LOUISIANA COMMUNITY NETWORK

Community Assessment

Assessment and analysis provide the foundation for consensus building and strategic planning.

Community Assessment

INTRODUCTION

Successful development in most communities results from many factors aligning to attract new investment and citizens. In a few cases, economic success just happens with very little effort. For the great majority of successful communities, however, success results from careful assessment, inclusive planning, effective plan implementation and continual revision and realignment of the plan over time. A comprehensive community development assessment is an essential tool for communities preparing to create a strategic plan. It is a detailed study of all factors impacting the community, including physical, human, economic, and social infrastructures.

Assessment is one part of a comprehensive community development process. This process includes:

- establishing and organizing a steering group/committee,
- creating a mission statement,
- identifying community stakeholders,
- collecting and analyzing information (assessment),
- developing an effective communications process,
- expanding the community organization,
- creating a vision statement and a comprehensive strategic plan,
- identifying leadership and establishing a plan implementation team,
- implementing the plan,
- reviewing and evaluating the planning outcomes,
- celebrating successes,
- and creating new goals and objectives as needed.[1]

Too often perception is reality in a community's view of itself. Assessment provides a foundation of "reality" or "as-is" for several of its vital functions by: serving as the basis for a community-wide dialogue, making citizens aware of current conditions, building discontentment with the status quo, creating

[1] Community Development Handbook, Community Development Council, 2006

momentum for change, focusing planning efforts for the best use of resources and providing benchmarks for measuring progress.

The objective of this module is to coach communities so they can either perform a comprehensive community assessment or evaluate proposals from those who might be contracted to perform that service. While it is based on sound theory from a variety of fields, it is intended to be an “applied tool” for use by practitioners.

Best practice for assessments is to define a “region” of several communities together rather than looking at individual communities by themselves. Effective leaders realize that factors impacting one population center will impact all surrounding communities and the outlying areas as well. A major plant closing in one parish, for example, impacts workers, retailers, and other businesses in surrounding areas. It is strongly recommended that communities and parishes unite to work on development initiatives. Their coordinated efforts can result in more effective use of development funds and a better chance of attracting new investment and residents.

Community assessments are performed for many reasons by different groups or individuals. The assessments discussed in this module are those performed for economic and community development purposes.

WHY CONDUCT AN ASSESSMENT?

The parish leadership recognized that something needed to be done. Like many rural parishes with a medium-sized city as its population center, the parish was having difficulty attracting new investment, especially diversified investment in small businesses and new residential development. The parish was losing population and many residents were poorly educated and living below the poverty level.

There were some bright spots, including a new high-end residential subdivision and a significant industrial base. However, the parish lacked the downstream jobs supporting its industries that would have produced a mix of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled jobs and help attract new residents and retain existing ones. When residents obtained good paying jobs in the local industries, they often moved to residential locations in other parishes. It was obvious that something needed to be done.

The parish's government and business leaders decided that a strategic development plan was needed. They hired a facilitator and spent eighteen months creating a plan. Numerous public meetings were held during that eighteen month period that involved more than 100 citizens. More than twenty goals were developed, each with a list of supporting projects and ideas.

However, the plan was never implemented. There was confusion. There were too many goals with too many projects to be accomplished. Some ideas were "nice to do," while others were essential. Goals were not prioritized in the plan, and the parish lacked the human and financial resources needed to bring them to reality. Upon closer examination, many of the projects were merely addressing symptoms of major problems rather than addressing the root causes of the problems. What was created was a "wish list" that tried to address every desire identified within the community.

What went wrong? One is reminded of the old phrase, "ready, fire, aim." The plan was directed at action but it was not based on a careful analysis of what needed to be done and in what order. No one identified the strengths on which to build or the weaknesses that needed to be addressed. The plan was created without performing an assessment.

When the development effort was renewed, an assessment was conducted. The various components of the initial plan were weighed against the high priority needs identified in the assessment. It was then that scarce resources were allocated to plan components that would produce the highest outcomes. The plan was reorganized into fewer goals, and lower priority ("nice to do") activities were left until resources could be allocated to address them. Had an assessment been performed first, the development process would not likely have gotten bogged down, and activities would have been focused earlier on actions that would bring about rapid, visible change and lay the groundwork for longer-term change.

Assessments help identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that impact the community and influence its ability to reach its full potential.

This module discusses the type of data included in comprehensive community assessments, provides guidance on data sources, includes a sample assessment of a Louisiana town, and provides a template for compiling data for assessments.

TYPES OF ASSESSMENTS

External Assessments
External Assessments are performed by individuals or groups considering a community for some type of investment or as a business location. These assessments could be performed by a company seeking a location, or by a professional site location consultant performing a search for a company, or by individuals deciding where to live and then find a job. The external assessment is typically performed to narrow the initial field of candidate locations to a “shortlist” of candidates to be examined more closely and, perhaps, to include a site visit. The objectives include identifying communities that meet the location needs based on a set of predetermined criteria, eliminating the communities that do not meet the criteria, and minimizing the cost of the site search. It is possible that community members would not even be aware that an external assessment has been performed.

External assessments are also usually restricted to specific information desired by the individuals or organizations performing them. Both individuals and companies may be interested in such factors as transportation, quality of life, work force, and other costs of living and doing business. Internal assessments will generally be more comprehensive, dealing with all the factors of an external assessment as well as many others.

Internal Assessments
Internal assessments are performed by or for community members themselves. Internal assessments may be performed by an economic development agency, chamber, or other individuals or organizations within the community. They may be led by members of the community, a resource available to them (i.e. a university or community college), or a consultant.

The objective of an internal assessment is to identify the community’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats so a strategic development plan can be created (See module on Strategic Planning). This first step of the planning process requires patience. When community leaders have decided to organize to make improvements, they usually want to jump directly to planning or action without conducting an assessment. “We already know what needs to be done; we need to get started.”

When communities jump directly into planning and action without conducting a foundational assessment, they often address symptoms rather than root causes of problems. Doing this, they bypass the vital community organizational and mobilization process and resulting community dialogue. They fail to obtain buy-in from a broad base of citizens, and they miss the opportunity to communicate with the public and build a groundswell for change.

There are associated costs (time, talent, and fiscal) when completing an assessment even if a volunteer is doing everything. How much is enough? What is the value? Generally, data collection has a point of diminishing returns. When too much data is collected it takes a great deal of time and money (certain data sources can be expensive). The delay in providing feedback reduces interest and momentum. The data collected often becomes repetitive and difficult to process (i.e. “Can’t see the forest for the trees”). When assessments are performed, they need to be conducted using a variety of information-gathering techniques including both research and citizen involvement. The assessment needs to be done within a short period of time (one or two months at most) and the results (“the good, bad, and ugly”) shared with the public.

TYPES OF DATA

Objective And Subjective Data

Information gathered during an assessment usually consists of objective and subjective data. Objective data are substantiated facts such as the capacity of the water and wastewater system, student performance on standardized tests within the local school district, and the unemployment rate. These data are usually the easiest to obtain, but need to be verified and understood within the context of the local environment.

Subjective data are based on opinions, impressions, feelings, and beliefs. It can be obtained from activities such as citizen surveys, careful listening, and observation followed by considered reflection. While opinions may not be based on reality, they reflect the feelings, attitudes, and knowledge level of the community, things essential to identify and confront so that true progress can be made.

Both forms of data are important and help provide a comprehensive overview of community conditions. Some subjective data often can be used to interpret findings in the objective data. The combination provides a better understanding of the overall community environment and its potential and readiness for development.

For example, if a city's wastewater capacity is 500,000 gallons per day and only 375,000 gallons are processed and used on average, it would appear that a processing surplus exists that would permit the recruitment of an industry to town that could use some of this excess wastewater capacity. Wastewater treatment capacity would be considered a strength.

What if, however, we learned on further investigation that most of the system is more than seventy years old, prone to breakdowns, and has substantial line leaks that have prompted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to threaten fines? A citizen survey reveals that most are unaware of the problem and are hesitant to spend large sums of public money (bonding and utility rate increases) on making improvements to the system that outwardly appears to be working well. This example highlights why data has to be carefully collected, examined, and verified from multiple sources before conclusions can be reached, and how the information may need to be shared with the public to gain support for change.

TECHNIQUES FOR GATHERING SUBJECTIVE DATA

Overview on Conducting Surveys:
The following is a discussion of some of the issues and problems involved in performing surveys. Surveys are a vital part of a comprehensive assessment because they provide such a rich insight into opinions, attitudes, and issues. Surveys take many forms. They can be professionally developed and managed or developed and managed locally. Surveys can include one-on-one interviews, focus group meetings, paper surveys, Internet surveys, and visual inspections. They can be done individually or administered in a group environment.

Types of People to Include in Surveying/Interviewing/Focus Groups

Elected and Appointed Officials

- Mayor
- Police chief
- Fire chief
- City council members
- Parish police jury members
- City engineer
- School superintendent(s)

Prominent Citizens/Stakeholders

- Major-business owners/operators

- Major property owners
- Local/regional philanthropists
- Neighborhood and civic leaders
- Bankers
- Minority group leaders
- Leaders of faith-based organizations

Key Informants
Key informants are individuals who may possess technical and/or historical information about the community.

- Realtors
- Engineers
- University leadership, researchers and professors
- Work force development center representatives
- Small Business Development Center representatives
- Utility representatives
- Local/regional/state economic development representatives

These individuals can provide valuable insight into past actions, successes, and failures, and the factors that are positively and negatively impacting the community.

Types of Surveys

Stakeholder Survey
As part of the initial research to establish "what" the community or region is before moving on to determine what it wishes to "become," it is often useful to survey various stakeholders to find out what their perceptions are with respect to the area. An example of this survey form, which has proven to be very useful and practical for such a purpose, is included in the online toolbox. The stakeholder survey form will identify what local people perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of the community as well as highlight key problems. The surveys may need to be modified to more accurately reflect the concerns of the specific community.

A stakeholder survey could be mailed to each household or can be published in the local newspaper. It also can be made available via a local website and then promoted heavily so that people respond.

Business Survey
Another survey, also in the toolbox, has been designed for the business community. It focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of the community as they relate to operating a business there. If the community has already undertaken a business retention survey, this new survey may not be necessary.

If this survey is undertaken, the questionnaire should be completed by business owners and managers who have a focus on “primary” operations and are not strictly serving the local market. Retail stores and local services are concerned more with local sales than with the competitiveness of the community as a location for manufacturing, distribution, call centers, agribusiness, or business services.

Visual Tour (Windshield Tour)
Windshield tours are an important aspect of assessments. Most citizens do not travel throughout their town. They tend to go to the same stores, take the same routes to and from work, and go to recreational activities at the same locations. They rarely see what is taking place “off their beaten paths.”

Simply take a drive through town. The community might be divided into sections depending on how large it is. Every street doesn’t need to be visited, but be certain to stop at corners to see if any conditions warrant further investigation. As the tour progresses, look for such things as:

- Street conditions
- Condition of buildings
- Vacant and underutilized commercial buildings (e.g., buildings that may only be used on weekends or that are occupied but have very low occupancy)
- Presence or absence of litter, landscaping, and signs of vandalism or gang activity (e.g., broken windows and graffiti).

Consider what is unusual, attractive, or distasteful. Think of what the ideal appearance would be for a town like this and make judgments as to what deviates from or reflects that standard.
Some ideas for what to look for are provided in the section above. It might be best to say, “You’ll know it when you see it.” Here are a few examples:

- Overgrown lots filled with debris and trash
- Broken down cars parked in front yards
- Farm animals fenced in on residential property in town
- Unpainted and poorly maintained homes with little to no landscaping (no curb appeal)
- A mix of deteriorated housing and homes in good condition
- Mobile homes in neighborhoods with middle- and upper-income homes
- Vacant land with infrastructure (roads and utilities)
- Rail access
- Recreational facilities
- Condition of public facilities including schools
- City hall

- Municipal equipment
- Condition and vacancy status of buildings on “Main Street” or downtown
- The type of businesses in town (e.g., gaming, truck stops, adult entertainment shops, professional businesses, retail stores)

Use a Digital Camera

Often when leaders are confronted with the results of an assessment, some reject the negative findings. They will deny the existence of homes and buildings in poor condition, streets in need of repair, or other negative findings. As explained above, many of these conditions are in areas not traveled by all citizens, especially some of the more prominent ones.

Pictures that support the findings become valuable. Thanks to inexpensive, high quality digital cameras, it is possible to record windshield tour observations during an assessment. These can be quickly cut and pasted into reports or included in PowerPoint presentations and shared with everyone. When confronted with the visual evidence, it is difficult to ignore conditions that require attention.

Tips for Designing a Survey

When designing a survey, be certain to carefully word the questions. Word each item following the same pattern so the respondents do not have to adjust their response patterns (e.g., “To what extent do you agree with the following statement” followed by an item, “To what extent do you disagree with the following statement”). Do not imbed the “correct” answer in the question or lead the respondent to make a “socially acceptable” choice (e.g., “Most community leaders believe….What do you think?”). Leave a blank space for comments so that respondents can explain their responses or provide explanations of their reasoning. Pilot test the questionnaire with a small leadership group within the community before making a wider distribution. Revise the questionnaire and change the wording of the questions to make them clearer based on the feedback you receive. Tabulate and distribute the results according to the pre-determined method recommended by the steering committee. It is vital that widespread opinions and attitudes surface and be addressed.

If the planning group has decided to collect this subjective data using an online survey system such as Survey Monkey or Zoomerang, it is suggested that e-mails go out every person identified by the Steering Committee or planning group asking them to participate in a perception survey. The e-mail letter should explain the purpose of the survey and demonstrate its importance to the planning process. Follow-up telephone calls or e-mails may be needed to stimulate a high rate of return. The entry point to the survey could be e-mailed to the group or be made available on a local web site. Please do not be fooled into thinking that an online survey is the easier way to collect data – it has its own pitfalls, including bad e-mail addresses and general apathy over this type of approach. A dedicated and rigorous approach must be taken with electronically-based surveys.

Tips for Interviewing with a Survey

Within a short period of time, most assessors working in communities will identify individuals who have strong beliefs and opinions. These beliefs and opinions may not be based on fact, but are usually based on personal experience, perceptions, attitudes, and emotion. Some individuals know how to "fix the problem" and believe that an assessment is not needed. They "know what is wrong;" they know "what needs to be done." Many may be "one issue" individuals who are unable to view the broader nature and interrelationship among community issues.

Even professionals such as engineers, planners, and educators bring personal practices, style, and opinions into projects. Everyone tends to view and solve problems within the context of his or her own knowledge and experiences. All humans have their individual egos, and personal and professional biases. There is probably no way to completely ensure that personal biases are eliminated from interviews and surveys. Even national surveys contain "margins of error" to compensate for measurement errors. There is likely no such thing as "objective opinions" when dealing with humans. That is why individuals are asked for "opinions" in surveys. Does that mean we should not collect opinions? Does that mean we should not perform surveys? How do we control for these biases?

First, as stressed above, an effective assessment utilizes many sources of information. One source is used to confirm another. Opinions can often explain the objective statistical data and provides meaning to it. For example, the population is declining. Why are people leaving the town? The likely answers may be found in opinions obtained during surveys.

Second, inaccurate opinions may result from problems in community communication processes that provide information from which citizens make informed opinions and decisions. The survey may identify information that needs to be more broadly distributed and communicated to the public. For example, widespread opinion says that elected leaders are doing a poor job of managing the community. If this is not true, then, at the very least, it is a perception that needs to be addressed. Perhaps the majority of citizens do not know all the reasons behind certain actions. Hard choices may be being made regarding the use of scarce public revenues. Perhaps fees, fines, and service charges (that have not increased in many years) need to be increased to reflect the financial realities. Surveys provide rich fodder for a community dialogue that will result in a plan for positive change.

And finally, surveys allow respondents a way to vent emotion, which is necessary during the organizational stages of an effective development initiative. In any organization's development, it is normal to move through stages (e.g., forming, storming, norming, and performing). If disagreement and raw emotion are not brought out and dealt with, they will continually resurface to retard the initiative and possibly doom it to failure.

TECHNIQUES FOR OBTAINING OBJECTIVE DATA

Surveys are useful for determining local perceptions, but they do not provide an objective assessment of the community. It is important to make an effort to analyze the community in comparison to other communities or in comparison to "norms" or "averages" so that it can be viewed in a broader context. For example, local residents may be of the opinion that the school system is excellent. However, when it is compared to other school systems in the state or region, it may become clear that local schools are not where they should be.

Economic Base Analysis

One basis of assessment is the economic base study. The health of the local economy is critical to the health of all other sectors of the community. The local economic base is the "engine" that drives the community's overall development. A faltering economy will lead to higher unemployment, lower wages, lower housing values, reduced tax revenues, inability to maintain the local infrastructure, out-migration, etc. Therefore, it is important to determine the state of the local economy.

Generally, an economic base analysis uses data available from state, federal, and private purchased sources to answer the following questions:

- What demographic trends are occurring in our community?
  - Population size
  - Age structure
  - Households – size and number
  - Income – level and distribution
  - Education level
- What impact are the demographic trends having on the labor force?
  - Size and availability
  - Age
  - Unemployment rate and potential underemployment
  - Commuting patterns
  - Skills and education

- What are the economic trends?
  - Employment by industry
  - Income by industry
  - Wage and salary income vs. transfer payments
  - Changes in the employment base
  - Occupational profile
- What is happening to retail activity?
- What trends are occurring in the local agricultural situation?
- What overall conclusions can be drawn?

S.W.O.T. Analysis
Another type of objective assessment is the S.W.O.T. analysis. This involves an analysis of local Strengths vs. Weaknesses, which is an internal assessment done by community leaders or an external assessment conducted by an objective outside agency or third party. It also includes an investigation of Opportunities & Threats, which is an external assessment of the impact of regional, national, and international trends on the community.

This S.W.O.T. analysis can be conducted by a local group who is familiar with the types of information resources required, or it can be done by an outside consultant or research group from various state agencies, utilities, or universities/community colleges. The S.W.O.T. analysis emphasizes how the community would appear to a business or visitor looking at it from the outside and compares it to other locations. Typically, the topics covered would include:

- Labor
  - Availability by skill levels
  - Wage levels
  - Labor-management relations
- Access
  - Geographic proximity to major consumer and industrial markets
  - Highways and trucking availability
  - Rail service
  - Commercial air service
  - Telecommunications capabilities
  - Mail and small-package service
- Industrial Resources
  - Energy cost and dependability
  - Water cost and availability
  - Wastewater treatment cost and availability
  - Raw materials and/or intermediate manufactured goods availability
  - Support services and supplies
- Industrial/Office Real Estate Market
  - Land: cost, availability, and suitability
  - Buildings: cost, availability, and suitability

- State and Local Business Climate
  - Taxes (business and personal)
  - Financial resources and business incentives
  - Vocational training and educational resources
  - State and local regulations and permitting
  - Technology resources of appropriate institutions
- Quality of Life
  - Housing availability and cost
  - Level of medical services available
  - Hotels/motels and restaurants
  - Schools
  - Recreational and cultural amenities
  - Public safety

An effective assessment draws on data from both **objective and subjective data sources**. An effective assessment also includes data from a variety of sources so that measurement errors are avoided. No town should base decisions on either one data source or one type of data.

To save time, data is collected concurrently during the development initiative. For example, a citizen survey and key informant interviews are conducted at the same time objective data collection is under way. Listed in the Appendix are many sources of objective data.

ASSESSMENT REPORT (PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER)

Collecting assessment information is only part of the process. What does the planning group do with all the data it has collected? What does an assessment report look like? The final phase of the assessment process deals with analyzing and presenting findings in a format that allows local leaders to make decisions. Many samples of assessment reports can be found on the Internet. The Appendix includes one such report example.

The assessment and rating process described below[2] is a comprehensive review of many factors that impact a community's potential for development. The table outlines the primary factors to be considered when conducting an assessment. Some of these factors relate to physical aspects of the community (e.g., geography, transportation infrastructure, utilities), but others relate to human

---

[2] This approach to rating various community factors was developed by George McFarland, a long-time community and economic developer from Mississippi whose career included management of Community Development for Entergy Mississippi and the Mississippi Department of Economic and Community Development.

aspects (e.g., leadership, attitude, skill level). In most instances, both sets of factors need to be aligned for successful development to occur.

Rating Scale

The development factors and rating scale below and the process that is outlined have been used to conduct assessments for counties and communities in Louisiana, Arkansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas. Other rating methods can be used as well. The example below supports the findings in the assessment. The factors being measured should be carefully discerned in light of the community's vision and goals. This summation of findings provides local leaders with a baseline of performance on which to measure their progress. As a strategic plan is developed and implemented, the rating can be revisited periodically to measure progress.

While some weaknesses identified in the assessment can be influenced by community leadership, others may not be under its control. Distance from major highways or rail, for example, is difficult to change. On the other hand, the condition of local water and wastewater systems are under the control of or can be influenced by local leadership. It is often interesting to note that many of the items rated "poor" are directly under the control of citizens and their leaders.

Identified strengths are resources to be marketed. Effective leaders recognize the need to maintain and market them. If a community has a vibrant small-business sector, for example, local leaders might implement a Business Retention and Expansion Program to help retain and expand it.

Table 1
Subjective Rating of Location Factors for Anytown
Possible Ratings -- Good (2) Average (1) Poor (0)

Assessment Factors	Ratings	Point Value
Physical Infrastructure		
Transportation System For Moving Goods	Good	2
Transportation Network For Business Travel	Average	1
Weather and Climate	Average	1
Social Infrastructure		
Broad-Based “Can-Do” Spirit	Poor	0
Low Cost Of Living For Rural Areas	Average	1
Availability Of Quality Health Care	Good	2
Safety Of Investment (police, fire, emergency services)	Average	1
Quality of College/University Nearby	Good	2
Economic Development Infrastructure		
Quality of Public Utilities (Electricity and Gas)	Average	0
Availability of Water And Waste Systems	Good	2
Telecommunications Interconnections	Average	1
Available Commercial Buildings	Average	1
Lack Of Governmental “Red Tape”	Good	2
Tax Rates On Business	Average	1
First Rate Scientific Community In Area	Good	2
Availability Of Fully Developed, Publicly-Owned Sites	Poor	0
Human Infrastructure		
Desire For Development	Good	2
Relatively Low Wage/Salary Rates	Good	2
Labor Availability	Good	2
Quality of Workforce	Average	1
Labor Climate	Good	2

The Assessment Report
It is of the utmost importance that the author(s) of the assessment avoid his or her own biases and the helpful instinct to “tell” people what to do versus informing them about what other communities are doing, giving options, and facilitating the process so that community leaders make informed decisions. A good Assessment Report is akin to putting up a mirror for the community to see itself.

Be certain to emphasize that the results are not the opinion of the author(s), but merely the findings based on citizen opinions and observations. It is useful to include such phases as, “A number of citizens reported …” and, “A majority of those responding felt …”. Not everyone will agree with the findings or be happy. However, the Steering Committee or leadership of the planning effort will know the author(s) has done a good job when feedback is received such as, “This is a great report. You really captured what is happening here.” It is then that leadership knows the author(s) asked the right questions, carefully listened, and are reporting answers accurately.

Each assessment will be different based on the planning group’s mission. The nature of the community being assessed needs to be taken into account when determining what information to include and what comparisons to make. An assessment of a large urban area, for example, will look very different than an assessment of a small town. Data comparisons need to be made, for example, with similarly situated communities in order for the assessment to be meaningful.

CONCLUSION

Assessments are valuable tools in the comprehensive community development process. They help foster community dialogues, identify strengths and weaknesses, build momentum for change, help focus the planning efforts that should follow, and serve as baselines of performance levels against which to measure progress, and most importantly help focus scarce resources so that positive, visible changes can be seen as quickly as possible.

Individuals or groups within a community can perform meaningful and valuable assessments of their communities. However, unlike external consultants, they need to be particularly careful not to build their opinions, biases, and desired results into assessment reports. This requires facilitation skills, not traditional leadership or decision-making skills.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

For Assessment See: Community Development Handbook (2006), Community Development Council, Inc. PO Box 2706, Atlanta, GA 30301-2706. 404-523-3030

For Facilitation See: Edgar H. Schein, *Process Consultation*, Volume I (*Its Role in Organization Development*, 2nd edition) and Volume II (*Lessons for Managers and Consultants*), pages 204 and 208 respectively, Addison-Wesley, 1988 and 1987 respectively

APPENDIX

SOURCES OF OBJECTIVE DATA

U.S. Census Bureau
The U.S. Census Bureau is a key source of objective data. While the census is formally performed every ten years, it is periodically updated and estimates for the future provide information on growth, migration patterns, and a wide variety of other statistical data including business and socioeconomic information. A good place to start is www.census.gov , the Census Bureau's home page. From there, a variety of links can be found that connect you to a wide array of data. It is recommended that you visit this site and explore the information located there.

Data sets can be found on states, counties and on "places" that include cities and populated areas within the states. In Louisiana, for most small- to medium- sized towns, the lowest practical data point is a parish. It is often useful to collect information on all adjoining parishes or on similarly situated locations within the region so that some comparisons can be made. A discussion of some primary census data sets and examples are found below.

- **Housing** – Census data can be found on many aspects of data including the number, size, cost, and type of homes.
- **Socioeconomic Data** – The Census Bureau and other federal sources can also provide valuable insight on objective socioeconomic data such as poverty.
- **Education** – A variety of information can be found within the Census Bureau data about the educational level of the population.
- **Population** –An effective assessment tries to determine if the population is growing or declining and why.

State of Louisiana Information Sources
A great deal of useful assessment information can be obtained about Louisiana and its communities from a variety of public and private sources. Much of this information can be found on the Internet. When conducting an assessment, it is useful to perform an Internet search using a search engine (e.g., www.google.com) to discover available data sources. The data sources found there often fill vital gaps. For example, the records of assessed value of property may only be available from a parish assessor at certain times of the year; however, the tax collection records may be available on line. So with a little "reverse mathematics," the assessed value of property can be determined.

- **Department of Education –** Louisiana was one of the first states to embrace school, teacher, and student accountability. For several years now it has been possible to obtain standardized statistics on individual schools, school districts, and the state as a whole. This is important because it informs citizens about the performance of their schools in helping to develop productive, lifelong learning adults. Public education, particularly grades K-12, is a primary determinant of work force competitiveness.

Detailed information describing these measures can be found on the Louisiana Department of Education's website, http://www.louisianaschools.net. This will include data for each school and district such as: the number and percentage of certified teachers, the number and percentage of teachers with advanced degrees, student suspension rates, performance on standardized tests, graduation/dropout rates, and pupil-teacher ratio.

- **Department of Transportation and Development – Transportation** resources and capabilities are a vital aspect of economic and community development. The district office serving your parish or community can be a great asset. You can obtain information such as traffic counts on highways, road and bridge capacities, and future plans for maintenance and new construction.

  The district engineer can be an ally with whom your community should build a relationship. It is important that, once a community's comprehensive strategic plan is created, the transportation priorities are communicated to him or her. Furthermore, near the end of each budget year, he or she may be able to focus remaining highway repair funds on highways that have a high priority in the strategic plan. Listed below are the district office locations and contact information.

- **Department of Labor –** Labor and work force data is a significant factor influencing development. Business location specialists and investors want to know if employees are available with the skills needed to perform their work. While the U.S. Census bureau provides a good deal of information, the most current information is available from the Louisiana Department of Labor. See http://www.laworks.net/ for more information and data sources.

- **Louisiana Economic Development (sites and buildings) –** Available buildings, developed sites (land with roads and utility infrastructure in place), and greenfield sites (large tracts of well positioned vacant, undeveloped land) are key assets for development. They are tangible assets that can be marketed by communities to businesses looking for new locations.

You are strongly encouraged to identify and list the available sites and buildings in your community and, most importantly, to keep your data updated. Local commercial realtors and major property owners can be tremendous allies in this process. Your Louisiana Economic Development regional director can provide information and assistance about the type of buildings and sites being sought and the state's searchable database.

- **Planning and Development Districts** – It has been this author's experience that planning district personnel are very willing to assist the parishes and communities they serve and are a valuable source of information. They have often been involved in assessment and planning activities within the communities they serve. The Internet link for the Louisiana planning districts is http://doa.louisiana.gov/census/plandist.htm. The map shown below indicates the various parishes clustered within each numbered planning district. The contact information is provided below for your convenience.