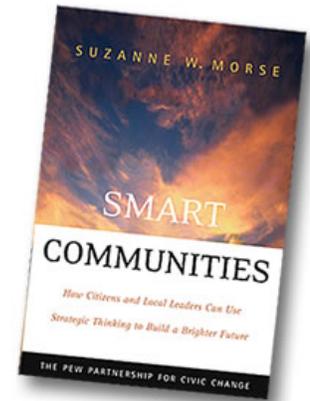


Smart Communities & Jackson: A Call to Action

Daniel J. Phelan

Evolution, growth and advancement are a part of all living things...even communities. Indeed the Jackson of today is itself the result of economic, educational, social, and demographic growth. Even its name has changed from Jacksonopolis to Jacksonburgh to Jackson. And, like all living things, communities and their growth can be blunted for a wide variety of reasons including: imagination levels, self-perception, support systems and methods, attitudes, openness to collaboration, independent planning structures, paradigmatic views, on-going challenges, and previous failures to name a few.



It is a shared view that Jackson, county and city, continue to have difficulty rising from its current environment to one of vibrancy, engagement, and pride. To be sure, many elements have contributed to our present state. Outmigration, company closures and/or relocations, economic downturn, and self-deprecation continue to preclude a vibrant breakthrough. Yes, Jackson has had a few, modest gains; however, Jackson has been unable, to date, to leverage these gains and rise above lingering and new troubles.

My sainted grandmother once told me that "...opportunities are all around you. You just need to be open enough to see them, courageous enough to seek them, and strong enough to live them." Perhaps just such an opportunity presents itself now...an opportunity to reset the paradigm for Jackson and usher in a new, exciting, collaborative future. In so doing, we, as a community, would realize our "Collective Impact." By working together, we can learn how we can break down silos, abandon isolated approaches, work across sectors, and align resources for maximum effectiveness.

Not since the 1984 "Jackson County 1990" effort, and the 1995 "Jackson Community Transformation Project," has there been any coordinating work done in the county from a broad, apolitical, asset-based, and collaborative standpoint. Indeed a local newspaper recorded in an editorial that few realistic goals were set, let alone achieved as a result of either of these initiatives. (Jackson Citizen Patriot, April 2011).

On August 15, 2011 a number of community members met at Jackson Community College to undertake a “Fresh Conversation About Our Community.” At the meeting, participants were asked of their “personal truth” about Jackson. Striking data were presented regarding a number of social, economic, and educational ills of the area. In addition, the following general observations were offered:

- Change is all around us, yet most of our work in the community is reactionary, limited in scope, even uncoordinated with others;
- Our work for change generally involves the “usual suspects” in our community and lacks broader involvement of many;
- Our plans generally lack longer-term view, lack commitment by many for their creation, and are generally without accountability; and
- Our community approach to issues tends to be, as Steven Covey (1989) stated, a “scarcity mentality” rather than an “abundance mentality.” (Note: Covey defines the “Scarcity Mentality” as people seeing their life as having only so much, as though there were only one pie out there. And if someone were to get a big piece of the pie, it would mean less for everybody else. It is the zero-sum paradigm of life).

Participants noted that the creation of a commonly-held vision and the uncommon unity of the community toward that vision was highly desirable. Meeting discussants posited that if we were to achieve a better, preferred future, Jackson County must be willing to:

1. Subordinate ourselves personally, professionally, and organizationally for the benefit of all;
2. Arrive at a single, unifying, and compelling view of our collective future;
3. Come together as citizens of the county desiring a brighter future;
4. Commit to laboring strategically in the achievement of the preferred future and hold each other accountable for the quality of the work;
5. Believe that the ideas and decisions of others can add to this work;
6. Leverage existing initiatives and plans, in a coordinated approach, so as to leverage community gains;
7. Target only high leverage goals for our community; and
8. Enroll others in the creation of our future...

At the conclusion of that meeting, participants affirmed the preceding points and requested that they be involved in subsequent efforts related to this work.

A recent article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* offered a practical example of the benefits of a community working together on core initiatives. Specifically, authors Kania and Kramer found through their research, involving serious education problems in the community of Cincinnati, OH, that significant change and improvement occurred only when "...a core group of community leaders decided to abandon their individual agendas in favor of a collective approach..." (2011, p. 36). The resulting effort, known as "Strive," provided proof positive of the collective impact derived from varied community members, from different community sectors, who are committed to solving a common problem.

Perhaps one of the core challenges of coming together as a community is precipitated by what author and Futurist Joel Barker (1993) calls paradigm paralysis. He suggested our paradigms of community need to "shift" in order to find the future...and from that vantage point, we are better able to solve old problems in new and exciting ways. He also noted that by using only our current community paradigm (i.e., the one that is responsible for our present state – the way we see and understand the world), we will get the same results we have always obtained.

While attention to our history, systems, and principles is important, sustained change and collective impact for our community can only come for our community when we, collectively, are open to other ideas, new systems, new possibilities, the involvement of many, and in so doing, write a new history together.

The good news is that we, in Jackson, are not alone. Other communities have succeeded in transforming themselves, while others are struggling to pull themselves out of various economic, environmental, operational holes. Thankfully, there are some professionals who can offer a new hope for the future. Such a person is Dr. Suzanne W. Morse who has expanded many of the aforementioned ideas in her book, *Smart Communities: How Citizens and Local Leaders Can Use Strategic Thinking to Build a Brighter Future*. The basic structure of this new paradigm includes:

1. **Investing Right the First Time** – identifying the high leverage issues and decisions that yield the greatest return;
2. **Working Together** – building the partnerships necessary to create new opportunities for success;
3. **Building on Community Strengths** – emphasizing what is right and unique rather than what is wrong;
4. **Practicing Democracy** – developing ways for citizens to actually *choose* their future rather than *react* to it;
5. **Preserving the Past** – using buildings, history, and culture to inform and catalyze the future;

6. **Growing Leaders** – creating opportunities for citizens to learn and develop their capacities to take action together; and
7. **Investing in a Brighter Future** – encouraging risk-taking and entrepreneurship in tackling tough community issues.

As she noted: “Smart Communities offers hope to those who are striving to make significant inroads to their communities and addresses vital issues such as poverty, race relations, and offering a good start to all children.”

Some of the early work of moving in this new direction is already underway. For example, Allegiance Hospital, one of our communities’ largest employers, has fully embraced the quality and institutional effectiveness methodologies that have resulted in the use of data to improve healthcare, prompt organizational savings, and save lives. Allegiance is looking for ways to engage the broader community in advancing quality in other organizations as part of its mission of giving back to its communities.

Another example is the work of Mr. Bob Carlton, who with the help of Spring Arbor University and other community partners undertook a formal “mapping” of existing community systems. This project has already been completed and will soon be available to citizens via the web. More specifically, seven targeted areas of services and resources in Jackson were defined as: Education & Training Systems; Business Systems; Arts, Culture, Sports & Entertainment Systems; Economic Development Systems; Government Systems; Health Care Systems; and Community, Social, and Special Needs Systems. These elements can provide a fundamental connection to a variety of community supports as we seek to leverage available resources and avoid unnecessary duplication.

In a similar vein, the Jackson County Commission and administration undertook a strategic planning effort in 2007 and developed seven direction statements for focus: Safe Community; Economic Development; Healthy Community; Cultural & Recreational Opportunities; Education; Cooperation between Governments; and Improved Work Environment. Though some of these elements are unique to the county, some are similar areas of focus by other community organizations. Indeed, a review of numerous strategic plans in Jackson County tends to reveal one or more similar focal points for the respective organizations. Seven committees, comprised of various community members, have defined goals for these directions statements and are currently working on them. (The County is up for an updating of their strategic plan within the next 12 months).

In an effort then strike a balance with existing community efforts and plans, and to coalesce them into core areas of needed attention in the region, the following principal “strands” are suggested as a basis of conversation for the development of a new vision

for Jackson and its people as we engage in a different way of thinking about our community:

- Education
- Economic and Workforce Development
- Health and Well-Being
- Cultural and Recreational Opportunities
- Government Efficiency and Effectiveness
- Community Safety
- Community and Social Supports

As part of our work, we would make use evidence-based interventions for improvement, as well as build quality systems and practices into our redesign.

On November 3, 2011, Dr. Suzanne Morse will visit Jackson County in the hopes of suggesting an alternative approach to community direction-setting and success. She will offer a variety of examples from her research and consulting work that have demonstrated the effectiveness of the seven principles of Smart Communities in a significant and sustainable way. Though many of the communities were prompted to undertake a change due to a crisis event, it is possible to undertake the same work when enough like-minded and committed persons seek a different approach.

Following Dr. Morse's visit, interested persons will be invited to undertake a broader community conversation to determine if the Smart Community approach makes sense for Jackson. Should citizens agree that this is a viable and worthwhile activity, community members will be sought out to be a part of the effort. The effort will be inclusive and incorporate traditional and new voices. It will include a review of best practices in other communities as we create a common, compelling, and widely-held vision. Other objectives for moving forward could include:

- Enroll a core team as "Jackson Champions" to serve as coordinators and communicators of the work;
- Enroll others who will commit to the initiative;
- Undertake benchmarking and review promising practices nationwide;
- Affirm or redefine threads for targeted work that contribute to the compelling and unifying vision;
- Work to develop up to 1-2 achievable targets or "threads" per strand;
- Coordinate and communicate with other community organizations for goal alignment;
- Establish a "Jackson 2020 Summit" in the spring to advance the discussion;
- Encourage and invite community comment and feedback;
- Undertake the work;

- Utilize quality processes in our work;
- Conduct monthly initiative progress review meetings;
- Establish scorecards for each strand and thread – post online;
- Establish a common web page for the work and related communications;
- Conduct another community visioning process in 2030;
- Work as a collective committed to the work, subordinating ourselves, caring not who gets the credit; and

The success will be determined, in part, by the realization of a new, compelling and unifying vision, the engagement of the people of this county, the development of new community leaders, the growth of the community, its improved health, the achievement of its students, and the realization of an overall improved quality of life for Jackson County citizens. To be a great community by the year 2020, we will need to create a smart community that unites all of its strengths. The journey begins now.

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