



Case Study

Shaping regional plans with citizen's voices

Background

The Strafford Regional Planning Commission is a political subdivision of the state of New Hampshire, whose role is to advise and assist their respective member communities by providing technical studies, data analysis, collection, interpretation, and cohesion with state agencies and community groups in order to make informed decisions for the benefit of their constituents.

James Burdin, AICP, Regional Economic Development Planner at the Strafford Regional Planning Commission, is contributing to a significant project, in the form of a community master plan, which required a high level of public consultation.

Community Master Plans are a comprehensive document, and are essentially a land use tool that communities use to decide how they want their region to look in the medium to long term, usually with an outlook of 10 to 15 years. In the state of New Hampshire, it's legislated that these plans contain at least two chapters; an overall vision statement setting out the goals of the community, and a future land use chapter, which applies the vision directly to land uses, be they commercial developments or residential developments. The plans can also include further chapters for economic development, transport and a variety of other issues affecting the community.

Engaging with the community

The master plan that Strafford Regional Planning Commission is contributing to has had a significant amount of work put into it so far.

Task set to James and his colleagues, was to pull all the content from ten prior chapters together, and finalize the plan with the required chapter around future land use. This work is the conclusion of a three to four-year process, and work on the final chapter commenced in early 2017.

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Engaging with the community was an essential part of the process for James, and this was achieved via a public forum which ran approximately six hours. “Consulting the community is really important for the work that we do because everything we do is supposed to be for planning for the good of the community” said James. “We definitely want to make sure that any time we’re putting together a public document like this we’re accurately depicting the opinions of that community, and we’re able to get to the truth of how people actually feel about the issues we’re trying to address.”

Citizen responses to the questions asked at the forum were recorded and transcribed, and what was produced was a significant data set which essentially resembled the kind of data produced by survey questionnaires. As the data set was



large and comprised of open ended responses, a software solution which could save time in the analysis stage was required. Enter Interpris by QSR International.

Working with Interpris

“Some of the work we had previously done was comparing and contrasting themes and topics directly from the chapters of the plan themselves. When we had this large body of feedback directly from the public, it was really helpful to be able to put that into Interpris and really dig into the data set on its own, in isolation of the previous work we had done. This was a test as to where we were sitting and if we had explored the right themes previously” said James.

The Strafford Regional Planning Commission also had an external consultant working with them on the Master Plan project, who was also required to analyze and report on the same set of data from the public forum, however, they undertook this process manually, without the assistance of Interpris. James reported that, “Doing it ‘the old-fashioned way’, the consultant’s report took approximately two weeks, and we had achieved the same level of analysis in three to four hours of work in Interpris”.

Interpris was able to quickly and easily identify themes automatically, and this created a significant time saving for James. “The fact that we could input our responses into Interpris, and it did a great job of picking out key themes on its own just made the process of sifting through a data set of that size so much easier” he said.

“As a survey analysis tool, Interpris has been impressive, and having a tool that can dig into our data and produce findings quickly has been extremely useful.”

The power of open-ended questions

Throughout the process, James and the Strafford Regional Planning Commission found that Interpris was able to show them the value and power of asking open-ended questions. “The tool has really taught us a lot about activity design. It has helped us think in different ways about how we’re developing initiatives to solicit community feedback, and the kinds of decisions we can make along the way that will give us great insights” said James.

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Having completed this piece of community consultation work, they’re now in the recommendations stage. James and his colleagues will be putting together their complete plan for the community they’re working with for a final round of feedback and consultation at the end of 2017.

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