

# **A Guide to Implementation and Benchmarking for Rural Communities**

**USDA Rural Development  
Office of Community Development**

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USDA Rural Development’s Office of Community Development administers the Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities (EZ/EC) program, a Presidential initiative designed to provide economically depressed rural areas and communities with real opportunities for growth and revitalization. Its mission: to create self-sustaining, long-term economic development in areas of pervasive poverty, unemployment, and general distress, and to demonstrate how distressed communities can achieve self- sufficiency through innovative and comprehensive strategic plans developed and implemented by alliances among private, public, and nonprofit entities.

Additional copies of this guidebook may be obtained from:

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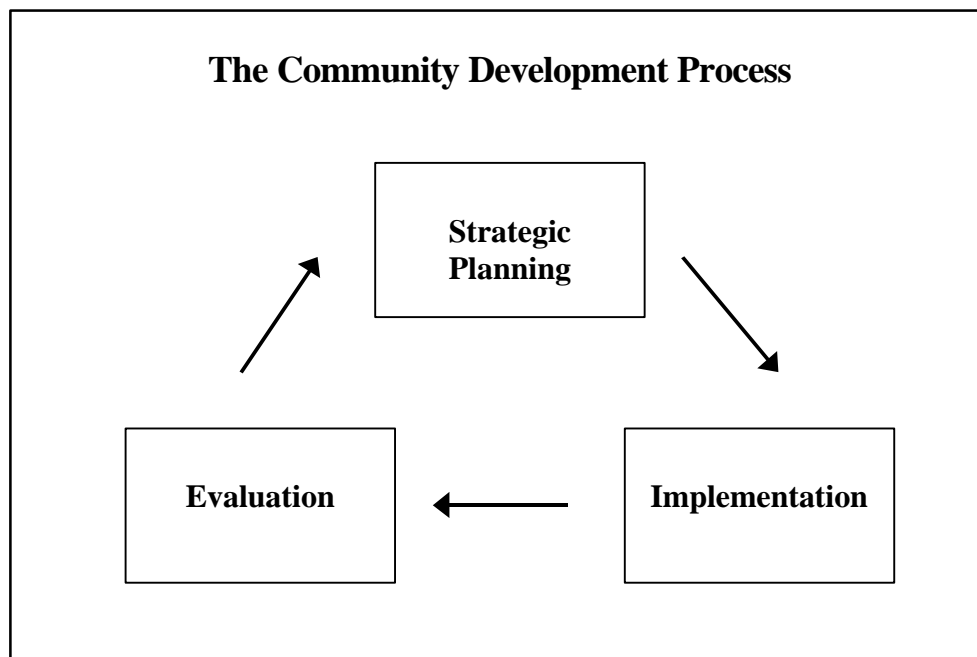
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## Preface

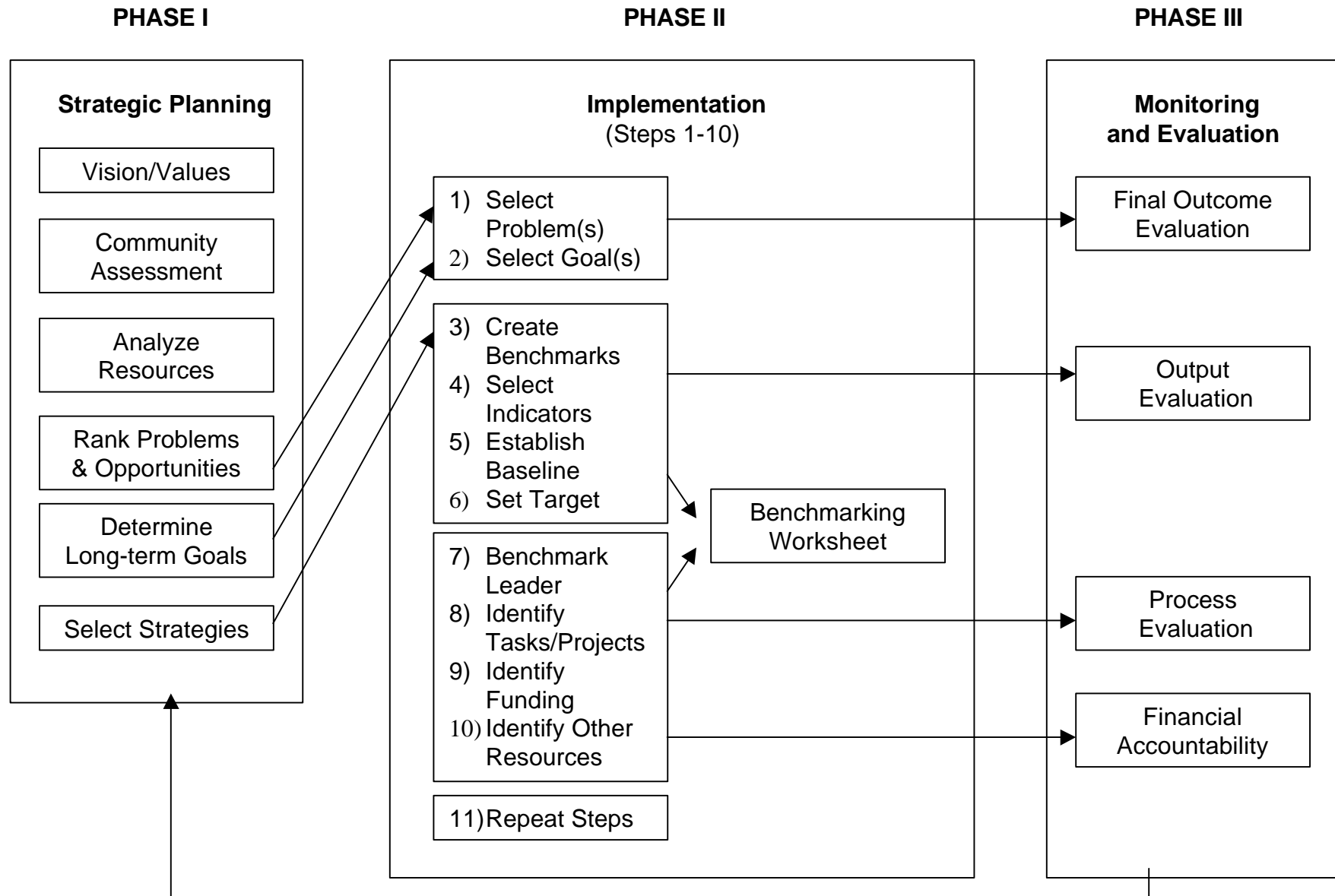
The community development process consists of three phases: strategic planning, implementation of the plan, and evaluation of the process and its outcomes. Strategic planning looks at the big picture and helps you decide what is important. During implementation, you do the things that will help you reach your goal. After completing these activities, evaluate them to see how well they worked and how they can be improved.

This guidebook leads you through the process of implementation and gives suggestions for evaluation. It describes how to create work programs, choose performance measures, and evaluate progress. The terms used in this book may differ from those used by other government agencies, communities, or private companies; however, the steps of the process are basically the same. For your convenience, a glossary of terms is located at the back of the guidebook.

The diagram below shows how the phases of the community development process are connected. The following page contains a flowchart of the steps within each phase.



# PHASES of the COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS



## I. Develop a Work Program

Implementation begins with a completed strategic plan.<sup>1</sup> If you do not have a plan, develop one. The Office of Community Development, within the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development mission area publishes a companion guidebook called *A Guide to Strategic Planning for Rural Communities*, which may be helpful. If your strategic plan was developed some time ago, review it carefully and see if it needs to be updated. Everything that you do toward developing your community should flow from the plan, so make any needed changes now. Your plan should contain the following major elements:

- Vision Statement
- Community Assessment
- Goals
- Strategies
- Evaluation Process

Your strategic plan should contain goals and strategies for a 10- to 50-year period. Everything cannot be done at once, so divide the plan into several programs of work -- a 10-year plan into five 2-year work programs. Each 2-year work program describes what will be done, who will do them, to or with whom, at what cost, and how success will be measured.

### Step 1. Select Problems/Opportunities

Review the problems and opportunities that you ranked highly in your strategic plan. Which problems are most urgent, important, or timely? Do you have enough information about each of these problems, or need additional study and research? If you need more information, include the cost of a study in your first budget.

Select the problems/opportunities that you want to address in the next 2 years. Start with a smaller work program until you have the experience and confidence to do more. If you try to do too many things, you may not do any of them very well. Your work program should include items that are most critical or those that will be most effective. It is also very important to have some early successes so that people in the community will feel confident about the process.

### Step 2. Select Goals and Strategies

For problems/opportunities that you selected, what goals and strategies have you identified? You may have more than one strategy for a goal. Decide which strategies you want to implement in the next 2 years. Are there any major obstacles

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<sup>1</sup> For a definition of a "strategic plan" as well as many other terms used throughout this guidebook, see the Glossary on pages 17-18.

that would make it difficult to complete a strategy now? Consider these issues before moving ahead. Examples include:

- Does the strategy attack the root causes of a problem?
- Is it a powerful method for change?
- Does it involve partnerships among different community groups?
- Will the strategy promote community empowerment in decisionmaking?
- Will the strategy distribute benefits widely in the community (Consider age, gender, race, income, and disability)?
- How will the strategy affect the community's economic diversity and vitality?
- How will the strategy affect the community's self-reliance and vulnerability to outside influences (e.g., global trade, severe weather, economic downturns, absentee business owners)?
- How will the strategy affect the community's resilience or ability to adapt to changing circumstances?
- How will the strategy impact existing public services, such as schools, police, roads, water, and sewer?
- What is the net impact on community finances (revenues vs. long-term costs)?
- How will the strategy affect the community's natural resources (air, water, energy, and land)?
- Will the strategy enhance the efficient use of community resources (financial, man-made, natural)?
- How much waste or pollution will the strategy create?
- What will be the cumulative effect of this and other related actions (e.g., approving a subdivision may contribute to a gradual loss of farmland.)?
- How will this action further the community's long-term vision and goals?
- What impact will this action have off-site (in neighboring communities or within the larger region)?
- How much risk does this action involve? Consider whether it puts all of the community's eggs in one basket or if some aspects of the action could succeed while others do not.

### Step 3. Create Benchmarks

The next step is to decide which strategies you will benchmark. In the process, choose your own performance measures and track your progress in achieving them. This will help you know when you have achieved the desired results.

**Benchmarks are strategies for which you will measure results.**

Decide which strategies should be stand-alone benchmarks and which should be grouped under one benchmark. A benchmark usually involves a number of smaller projects and tasks, such as applying for funding or preparing a plan. If you select an extremely large number of benchmarks, you may have difficulty tracking them. If you select only a few benchmarks, they may not reflect the whole range of problems and issues that you are addressing or may be too general to be of practical help. *For example, a community may want to build a new police station in three different towns. Instead of creating a separate benchmark for each station, create one umbrella benchmark for improving police protection in the community and make each station, and its multiple projects, tasks under the benchmark.*

There are different ways to number your benchmarks. Assign each benchmark a unique whole number and number them consecutively (1,2,3). When benchmarks are completed, do not reuse the numbers. They then become an historical record of your accomplishments.

On pages 10-13 are Benchmarking Worksheets and Worksheet Instructions. Make copies of these for use at community planning meetings. The Worksheet Instructions are a shortened version of the steps described in this booklet.

Complete one worksheet for each benchmark in your work program. At first, these worksheets may seem complicated and overwhelming. Keep in mind that they are a planning tool, so it is alright if you do not have all this information when you start. You will find that estimates of resources, budgets, and timelines will change over time.

#### **Step 4. Select an Indicator**

An indicator or unit of measure will tell you if you have achieved your benchmark. It shows progress towards meeting a goal. Choose an indicator that is easy to understand -- something you can count and measure, such as "Number of X," "Percentage of X," "Cost of X," or "Frequency of X." The indicator should show progress towards meeting a goal. The quality of what you produce is as important as the quantity.

**If you don't measure it,  
you can't improve it, and  
you can't brag about it.**

Finding a good indicator can be tricky. Different people in your community may disagree about which indicator to use. Select an indicator that most people prefer. Consider these criteria when choosing indicators:



- Relates directly to the benchmark
- Easy to understand
- Information readily available
- Actions from your benchmark can influence result
- Shows progress toward long-term goals
- Measures results, not the effort put into the activities
- Can be measured objectively
- Short time horizon

Choose only one indicator for each benchmark, even though there are many ways to measure success. *For example, the community may want to expand a health center that will serve 100 new clients and employ 2 additional physicians. The community may choose as its primary indicator the number of clients served.*

Identify where to get information about your indicator -- the source of data. If you don't know where to look, start by asking your community development partners, such as local nonprofit agencies. Common places to find data are colleges and universities, government agencies, utilities, and private companies.

Don't choose an indicator simply because it is easy to get the numbers. You may be measuring the wrong thing by focusing on quantity instead of quality. Keep in mind that the indicator should show progress towards a long-term goal.

It is difficult to find indicators for benchmarks that address issues such as community capacity building or sustainability. In these cases, you may not be able to measure direct results. *For example, a community's goal is to overcome racial conflict. Its benchmark is to create a conflict resolution center in the community. The indicator in this case could be the number of disputes resolved by the center. It is an indirect result of implementing the benchmark.*

Another option for measuring the quality of your actions is to use surveys. Surveys are an excellent way to get feedback from your customers and improve your services. For example, if you established a job training program, use a survey to determine how many people were able to find a job after completing the training. Your performance indicator could be the percentage of satisfied customers, based on followup surveys. A survey is most useful when you ask the right questions. For help in designing a good survey, contact your local community college or an experienced marketing professional.

Take advantage of the work others have done. Many organizations have researched and used performance indicators for years. The State of Oregon's Department of Human Resources, Adult and Family Services Division has established indicators in the areas of education, welfare, youth, and family programs. The North Central Regional Center for Rural Development at Iowa

State University has researched indicators for sustainable development and capacity building. The following chart contains examples of indicators for various goals:

<b>Goal</b>	<b>Benchmark</b>	<b>Indicator (Unit of measure)</b>
Excellent health care	Expand local hospital	Number of new clients served
Close-knit community	Establish a leadership training program	Number of individuals completing courses
Clean environment	Clean up polluted river	Level of pollution
Low poverty rate	Set up a job training program	Number of clients going from welfare to work
Safe neighborhoods	Set up a neighborhood watch program	Percent reduction in the neighborhood crime rate
Educated youth	Create a youth mentoring program	Percentage of youth completing high school on time
Good infrastructure	Build more affordable housing	Number of affordable housing units
Healthy economy	Set up a micro-loan program	Number of loans given for business start-ups

### **Step 5. Establish a Baseline**

The baseline is your starting point. It must be a number or other measurable unit. You may need to do some research to get the data for your baseline, or you may have collected that information in your strategic plan. Use the same source of data for measuring both your baseline and your benchmark target.

### **Step 6. Set a Benchmark Target**

The target is a number or other measurable unit that sets the standard you wish to reach. Use the same unit of measure as for your baseline. *For example, the health center currently serves 50 clients per day. It will serve 150 per day when it is expanded. The baseline is 50. The benchmark target is 150. If you use a qualitative indicator, such as the percentage of satisfied customers, your benchmark target could be: 75 percent of individuals surveyed after the training rate the course as relevant to their job or would recommend it to others.*

### **Step 7. Assign a Benchmark Leader**

Identify the person or organization(s) responsible for managing this benchmark. They will supervise any task or project leaders, track funding, and monitor activities. They should report to the steering committee and the lead organization on progress and on how and when money is spent, do troubleshooting, and maintain good communication with their customers.

### **Step 8. Identify Tasks and Projects**

Describe the specific actions required to complete each benchmark. Tasks might include applying for funding, holding a public hearing, hiring a contractor, selecting a site, etc. Identify a task leader, projected timelines (start/end dates), and a projected budget for each task. Do not duplicate costs under multiple tasks. For example, if the task is fundraising, don't list the amount you seek, just the cost of applying for funding.

### **Step 9. Identify Funding Resources**

Identify potential funding for this benchmark. Start with the resources already available. Under source/partner, indicate whether it is a Federal, State, or local government, private sector business, nonprofit agency, civic group, other local source, or a combination of any of the above. Provide the name of the funding organization and the relevant program. Funds received should be currently available. Funds needed are those you apply for.

### **Step 10. Identify Other Resources**

Identify any nonmonetary items, resources, or assets that can help you with this benchmark. Be creative. Sometimes a few motivated volunteers can get a job done faster than if you waited for funding to hire a contractor. Think about donations of time, materials, space, technical assistance, or volunteer resources. These are generally called "in-kind" contributions and are important to accomplishing the strategic plan. Start with resources already available. Identify the partners (private, nonprofit, local, State, Federal) that can help you. Refer to your strategic plan's resource analysis for ideas about the range of assets your community possesses.

**BENCHMARKING WORKSHEET Part I**

1. Problem/Opportunity \_\_\_\_\_

2. Goal \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Benchmark Description (e.g., 1,2,3) # \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Indicator \_\_\_\_\_ Source of data: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Baseline (quantity) \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Benchmark Target (quantity) \_\_\_\_\_

7. Benchmark leader(s) \_\_\_\_\_

8. Tasks/Projects	Task Leader	Projected Timeline Start (mo/yr) End	Budget*
a. _____	_____	___/___ - ___/___	\$ _____
b. _____	_____	___/___ - ___/___	\$ _____
c. _____	_____	___/___ - ___/___	\$ _____
d. _____	_____	___/___ - ___/___	\$ _____
e. _____	_____	___/___ - ___/___	\$ _____
f. _____	_____	___/___ - ___/___	\$ _____
g. _____	_____	___/___ - ___/___	\$ _____

\*Projected or actual spending

**Total** \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**BENCHMARKING WORKSHEET Part II**

Benchmark Description (e.g., 1,2,3) # \_\_\_\_\_

9. Funding Resources

Source/Partner*	Agency Name	Funder's Program	Funds Received	Funds Needed
Federal	Dept. of Health & Human Services	SSBG – (EZ/EC program only)	\$ _____	\$ _____
_____	_____	_____	\$ _____	\$ _____
_____	_____	_____	\$ _____	\$ _____
_____	_____	_____	\$ _____	\$ _____
_____	_____	_____	\$ _____	\$ _____
_____	_____	_____	\$ _____	\$ _____
*Federal, State, Local, Private, or NonProfit		Totals	\$ _____	\$ _____

10. In-Kind/Technical Assistance Resources

Source/Partner Quantity	/Volunteers	Description of contribution
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Notes:

**Phase II:**

**Instructions for the Benchmarking Worksheets**

1.	What is the problem or opportunity?	<p><b>Problem/Opportunity</b>                      The strategic plan identifies and prioritizes issues in your community. Typical categories include housing, infrastructure, education, health care, economic opportunity, environment, crime, social services.</p>	<p><b>EXAMPLE:</b>  <i>Lack of affordable housing.</i></p>
2.	What is your long-term goal?	<p><b>Goal</b>                      The goal identifies what your community wants to achieve regarding a particular problem or opportunity. Select the goals from your strategic plan that you want to focus on in the next 2 years.</p>	<p><i>Increase number of affordable housing units.</i></p>
3.	How will you achieve this goal?	<p><b>Benchmark Description</b>                      Describe how you plan to achieve your goal. Select measurable strategies, because you will choose performance indicators for them. Benchmarks usually involve a number of smaller projects and tasks, such as applying for funding or preparing a plan. By creating many benchmarks, you may have difficulty tracking them. But only a few benchmarks may not reflect the whole range of problems and issues being addressed. Assign each benchmark a unique whole number and number them consecutively (1,2,3).</p>	<p><i>1. Build new affordable housing units.</i></p>
4.	How will you know if you are progressing towards your goal?	<p><b>Indicator and Source of data</b>                      An indicator shows progress towards meeting a goal. Choose an indicator that is easy to understand and can be measured. Identify the source of your data. A benchmark may result in several successes. For example, constructing housing may lead to 30 new housing units, 100 persons better housed, 15 construction jobs, and an increase in homeownership. Choose one of these outputs as your main indicator.</p>	<p><i>Number of low-income housing units.                      Source of data: City housing department</i></p>
5.	What is the existing situation?	<p><b>Baseline</b>                      The baseline is the starting point from which a benchmark target is measured. It describes the current status of your indicator.</p>	<p><i>10 affordable housing units</i></p>
6.	What is your target?	<p><b>Benchmark Target</b>                      The target is a measure that sets the standards for your benchmark. Use the same indicator as for your baseline.</p>	<p><i>20 affordable housing units</i></p>

7.	Benchmark Leader(s)	Identify who will coordinate/manage activities for this benchmark.	<i>Lead entity: Housing task force</i>
8.	What activities are required to complete this benchmark?	<p>Task/Project</p> <p>Describe the specific actions required to complete each benchmark. Tasks include: apply for funding, hold a public hearing, hire a contractor, select a site, establish a housing loan fund, etc. Identify a task leader, projected timelines with start and end dates, and a projected budget for each task. Do not duplicate costs under multiple tasks. If the task is to seek funds, don't list the amount you seek, just the cost of applying for funding.</p>	<p><i>1a: Apply to foundations; Housing task force; 5/96-12/96</i></p> <p><i>1b: Hire contractor to do survey; Housing task force; 1/97-3/97</i></p> <p><i>1c: Prepare housing plan; Contractor; 4/97-7/97; \$10,000</i></p> <p><i>1d: Construct 10 units; Contractor; \$500,000</i></p>
9.	What funding do you need to achieve the benchmark?	<p>Funding Resources</p> <p>Identify all potential funding for this benchmark. Start with the readily available resources. Under source/partner, indicate whether it is a Federal, State, or local government, private sector business, or nonprofit agency. Then, provide the name of the agency and the relevant program. Funds received should be currently available for use. Funds needed are those you will apply for.</p>	<p><i>Federal: SSBG: \$10,000</i></p> <p><i>Federal: USDA Rural Housing Service: Funds received \$200,000.</i></p> <p><i>State: Housing Agency: Funds Needed \$200,000.</i></p> <p><i>Non-profit: XYZ Foundation: Funds Needed \$100,000</i></p>
10.	What other resources are needed to achieve the benchmark?	<p>Resource Identification</p> <p>Identify the nonmonetary things you may need (in-kind, technical assistance, or volunteer resources). Be creative. Start with the readily available resources. Identify the partners (private, nonprofit, local, State, Federal) that can help you.</p>	<p><i>Local businesses - computers and office space for task force;</i></p> <p><i>USDA RD technical assistance in grant-writing</i></p>
		Repeat the steps for each benchmark.	

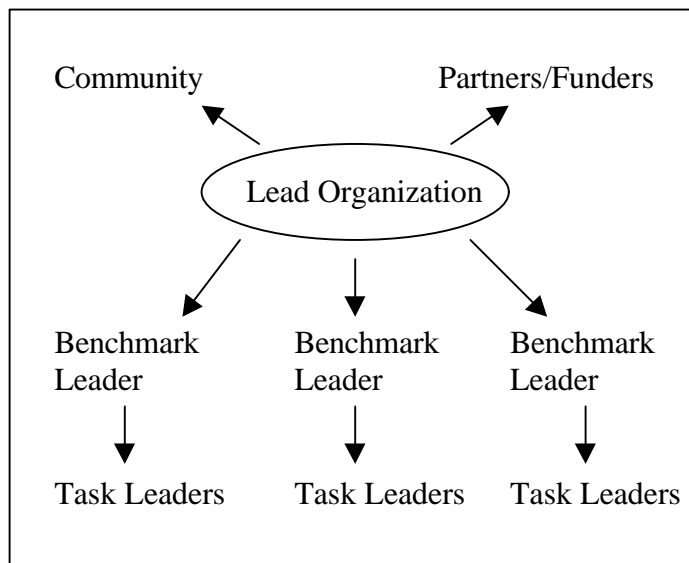
### Helpful Hints:

- Start with your identified needs in the strategic plan and create appropriate projects based on them. Avoid attempting to fit into your plan an unrelated list of projects that already exist in your community. (3).
- Baselines (5) and benchmark targets (6) must use the same indicator (4).
- Try to think through each strategy thoroughly. Be more specific about the major tasks/projects; consider who will do them (5,7), when they will be accomplished, and how much things will cost (8).

## II. Monitoring and Evaluation

### 1. Monitoring

As the strategic plan and work programs are being implemented, your lead organization should track what is going on with all benchmarks. The lead organization is responsible for maintaining good communication with all the partners in the community development process, tracking the use of money, and keeping the entire community and other partners updated about current activities.



Some of the lead organization's responsibilities are described in the strategic plan:

1. Continuing public involvement
2. Annual progress reports
3. Strategic plan review and amendment

In addition, a work program should describe how the community will do the following things:

1. Benchmark review and amendment
2. Financial accountability

#### **Benchmark Review and Amendment**

How and when will the community review its benchmarks? This review can be done at the same time that the strategic plan is reviewed (usually once a year). The review team should include the lead entity, advisory board members, and benchmark leaders as well as community members. The review may identify things that need to be changed in the work program. For example, if the community was unable to obtain a grant, the benchmark must be redesigned to reflect a smaller budget.

Your work program should describe an official, public process to change benchmarks. Avoid



revising your benchmarks every time something needs to be changed. An annual review cycle works well, except in special cases where there may be a new opportunity that requires a quick response. Constant benchmark changes may cause community members to lose interest in the planning process.

### **Financial Accountability**

When you receive funding from an outside source, account for where it goes and keep appropriate documentation. The lead organization should know where all funding is coming from and what it is being spent on. Each benchmark leader should report the sources of funding, technical assistance, and in-kind support and how that money was used on tasks and projects. For reporting purposes of the USDA Empowerment Zones/Enterprise Communities program, financial estimates and figures can be rounded to the nearest thousand. Your community may need to identify more exact numbers.

## **2. Evaluation**

Occasionally, the community should stop and look at what went right or wrong, learn why it happened, and try to build on those successes or prevent similar problems in the future. The strategic plan describes how and when the community will evaluate the process, outputs, and outcomes of the strategic plan. Work programs include specific indicators and benchmark targets for use in evaluating short-term progress.

**Process** Did people complete their tasks on time and within budget? Are partnerships succeeding? A process evaluation helps answer questions -- "What changes are needed in how we are carrying out our plan?" and "How can we do it better?" It may be possible to do a process evaluation during the strategic plan's annual review and update. If you have been actively monitoring your programs, this step should be easy.

**Outputs** An output evaluation asks, "How much of what we planned to do did we actually accomplish?" and "How well did we do it?" Outputs are measurable, short-term results. (e.g., jobs created, houses built, programs started). They result from work program activities. Did you meet your targets, and if so, how well? If you constructed new housing, was the workmanship of high quality? Are new jobs full-time and family-wage jobs with benefits? Use surveys to assess how satisfied people are with your results.

**Outcomes** In evaluating the long-term effectiveness of a strategic plan, ask "How successful were we in tackling the long-term problems in our community?" or "Were we successful in achieving our long-term goals?" Outcomes are improvements in conditions linked to problems and goals (e.g., fewer people living in poverty). They are hard to evaluate because many factors that influence a community's well-being are out of its control (e.g., weather, world trade, technology changes). The outcome evaluation should be made after your strategic plan has been in effect for

a long period of time, such as 10 years.

Many communities overlook the importance of monitoring and evaluating the community development process. When there are pressing deadlines and limited resources, it may seem that evaluation is a luxury you cannot afford. On the contrary, it is critical that you check in with customers in the community to make sure your efforts are heading in the right direction. Building in an evaluation process from the very start will help you get feedback later. The most successful communities maintain momentum, learn from their experiences, and improve as time goes on. Good luck in achieving your community's vision!

## Glossary

Baseline	The condition that exists when a benchmarked activity starts. A benchmark target is compared to this point (e.g., 20 clients served/week).
Benchmark	Strategies for which you will measure results. Benchmarks usually include a number of smaller projects and tasks, such as applying for funding or preparing a plan.
Benchmarking	The process of identifying measurable strategies, selecting indicators, setting targets for output, and tracking progress in meeting them.
Benchmark Leader	The person or agency responsible for coordinating activities related to a benchmark, reporting on progress and funding, and troubleshooting progress of the tasks.
Benchmark Target	A quantitative, short-term performance standard for your actions (e.g., 50 jobs created, 100 clients served).
Evaluation	Takes place in the third phase of the community development process. Review benchmarks and see how well they worked. Lessons learned can be used to improve strategic plans and work programs.
Goal/Objective	A goal describes the condition or end result your community wants.
Implementation	This is the second phase of the community development process. The broad goals and strategies of the strategic plan are translated into action items. Identify specific action items and resources, delegate responsibility, and choose quantitative performance measures.
Indicator	A unit that can be measured (e.g., clients served, jobs created). It tells you if you are making progress toward a goal.
Lead Organization	The agency responsible for managing the implementation of the strategic plan and its work programs.
Monitoring	Takes place in the third phase of the community development process. The lead organization tracks progress and funding and maintains good communication.
Outcomes	End results or conditions after implementing a strategic plan (e.g., low poverty rate). They tell you how well you have met your long-term goals.

Outputs	Measurable, short-term results (e.g., jobs created) to show progress toward long-term goals.
Problem/Opportunity	Major issues identified in a strategic plan. Typical categories include housing, infrastructure, education, health care, economic opportunity, environment, crime, social services, and quality of life.
Source of Data	Where you will get information about your indicator?
Strategy	Actions taken to achieve a goal.
Strategic Plan	A document describing a community's vision, problems/opportunities, strengths and weaknesses, goals and strategies for a 10- to 50-year period.
Strategic Planning	The first phase of the community development process that helps a community identify its highest priority problems and develop strategies to address them.
Task Leader	The person or agency accomplishing a specific task or project.
Task/Project	The specific actions required to complete each benchmark. Tasks include: applying for funding, holding a public hearing, hiring a contractor, selecting a site, etc.
Unit of Measure	See Indicator.
Work Program	A 2-year plan of action based on a strategic plan that describes the activities, who will do them, how much they will cost, when they will be completed, what resources are needed, how performance will be measured, and what results can be expected.

# Where To Get Help

## FEDERAL AGENCIES

- USDA Rural Development, Office of Community Development: 1-800-645-4712
- USDA Rural Development State Office Community Development Program Managers
- USDA Forest Service

### Useful Web Sites for Community Empowerment

<http://www.ezec.gov>

<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/ocd>

## STATE AGENCIES

- State Data Centers for census information
- State departments of community development
- State Cooperative Extension Office

## OTHERS

- Area Planning and Development districts
- Community Action Agencies
- North Central Regional Center for Rural Development
- Northeastern Rural Development Center
- Resource Conservation and Development districts
- Southern Rural Development Center
- Universities, institutes, foundations, “think tanks,” and local consultants
- Western Region Rural Development Center

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