INTRODUCTION: THE THEORY BEHIND THE VISION

Collaborative decision making, community based planning, social capital, these are the buzz words of local economic and community development in the 21st century. At the heart of this movement supporting bottom-up planned change is the belief that the average individual, in collaboration with their fellow citizens, can build a better community. Better is defined by those people living in and affected by the local community not by bureaucrats or politicians in the state capitol. Visioning is one method of creating this enhanced community setting.

Visioning can be defined as processes that “enable citizens to get acquainted with each other, to analyze the community, develop a future direction and undertake action plans.” (Ayers, 1996, p. 24). The key elements of visioning include involving multiple organizations and stakeholders which are truly representative of the community, gaining the commitment of elected officials, developing strong leadership, providing adequate resources and publicity, and sustaining public interest beyond the initial planning stage (Flora, Flora, and Wade, 1996; Walzer, 1996; Wheeland, 1991, 2000; Helling, 1998).

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania in their Handbook on Community Visioning (1987) lays out the steps in a typical vision process: define the boundaries of your community, inventory your resources, create a vision plan, and implement this plan within a given time frame. The authors have examined the factors essential to the creation of the vision plan in a previous paper (Duda and Lieberman, 2000). This most recent research focuses upon the implementation stage. What happens after the initial enthusiasm for the project has died down, after the media has changed its focus, after the
vision document has been completed? Is visioning an effective tool in the long term or is its usefulness simply limited to creating an initial exchange of ideas?

“So the community has a vision of the future. What does that mean to local leaders who have participated in a marathon of consensus-building efforts that the whole community is now reading about in the newspaper? Nearly everyone associated with the project (except a few naysayers) has reached the peak of excitement after hearing about the expectations. Of course, now someone has to transform the vision into a reality.” (Kline, 1996, p.161).

The six communities chosen for the study include a variety of definitions of community. Two of the vision projects are based upon municipal boundaries, the borough of Forest City in Susquehanna County and the borough of Tamaqua in Schuylkill County. Two projects can be defined as regional in nature, Northern Lehigh which encompasses this Lehigh County school district and the joint Hawley-Lake Wallenpaupack effort in Wayne County. Two projects, Carbon and Schuylkill, encompass the entire rural counties. Thus, in keeping with the literature, community, in the study projects, is defined by the commonality of interests, economic, social, cultural, rather than strict governmental boundaries (Center for Rural PA; Putnam, 1996).

In a 1990 national survey of entrepreneurial communities, Flora, Flora, and Wade define success as achieving the goals outlined in the vision statement. They cite characteristics such as acceptance of controversy, ability to depersonalize politics, adequate public and private funding, leadership, networking between and among levels of government, involvement of the educational system, and a broadly defined community support base as key to successful vision implementation. Michael Woods (1996) emphasizes the following preconditions for program implementation: diversity in participation, direct government coordination and widespread community support,
adequate financial resources from public and private sources, established information networks especially including the local media, a good public infrastructure from roads to recreation, and abundant human resources such as an educated workforce and local leadership.