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## **Chattanooga, A City Worth Watching**

*Chattanooga, Tennessee*

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**Scope:** Local, urban

**Project type:** City-wide planning to restore air quality and become a model of sustainability

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Chattanooga Tennessee, a mid-sized city located along the Tennessee River just north of the Georgia border, was not only voted as the city with the worst air pollution in the United States in 1969, but faced the label of an "invisible" city with no real image. Its residents faced deep problems of job layoffs, a deteriorating city infrastructure, racial tensions and social division. Recognizing these recurring and deeply impacting problems, a few visionary community leaders, which included people from the Chamber of Commerce and the City's Planning Commission got together and created Chattanooga Venture - a nonprofit organization with the goal of bringing the full participation of the community to the task of "cleaning up" their city on all fronts - environmental, social, economic.

Chattanooga Venture's first monumental task, was to design and implement a project called "Vision 2000" which brought together more than 1700 people, to take part in city planning over a four month period in 1984. During a series of meetings led by involved community members trained in facilitation, Strategic Visioning, and Nominal Group Technique (NGT) processes, community members were encouraged to dream about the way they wanted their city to be, and to organize these dreams and ideas into a formal list of shared ideals. The community participants collectively set goals, established priorities for improving their city.

Diverse groups of community members united and literally used brown paper and markers as they brainstormed, debated, categorized and organized their concerns. The result of the many community meetings was a set of 40 goals for the city to achieve by the year 2000. These goals fell under the categories of *future alternatives, places, people, work, play and government*. The goals were as diverse as creating a distribution and transportation center to strengthening the downtown area to solving existing problems in the area of air, water, toxic waste and noise pollution to strengthening the day care system and creating after and before school programs. Today, many of the original goals have been realized.

The action from the goals led to 223 projects and programs with an investment in the community of more than \$800 million. Because of the success of this visioning process, it is currently being modeled in cities throughout the United States as well as internationally. Chattanooga Venture has compiled a step-by-step guide for community groups to assist them with brainstorming, visioning, developing plans, and making choices. The projects that have resulted are varied in scope, but all work to create a more sustainable community - as defined by the people who live there.

Environmental problems, the impetus for community-wide action, led to the creation of the Environmental City project, which is working for the expansion or relocation of "clean industry" (nonpolluting) to the area, the retention of environmentally sound businesses, and the creation of environmental awareness throughout the city. Public/private partnerships have proven extremely successful in the Environmental City project and key players in this initiative are from the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce and the Chattanooga City Council. The Chattanooga Environmental Initiative, another project, strives to have the city become the nationwide center for environmental information and business and is complemented by clean air work to maintain Environmental Protection Agency standards (which have been met since 1988) and create a zero emissions industrial park; the Tennessee River Gorge Trust, which protects 25,000 acres of ecologically, geologically and archaeologically rich land; electric bus technology, which contains the largest fleet of free, electric buses in the U.S. and free public parking downtown; and the Greenways Planning Project, which is creating a network of protected areas of open space and linear parkways through eight counties.

Economic and community welfare issues are partially addressed by the Chattanooga Neighborhood Enterprise, a nonprofit organization with the mission of developing, financing, renovating and managing affordable housing for low to moderate income citizens in the region. The Chattanooga Neighborhood Enterprise is striving to eliminate substandard housing as a major community problem. Once again, public/private partnerships are crucial to success, along with the support for the project coming from foundations, financial institutions, businesses and private donors, and federal, state and local entities. Homeowner purchase and rehabilitation loans, new housing, a homebuyers education program and a neighborhood and community revitalization program all work to create quality living situations in the area.

There are a number of projects which directly involve the people who live in the community. The Orange Grove Materials Recovery Facility employs mentally challenged adults in operating a recycling center, and handles the recyclable goods of the entire region at approximately one-tenth the cost of facilities in similar sized cities. Jobs 2000, a project of a regional economic development agency called RiverValley Partners, undertook extensive research to identify the needs of businesses, both in the area and elsewhere, in the areas of workforce, quality, sites and buildings, and local business retention and expansion. Results of this study, which showed, for example, that manufacturing was important for the local economy, and there were grave inequities among the minority community's unemployment rates and job placement success, guided Jobs 2000 project to target specific audiences: (1) the minority community; (2) existing businesses; and (3) new businesses identified in the strategic plan of the project.

Recommendations were made for providing tangible strategies that could be implemented, such as raising the

educational attainment level, developing a workforce training incentive program for relocating companies and expanding local companies, develop closer linkages between economic development and public education and training in the community.

The city also turned its attention to riverfront property, recognizing the river as being the heart and soul of the city as well as the city's primary asset. A task force, called the Moccasin Bend Task Force developed a plan for resurrecting the downtown riverfront area, and the nonprofit RiverCity Company was established to oversee the work. Gradually, the riverfront became the focal part of the city again: the Tennessee Riverpark opened with fishing piers, a playground, a woodland walk, and a park; Tennessee Aquarium was constructed as an educational center that hosts thousands of visitors a year; and plans are underway for the creation of an environmental trade center which would implement an overall design plan around the theme of sustainable urban ecology.

Information communication has been paramount to all of these projects. The Chattanooga News Bureau serves as a central source of information for the community projects, and is remarkably active in initiating, coordinating, and facilitating regional, national and international news coverage on stories from Chattanooga and the surrounding area. Nearly a hundred cities from around the world have solicited information in the areas of economic development and urban design, the Chattanooga Neighborhood Enterprise, the electric buses, community visioning and citizen involvement, and the Tennessee Aquarium. There is also an initiative to create a Chattanooga Community Link, which would share information online for all interested community members and further provide the essential local-global link to the many sustainable community initiatives in Chattanooga.

Based on the success of Vision 2000, which brought about 223 projects and programs, created 1,381 jobs and 7,300 temporary construction jobs, served 1,551,000 people and triggered a total financial investment of \$793,303,813.00 into the community (or \$2,778.00 per person), Chattanooga Venture recently completed a Revision 2000 process. Revision 2000 began where Vision 2000 left off, by holding meetings in 9 locations around the county to brainstorm as a community again; organizing the ideas into a list of goals from the brainstorming meetings; and presenting and celebrating the ideas and goals through a Vision Fair, which would lead to suggestions for implementing the goals. As expressed in publicity for the community to encourage them to take part in Revision 2000, Chattanooga Venture challenged people by saying "Chattanooga looks drastically different, and we are clearly enjoying the city's new image. Not it's time to task ourselves: What does it really mean to us now?" Change is an ongoing process, and, therefore, visioning is never done.

Revision 2000 was also tremendously successful, with 2,600 participants, including 30% under the age of 25 and 23% over the age of 55. 27 goals were identified and 122 recommendations emerged for further improving the community. Today, Chattanooga has essentially become a "living laboratory" for sustainable projects, and is now implementing its new "take charge" attitude in the areas of education, business development, and community action. Plans for a Vision 20-20 are being discussed, further proving that this community, which is striving to be the best mid-sized city in America, will continue to provide examples, models, and vision for its residents as well as others around the world who are working for sustainable communities.

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**Case Study Source:** American Forum for Global Education. 1995

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