focus groups were conducted a survey was administered. The same participants had a chance to provide a more in-depth picture of their community. Through the survey we learned about the following: 1) issues affecting the future of Sterling; 2) quality of life issues (including the regional economy); 3) life in Sterling (including personal safety); 4) possible city improvements (including downtown uses and improvements); 5) possible park improvements; 6) service or city employee evaluation; 7) city services; 8) city communications with the public; 9) funding of city services; and, 10) general city funding views and other issues.

On Monday, December 19, 2005, Ranson presented the final results of the research to the Sterling City Commission. Recommendations were made based on the results of the survey and the focus groups conducted on November 12, 2005. The most important issues affecting the future of Sterling in descending order are as follows:

- Attract and keep young families
- Assist in creating and maintaining attractive schools and college campuses continue to improve Sterling's downtown area
- Maintain quality city services' market and promote the city as a great place to live and work
- Promote redevelopment of commercial properties
- Provide cost effective city services that meet the needs of users
- Promote community involvement and service opportunities

- Maintain access to regional jobs, goods, and services
- Require that property be kept up in appearance
- Create affordable housing options for current and future Sterling residents
- Create a strong identity for Sterling as a community separate and distinct from other communities in the surrounding area
- Improve the physical appearance of the city
- Support seniors living independently

Many of these issues have to do with maintaining the quality of life in Sterling. They overlap with and affect one another. For example, attracting and keeping young families is strongly related to schools, attractive places to live and work, access to jobs and quality city services.

Sterling is a close-knit community with a lot to offer. Many of the residents cannot imagine living any other place.



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This would indicate that they are generally pleased with the city and its services. Aside from improvements, it was suggested that the city focus on the things that they do well and take into consideration the opportunities that exist for improvement.

The results indicated in the Sterling report represent a mere snapshot of the community. While the results are directional, they are not projectable. In other words, these results indicate where things are going, and how the people who participated in the strategic planning process feel, but we cannot project too far into the future with these results.

For further analysis, it was recommended that a smaller version of the existing survey be sent out with the resident's water bill. This would provide a cost effective way to gather information and would also provide a larger demographic representation of the Sterling population.

### Considering Finance Options

Consideration of options available for financing projects can be paired with strategic planning for an even stronger outcome. For example, a city or

would be covered under the KPWSLF program. I encourage you to read the article by John Haas in this issue (see pp 12-15) describing the Kansas Public Water Supply Loan Fund

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## The State Revolving Loan Fund can be paired with strategic planning for an even stronger outcome.

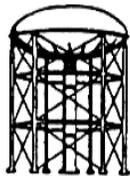
rural water district might look into the Kansas Public Water Supply Loan Fund (KPWSLF) program regarding the kinds of projects that it supports. Phase I would include focus group research and would indicate what citizens think their city or RWD does well and and what could use improvement. One of the issues citizens feel could use improvement might be their drinking water system. If the city or RWD decided to take this information and implement a plan to improve their drinking water, water line improvement projects

(KPWSLF) loan program and how the program funds different kinds of projects.

Phase II of the strategic planning process would implement the use of a survey. This survey could be given before or after the water line improvements. Citizen feedback would describe what the residents think about the quality of their drinking water. This feedback could be based on their opinion of the city's drinking water before and after the improvements.

There are several sessions that address long range or strategic planning at the upcoming KRWA conference. They are on Wednesday at 10:45 a.m. in Hyatt Ballroom E presented by Brad Lindstrom and Alan Soelter of Bartlett and West Engineers in Topeka. I will present the topic, "Reaching Goals with Regular Strategic Planning," at 10:45 a.m. in Room 209A on Thursday, March 30.

I hope you will attend either or both of these sessions. Also, please contact me at Ranson Financial Consultants, L.L.C. if you have any questions about how to complete and implement a strategic plan.



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