

Critical Thinking for Sustainable Community Decision-Making

A Community Leadership Tool

Communities are shaped by decisions made over decades. Though some of these choices are made with full knowledge of possible consequences, those made with insufficient thought and information can leave communities with unfortunate and unanticipated outcomes—some felt immediately, some delayed many years.

This tool supports better informed decisions. Community leaders faced with an important decision can use it to discover many aspects of a proposed action that might otherwise be missed. It will help them think about aspects that are often left out of decision making (for instance those that influence quality-of-life) in addition to the financial and technical information normally considered in community decisions. This tool might be used to identify the best of several alternative actions. It can be used to decide for or against a proposed action. Or, discussions that take place during its use might lead to creative changes to a proposed action that make it more compatible with the community, its economy, and the environment.

This tool is effective only when everyone potentially affected by, and knowledgeable about, the proposed action participates in its use. It is not particularly useful when only like-minded people are involved. Therefore, participants must include people from different political points of view. For example, those for and those against; or those who want A, B and C alternatives. Also, people with differing technical backgrounds must be involved. For example, if the decision relates to the sewer system, then people who understand the water system, soils, and alternative treatment systems must be involved.

The meeting in which this tool is used must be conducted by a skilled facilitator, someone who is impartial and understands how to ensure that all sides are fairly heard. An individual with much power and influence is seldom the best facilitator, often the worst. The meeting should be convened on neutral “turf,” not in a location identified with one point of view.

The object of using this tool is not simply to fill in each blank, rather it is to involve participants in a comprehensive and meaningful discussion about an important decision. Though this tool does not guarantee that resulting actions will be sustainable, it will help evaluate options in a more systemically.

This tool does not result in a numerical score by which a decision can be made. Rather it displays the positive and negative aspects of proposed actions so that its users can more easily recognize likely implications and render a sensible decision. It is particularly useful when comparing two or more alternatives. Even without a numerical score, the preferred alternative usually emerges.

Using the Tool

The matrix on the following page contains 15 factors that can be considered when thinking about any important community decision. Summaries of the factors are on pages three and four. The summaries include questions to ask while considering each factor. Before convening participants, revise this list of factors to fit with your particular circumstance. You probably will add factors or add questions to better focus this tool on your particular community or the particular decision at hand. Or, you may wish to remove factors. But be cautious; consider if their removal would simply avoid an uncomfortable discussion.

Your responses in column A of the matrix will apply to the proposed action. Column B can be used for a “no-action” alternative (that is, doing nothing) and Column C might be used to examine an alternative action, including one that might emerge in the course of the discussion regarding the originally proposed action. If the community is considering two or more

alternative ways to solve a problem, you might create as many columns as there are alternatives.

Respond to the questions for each factor by assigning one of seven symbols: (++) if you think the proposed action will have a highly positive effect, (+) for a positive effect, (0) no effect, (-) a negative effect, (--) a highly negative effect, (?) if you don't have enough information to estimate the effect, or (n/a) if the factor does not apply to proposed action you are evaluating.

If you write in “?” regarding an important factor you may wish to obtain more information before proceeding with the decision. But be careful, gathering more information can be a handy way to avoid a thorny decision.

Very important: If participants indicate potential negative effects, then also discuss ways in which the proposed action might be changed to achieve more positive results. If the changes are significant, you may wish to fill out Column C for the revised action.

Decision-Making Matrix

A. Proposed action: _____

B. No action

C. Alternative action: _____

	Factors	Alternative Actions		
		A	B	C
1	Long-Term Effects			
2.	Off-site Effects			
3.	Cumulative Effects			
4.	Self-Reliance			
5.	Economic Diversity			
6.	Environmental Diversity			
7.	Growth			
8.	Throughput			
9.	Fairness			
10.	Public Services			
11.	Finances			
12.	Natural Resources			
13.	Waste			
14.	Multiple Benefits			

Notes: The factors are not listed in order of importance.
 The matrix can also be used to consider several alternative actions
 (e.g. *alternative* road alignments or building sites)

Key: ++ highly positive effect -- highly negative effect
 + positive effect ? need information
 0 neutral effect n/a not applicable
 - negative effect

Summary of Matrix “Factors”

1. Long-Term Effects: Is this proposed action compatible with the community’s stated goals—its vision or preferred future?
What effects might the action have in ten years? How will it affect future generations? Can future problems be minimized or avoided ?
2. Off-Site Effects: Will the action cause effects somewhere other than the place where the action will take place? These kind of effects might be, for instance: next door, blocks away, in the next community, downstream or downwind.
If there are negative off-site effects, can these be reduced or turned to the community's advantage?
3. Cumulative Effects: An action may seem benign when considered alone, but it may have important negative effects when considered in light of other decisions and actions. Consider these kinds of effects by thinking about previous or likely future actions regarding similar issues. Is the problem we are attempting to solve caused by some earlier action? If so, might today’s proposed action create problems? Where would this action lead us; what problems might it create for future leaders? What will be the cumulative effect of this and other related actions? (i.e. Approving a subdivision may contribute to a gradual loss of farmland).
4. Self-Reliance: Will this action affect the community’s self-reliance?
Will it make the community less or more vulnerable to outside influences (e.g. global trade, severe weather, economic downturns, corporate or governmental decisions)?
5. Economic Diversity: Will it affect the community's economic diversity?
Will the community become more or less dependent on a single large employer or one type of business activity? Will it enable local businesses or residents to produce or buy things locally, instead of outside the community? Does this action put all the community’s eggs in one basket? Is it an all-or-nothing prospect? Or can the strategy withstand partial failure while achieving overall success?
6. Environmental Diversity: Will this action affect environmental diversity?
Will it decrease habitat size or type, or number of species?
7. Growth: Will this action make the community better or just bigger?
If the action would make the community bigger, who will pay the costs of the expansion? Might this action lead to, or be part of, a boom and bust cycle?
8. Throughput (the quantity and flow of resources that are processed, used, and turned into waste, e.g. the number of harvested bushels, cut trees, or tourist days.)
Will this action increase "throughput," in certain areas without creating the means to pay for associated costs? Has the community reached the point where increasing throughput in certain areas increases costs more than benefits?
9. Fairness: Will this action create inequitable costs and benefits?
Will one group receive the benefits of this action while another pays disproportionate costs? Consider age, gender, race, income, and disability. What kind of environmental, social, or economic effect will this action have on less fortunate members of the community? Can the action be changed to distribute benefits and costs more fairly? Will the costs of this action be imposed on future generations who receive less or none of its benefits?

10. Public Services: Will the action affect existing public services (schools, police, roads, water, sewer, etc.)?
If the effect is negative, who is being affected by reduced quality of service? Or, who is paying the additional costs to expand services? Is it possible to avoid expansion by using existing resources more efficiently?
11. Finances: What is the net effect on community finances (revenues vs. long-term costs)?
12. Natural Resources: Will this action positively or negatively affect natural resources (water, energy, land, soil nutrients, minerals)?
Will the action use resources renewably? If the action will significantly reduce or exhaust a resource, what will the community do? Will the action foster efficient use of resources? Are there opportunities to get the same or more benefit by using fewer resources?
13. Waste: Will this action create significant amounts of waste or pollution ?
Is there a way to reduce, reuse, or recycle the wastes? What are the economic, community and environmental costs of disposing of the waste? Are there ways to put the waste to work in the community creating more jobs or income?
14. Multiple Benefits: Does this action solve more than one problem?
Can the proposed action be adapted or expanded so that it will address more than one community problem?

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