

# Goal-setting basics seem simple, but are really important

*The temptation is that things like sticking to a long-term plan, implementing its steps and engaging the public can take a backseat to daily operating pressures.*

By Susan Cover

**W**hen Brunswick Sewer District General Manager Leonard Blanchette decided to lead a strategic planning process two years ago, he knew it would take a lot of work.

If he had to do it over again, he would hire a consultant to help focus the discussion and make sure everyone involved clearly understood their roles.

"It's worth the time, effort and money to hire a consultant or someone who's good at facilitating to develop a strategic plan," he said.

Blanchette, who's worked at the district for 30 years, said he thought the staff and sewer district board could go through the process alone. But he said discussions sometimes got bogged down in details and that someone independent of the district would have been able to move things along more quickly.

Prior to establishing the 10-year strategic plan, the sewer district had a plan specific to the wastewater treatment plant and a five-year rolling capital plan.

"But that had been the extent of goal setting," said Blanchette, who oversees a \$3 million budget and 17 employees.

Now, every January, the board discusses goals for the New Year and how they fit in with the strategic plan. This year, the board decided to update the strategic plan in July.

"Clearly, you need to do it to make sure goals haven't changed," he said. "It's a living document. You don't put it on a shelf."

## Constant attention

City and town officials from across the state echoed Blanchette's sentiment

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## LONG-TERM PLANNING TIPS

- Consider hiring a consultant who specializes in facilitating goal setting sessions.
- Find a way to balance the goals expressed by elected officials versus expectations of municipal staffers.
- Make sure everyone, not just senior management, is working toward the same goals.
- Think about cross-department planning to help ease the workload.
- Get residents involved in setting long-term goals and take advantage of their outside expertise.

that strategic plans, comprehensive plans, long-term goals or even benchmarks set in a performance evaluation need constant time and attention to get the desired end result. It's planning – and implementation – that counts, they said.

In Millinocket, the focus is on a five-year capital plan, said Town Manager John Davis. While council members may change or have different goals from year to year, Davis said it's important to stick to the plan whenever possible.

That can be hard when the budget isn't big enough to cover all the needs, he said.

"It's hard to set goals if you don't have the money to do them," he said.

Another variable comes when new council members with different ideas are elected. A former Millinocket council member for seven years, Davis understands the delicate balance from both sides.

"The best advice is once you map out a plan, stick with it," he said. "The problem is the council might change every year. Lately we've been able to convince new councilors it's the right thing to do."

Long-term planning and goal setting are ongoing in Brewer, said City

Manager Stephen Bost. He said many of the city council's goals are tied to his annual performance review, which he then uses to set goals with various members of his staff. It's a team approach that works for a variety of goals, including working together to entice new businesses to locate in the city.

"I try to chisel away at the goals council has set," he said.

For example, early on in his 19-year tenure, the council directed Bost to have the city take over a quasi-municipal water company. When the Eastern Fine Paper mill closed, he worked with Cianbro to find a new use for it. And, when a new business wants to come to town, Bost gets all department heads together in one room to meet with company officials to answer as many questions as possible right up front.

All of that takes planning and a manager to make sure council goals are implemented, he said.

"I think the planning component is very important but so is the implementation piece," he said. "One of the things we pride ourselves on in Brewer is the team approach to economic development."

## Outlook in Turner

In Turner, the need to update

the comprehensive plan is driving the long-term planning, said Town Manager Kurt Schaub. When it's completed – hopefully by the 2019 town meeting – the plan will drive town decisions for 10 years with regard to everything from capital needs to where new growth should occur, he said.

Turner has gained population in the last several years and serves as a bedroom community for commuters who travel to Lewiston, Auburn, Augusta and Portland. Although they are always aware of continuing cost of education, he said there's been enough residential and commercial growth to help ease the property tax burden.

The town has “relative-ly strict ordinances” when it comes to allowing new development, although a new Hannaford store and Dollar General have opened in recent years. Town officials push developers to help maintain the town's New England village architecture style, he said.

The comprehensive planning committee is independent of the select board and the planning board, and is made up of volunteers. Rather than hire a consultant and start from scratch, Schaub said the plan developed 10 years ago still had enough relevant parts that what it really needed was an update.

“We have a very dedicated and interested committee who agreed to do a lot of the grunt work on their own,” he said.

The committee has met twice a month for three months, will hold community forums in late spring or summer and will use the online survey service SurveyMonkey to get input from residents. While the committee will print some surveys for those who do not have internet service, using the online system will save the town considerable money



**Kurt Schaub**



**Scott Gagne**



**Stephen Bost**

on printing and mailing, he said.

If all goes as planned, he hopes the updated comprehensive plan will cost somewhere between \$6,000 and \$10,000. Schaub said it's a little early to know whether his approach to the work will be a success, but he encouraged other cities and towns to think about it.

“It will require an energetic group of people to put it together,” he said. “Most towns have a core group of people like that.”

### **Rangeley projects**

For some towns, it makes sense to hire a consultant to help with economic development and long-term planning, rather than a staff member. That's the case in Rangeley, where Darryl Sterling works as an economic development consultant.

Among the projects in the works is a \$10 million airport expansion, downtown revitalization projects, a new sidewalk connecting the downtown to a scenic overlook and broadband and communications infrastructure work, he said. About a year ago, the town developed a plan for the Rangeley region and since then, it's been “full speed ahead,” he said.

Within the action plan are phases set for two, three and four years, with concrete deadlines. Sterling, who also works for Wilton and Richmond, said planning is important, but it's only part of the work.

“It's very important but you have to also do the action and implementation,” he said. “You have to do both.”

For Biddeford Fire Chief Scott Gagne, working closely with the head of public works has been extremely helpful. Together, they have a 20-year purchasing plan that gets updated every year.

“Budgetarily, it's easier when you go before council,” he said. “It's easier to go together. It's not just me saying ‘I

need, I need, I need.’ ”

Between 2005 and 2017, calls to the fire department have jumped from 2,062 to 5,368, he said. Gagne cited many reasons for that – an active local hospital, a growing University of New England campus, renovated mill space that is now used as housing – but he said staffing has not increased. And as needs evolve in the city, he needs to be able to update his long-term plan that includes everything from maintaining the fire station, to ballistic vests, to stretchers and garage door openers, he said.

Gagne, who leads a department with a \$4.8 million budget and 44 full-time employees, said he presents his plan to city council once a year and makes it available to them year-round so that there are no surprises come budget season.

“Budgets are tight everywhere,” he said. “Everything is getting more expensive. I think it's just planning and being honest and being up front and not surprising them.”

### **Engaging the public**

In Caribou, City Manager Dennis Marker holds an annual goal setting meeting with the council to plan out projects for the next year. A 10-year comprehensive plan was put in place in 2014 that covers a wide range of city services and functions, including buildings, parks, roads, staffing and economic development. While the plan spans 10 years, Marker said in practice, it's important to revisit the plan every five years to see if goals have changed or if the underlying assumptions behind the goals have shifted.

One of the most important facets of long term planning in Caribou is citizen involvement, he said. Residents serve on city council subcommittees and are an active part of helping with economic development.

With 63 full time staffers and a \$10 million budget, Caribou has two staff members who work on economic development part-time with residents helping with the rest. In addition, Marker and other city staff must focus on immediate needs, which can interfere with long-term planning.

“Public engagement is key,” he said. “Oftentimes, too often, we try to just think inside the box. The long-term vision of where you want to be going? That's where your citizens need to be involved.” ■