

# Overview of the Strategic Planning Process in Clatsop County

## Appendix to the Strategic Plan

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### Why local governments create strategic plans

Institutions, public or private, operate more effectively if they are clear about their goals, and develop procedures that effectively and fairly (1) facilitate discussion and decisions about how to best meet those goals, and (2) implement those decisions in a thoughtful and professional manner.

For local governments (like counties, cities, and special districts) a fundamental objective is to effectively deliver quality services that are needed or desired by the communities they serve—primarily people who live within their boundaries and the businesses that serve them. Creating policy about *what* services and level of services (including a budget consistent with that policy) is the primary role of a governing board, which is usually elected. The policies adopted by such a board often inform *how* the services will be delivered (planning, finance, facility operation and maintenance, programs, customer service), but the details of implementation generally fall to staff.

In Clatsop County, the governing body is the Board of Commissioners. The respective roles of the Board of Commissioners and staff inevitably overlap. Elected officials are the public’s agents for developing policy and monitoring the delivery of service and management of assets. Staff are critical to formulating the details of the policy and budget decisions that are ultimately the purview of the Board of Commissioners to enact and monitor.

The demands placed on local governments change over time. Residents come and go; circumstances and preferences evolve; the economy, the environment, technology, and politics at all levels ebb and flow. Local government must monitor the community (demographics, opinions, desires) and re-evaluate its policies and operations to maintain relevance in a dynamic environment.

Elected officials, professional managers, and staff of local governments continually assess and respond to changing circumstances. They often do so in the context of a *standardized process for strategic planning*. Such a process involves elected officials, staff, stakeholder groups, and the general public in a discussion and decisions about:

- *What we want.* Goals and objectives, and a vision for the future of the area the local government serves.
- *How we will act.* The local government’s role in achieving those goals (its mission), and the values it will honor as it works to achieve its mission.

- *The factors our decisions should consider.* An assessment of the past, current, and future conditions that create opportunities and present constraints for achieving the goals, vision, and mission.
- *Our priority areas for government action.* Needs and desires always exceed resources. What issues need the most attention now?
- *What we will do.* Specific actions the local government adopts and will implement.

The categories of questions above suggest a typical structure for a strategic plan:

- *Direction:* vision, mission, and values. What do we want to achieve and why? How will act in our efforts to achieve what we want?
- *Situation Assessment:* opportunities and constraints. What are the conditions (past, present, and likely future) that strongly affect our abilities to achieve what we want?
- *Priorities:* issues and actions. Given that the sum of desired improvements always exceed the time and money a local government has to try to achieve them, (1) What issues are the most important ones to address?, and (2) What actions are most likely to be cost-effective and consistent with our values?

## Why Clatsop County created this strategic plan now

Most elected officials, managers, and staff see the benefits of a strategic plan, but many local governments do not pursue such plans. Why not? The main reasons are: (1) the development of a strategic plan is time-consuming and difficult work that is both technical and political; it requires an honest evaluation of current conditions, challenges and opportunities; and (2) it takes resources (money and time) away from other pressing problems.

Yet many local governments conclude that the likely benefits of a strategic plan outweigh the cost of developing it. Some local governments even believe that the “cost” of developing such a plan is one of its benefits: that the *process* itself can create relationships, perspectives, capacities, and procedures that will make local government work better even before the plan is formalized.

The Clatsop County Board of Commissioners agreed on the value of developing a strategic plan in December 2019. The Commissioners hoped to improve performance by fully integrating strategic planning, budget development, performance measurements, and reporting to the public into an annual process. The strategic plan itself is a single step in a larger process for improving decision-making, oversight, and transparency of County government.

## How the County created this Strategic Plan

To assist the Board of Commissioners, managers, and staff in the creation of the Strategic Plan (the Plan), Clatsop County engaged the Center for Public Service at Portland State University. CPS designed the process, facilitated work sessions with the Board of Commissioners, and prepared interim products and the draft Plan. The structure of the Plan was identical to the typical structure described above, and based on key questions:

What do we want?

What opportunities and constraints significantly affect our abilities to achieve what we want (and, thus, may influence what goals we pursue, and how)?

What issues are most important to address, and what actions are do the “best” job of addressing them in the context of conditions and values:

What a government “does” should be a response to what community members and the leaders that represent them think needs to be done, and what they want to achieve. *What* they want to achieve gets referred to as vision, goals, and objectives. *How* they want to relate to one another as they strive for those goals get referred to as values and principles. This Plan views the goals and values as the *foundation for action* because adopted actions should effectively achieve goals and should do so in ways that honor values.

This Plan was developed by first assessing the underlying conditions (past, current and future) that may influence the County’s work, priorities, and resources.<sup>1</sup> These conditions included natural and built environments; physical and economic conditions; and social and political elements. Information and discussion about those factors helped the Board of Commissioners and staff identify and prioritize areas for improvement and action. The assessment included not only measurable conditions, but also perceptions and interpretations of those conditions.

The fundamental techniques of a SWOT analysis are standard, but the context for this Assessment is exceptional. It started in January 2020; by March the world was responding to a pandemic. Because the County was immediately engaged in the planning and implementation of separate activities to respond to the immediate and mid-run challenges of COVID-19, County management did not want to duplicate an evaluation of conditions in this Assessment. But the Plan had to deal with the degree of uncertainty that COVID-19 introduced on the demand for services and the ability to deliver those services. The solution: the Assessment (1) describes the internal and external forces with significant issues

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<sup>1</sup> In other words, the Plan identified the County’s internal *Strengths and Weaknesses* related to its primary mission (the delivery of certain public services to County households and businesses), and the external *Opportunities and Threats* that it faces as it goes about delivering those services (i.e., what is referred to as a SWOT analysis).

on County policy and actions *before* COVID-19, and then (2) provides some thoughts about how COVID-19 might affect those forces.<sup>2</sup>

Plans can fail when visions, goals, and principles diverge too greatly from the current reality and achievable future reality. Excessively grand visions (e.g., “make our county the best place to live in America”) fail to inspire because they overreach and are too general.

Thus, in developing this Plan the Board of Commissioners started with a general discussion of goals to get some direction, but then turned to evaluation of conditions (Chapter 3, Situation Assessment) before returning to vision, mission, and values for discussion and agreement. The results, presented in Chapter (Foundation for Action) are ones that the Board of Commissioners and County management believe are important and achievable, and that can be referenced for guidance as the County’s priorities and actions evolve.<sup>3</sup> In combination, the assessment and the vision, mission, and values became the foundation for the Commissioners’ discussion of priorities (for focus areas and actions within those focus areas).

The schedule for developing the Plan paralleled the structure of the Plan:

- *Jan-Feb, 2020, Process Design.* Preliminary review of documents; focus groups and interviews; revised scope of work; Board of Commissioner Work Session 1 (importance of local government, overview of some best practices, preliminary scan of conditions, agreement on the process for developing the Plan).
- *Mar-Jun, 2020, Situation Assessment.*<sup>4</sup> Review and evaluation of reports, data, and opinions to create a description of (1) the forces (demographic, social, technological, economic, environmental, political) affecting the County’s ability to deliver services, (2) County performance on service delivery, and (3) the implications for the content, development, and focus of the Strategic Plan.
- *Apr-Aug, 2020, Vision, Mission, Values.* What services do the people the County serves (residents, businesses, interest groups) want, what future (vision) does that suggest, what role should the County have in meeting

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<sup>2</sup> The thoughts about potential effects of COVID-19 were, of course, speculative. Data were sparse; uncertainty large. That point is, in fact, a main conclusion: the Plan, staff, and Commission will need to be flexible, adjusting priorities as the effects of COVID-19 play out and become more predictable. For more detail, refer to the Assessment document and its appendix, *Thoughts about the Potential Effects of COVID-19 on County Operations*. Chapter 5 of this Plan provide links.

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 3 of the Plan summarizes final language. For more information on the data reviewed (including Commissioner surveys) and the discussion that led to the Commissioners’ agreement on this language, see Chapter 5, Appendices, for links to documents with that information.

<sup>4</sup> The elapsed time for this phase got extended as the County coped with the demands of COVID 19. The project made up the time in August through October, and the Plan was completed on schedule, in December 2020.

those desires, and how should the County behave as it discharges that role?

- *Jly-Oct, 2020, Focus Areas and Actions.* Based on the information assembled in the Situation Assessment (Issues, Opportunities, and Constraints) and in Vision/Mission/Values (what is desired, what is possible, what is the County role, who are the County's partners in the production of services, what community values must the County honor as it makes changes to policy), identify, evaluate, and agree on (1) areas with issues that need the special attention of the Board of Commissioners and staff leadership, and (2) actions to be taken to address the issues.
- *Oct-Dec, 2020, The Plan Document.* Draft plan; Board of Commissioners' discussion; revision, final plan, and adoption.
- *Jan, 2021, Plan adoption.* End of the *planning* process; beginning of the *implementation* process.

Two additional considerations frame the content of this Plan:

1. By adopting this Plan, the Board of Commissioners is not saying that the focus areas it addresses are the most important services the County offers in an absolute sense. Many critical services (e.g., public safety and justice, transportation) did not get adopted as Plan focus areas. That being said, these service areas require County funding and the attention of staff charged with delivering services. The Strategic Plan is built on the recognition that Board of Commissioners has many tasks (including monitoring service delivery and asset management, and dealing with future issues now unknown as they arise, such as COVID-19 in 2020), and that they have the time to deal in depth with only a handful of complex issues a year. The Board of Commissioners must select areas of focus not only based on what is important, but also on how vital their participation is to make progress. In other words, where is the special attention of County leadership most needed to get critical improvements to County performance moving forward?
2. COVID-19 is clearly a critical issue for all local governments. It is easily a candidate for the top issue requiring County leadership in 2020; it may be in the running again in 2021. The County began in earnest, in February 2020, making policy and operational changes that focused on the COVID-19 response and mitigation. The Board of Commissioner and staff have invested considerable time developing plans for their community and in operational response to the ongoing problems. The County Commissioners decided not to make COVID-19 a focus of the strategic plan, because (1) it already was a central topic for Board and staff, and was receiving the political and administrative attention required by such an emergency, and (2) the focus areas in the Plan would include strategies to address specific impacts of COVID-19.