

Diagnosing Your Community

There are several methods a community can use to assess their need, capacity and readiness for planning. A ‘diagnostic study’ generally begins by inventorying existing plans, studies and regulations. These items should be reviewed to make sure they are up-to-date, satisfy existing legal requirements, and are being implemented.

Next, the community should assess how well local plans and regulations meet the needs of local decision-makers and the community-at-large. A series of local meetings, interviews, focus groups or a survey can help to identify current planning issues, resources available for planning, and concerns with previous planning efforts. An analysis of recent media coverage can also shed light on these issues.

Lastly, valuable lessons can be learned by consulting with county planning agencies, regional planning commissions, private consulting firms, and neighboring communities that have undertaken similar planning projects. Conversations with ‘outsiders’ can help to identify potential planning issues and challenges not readily apparent to those living in the community. After conducting a diagnostic study, your community should be able to answer the following questions:¹

1. What are some of the current planning issues in your community? Does planning appear to be a priority in your community?
2. Is planning legally required in your community? Are there minimum requirements that a plan or process must satisfy? Do you have an existing plan that meets those requirements?
3. Does the content of existing plans reflect current issues, needs, desires and facts?
4. Have existing plans been implemented? Did the implementation effort produce the desired results?
5. What is the history of planning in your community? What factors contributed to the success or failure of past projects?
6. Are there significant social, economic or political conditions present in your community that should be considered in future planning efforts?

¹ Joel S. Russell, Esq. “Diagnosing Your Community Before You Plan.” *Planning Commissioners Journal*. Number 26, Spring 1997.