

WHY DIDN'T THE PROCESS WORK?

Darin Gerdes
Charleston Southern University

R. Scott Pearson
Palm Beach Atlantic University

Mayor Collins can't understand what went wrong. He did everything he was supposed to do. Since he became Mayor of Summerville three years ago, he has worked tirelessly on behalf of the town. He brought in consultants to create the town's first vision plan. Hundreds of people participated in the visioning sessions, but when the final plan was made public, a small group of people became vocal in their opposition to major components of the plan. He followed the process. The law is on his side, but how do you proceed when people are determined to become obstacles?

PRESENT DAY (2014)

Mayor Collins is getting more and more frustrated with each passing day. Lately, town hall meetings have become unnecessarily tense. Opponents of the town vision plan have become more outspoken, and they have become quite disruptive. It's starting to get out of hand. They had their chance to participate in the vision plan when it was created in January. They decided not to offer their thoughts at the time, but now they want to gum up the works.

BILL COLLINS

Bill Collins was born in a small mill town in upstate South Carolina. He attended the University of South Carolina, and worked as a reporter for the Atlanta Journal for a number of years. In 1972, he moved to Summerville where he started a newspaper—the *Summerville Journal*. The *Journal* eventually merged with the *Summerville Scene* and became the *Summerville Journal-Scene*, the leading local paper. In 1972, Summerville had a population of roughly 4,000 residents. By 2011, it had grown to about 44,000 residents. It was a bedroom community for Charleston, South Carolina.

2011

In 2011, Mayor Berlin G. Meyers, decided to retire after serving 10 terms in office. He was 94 years old. Mayor Meyers' departure created an unusual opportunity in an otherwise stable political environment. Collins had always been a civic-minded man. He was involved in the town's political scene for nearly 40 years as a newspaper publisher, and he had run unsuccessfully for the State Senate in 2008, so it was not a surprise when Collins decided to run for mayor.

Having documented changes in the town over the years, Collins felt that he had his finger on the pulse of the community. Collins had three major planks in his platform: ease traffic, increase new business, and attract more tourism. This included a boutique hotel downtown in order to support the tourism.

His opponents were Bill Lomax, an ear, nose, and throat doctor, and Dickie Miller, a local real estate broker. He easily won the mayoral contest with 52 percent of the votes in a three-way race. At the election party, he said:

I love Summerville. I'm completely retired, so I have the time to devote to it. I live two blocks from town hall, so it's not like I'm in the legislature having to drive back and forth to Columbia. I think I'll enjoy it – I want to get more and more people enthusiastic about living here and doing things for this town. There's nothing we can't do if we work together.

Before the election, the town administrator also decided to leave, "after council learned that an unknown tens of thousands of dollars had disappeared from the parks department, rather than the few thousand first reported" according to the local paper. While those close to him adamantly insisted that there was no wrongdoing, such events inevitably lead citizens to mistrust the government.

Collins' election felt like a fresh start. The citizens were starting a new page in town history. All of the mayoral candidates were on record stating that finding a new town administrator was a high priority. Town hall received 93 applications for the position, but council passed a resolution granting Collins the powers of the administrator. As a retiree, he had the time to take on the extra work.

2012

Collins worked tirelessly on behalf of the town of Summerville. In December, he launched community initiatives such as *Summerville Cares: A Day of Service* to get more people involved in the community. He could be found supporting the Red Cross blood drive, visiting elementary schools, representing the town at various organizations, and of course, at ribbon cuttings of new businesses that came to

Summerville. As mayor, he continued to write an editorial, *The Mayor's Column*, to keep citizens informed about all of the good things happening in town.

2013

By all accounts, business was booming. New businesses were relocating to Summerville and the town had added a few thousand additional residents. The town worked with Google to provide free Wi-Fi to the downtown area. Everything appeared to be humming along.

In July, the town began to consider hiring consultants to create a vision plan for the town. In October of 2013, council voted unanimously to begin a development plan for the town. Such a guiding document had not existed before. Town council contracted the Lawrence Group, an urban design firm, to create the town vision plan. It cost \$213,000, but the mayor and council felt it was necessary for them to plan for the future. Besides, Collins had saved at least that much by not hiring a new town administrator.

By December, Collins had formed an advisory board for the vision plan. Soon, the Lawrence Group would host a design workshop known as the charette in order to gather ideas for the town's vision plan. According to Collins, a charette is "a fancy French word for a planning and design workshop." As the year came to a close, Collins could be proud of the progress that Summerville had made, and it was only going to get better.

2014

On Jan 30, 2014, the Summerville *Journal-Scene* reported,

Summerville Mayor Bill Collins urged citizens to take the charrette seriously in his letter on the Town website. 'This will not be just another report to be put on the shelf to collect dust,' he wrote. 'I plan to use it as a handy roadmap for our future and plan to work with council to make those recommendations a reality.'

About 40 people attended the first planning session in February, and the design group maintained a presence in a local community center for a week. Others offered ideas online. Collins' goal was to manage growth and transform Summerville from a sleepy suburb of Charleston to its own tourism destination. The vision plan would chart the course.

Hundreds of people contributed to this process, but when the vision plan was unveiled in June, town residents were less than receptive. The plan would add 880 new living units, remake Hutchinson Square (the park in the center of downtown

Summerville), and include an ambitious public-private partnership project—the Dorchester Hotel—the crown jewel of the plan. On June 11, the newspaper reported:

Overall plans include 10 key projects: redeveloping Hutchinson Square; building mixed-use infill housing close to downtown; improving pedestrian crossings on Dorchester Road; elevating the town’s design standards; completing the Sawmill Branch Trail; redefining the entrances to Summerville; reorganizing in Oakbrook; connecting “short Central” to “little Main”; providing a transit option to connect town; and implementing a comprehensive annexation strategy.

While none of those items appear to be particularly compelling, an unexpectedly large crowd of 80 citizens attended the town hall meeting on June 11th. They had learned about certain elements of the plan that they did not like such as the high density living units and the proposed hotel. The plan was provided as a completed work rather than a menu of possibilities and for that reason, many speakers opposed the vision plan.

Where the mayor saw progress, citizens saw traffic. One vocal resident, Peter Gorman, asked council to slow down the plan to allow for additional citizen input, but council ignored this request. Council approved the plan over the objections of the protesters. The situation deteriorated.

Two weeks later, Collins tried to reassure the town in his regular Mayor’s editorial. He wrote:

For those of you who have not followed or participated in our effort to develop a Vision Plan for the town of Summerville, let me update you. The town has never had a Vision Plan. Council decided that with all the pressures of growth we’re experiencing the time was ripe to look at current assets and future needs over the next 25 years.

The town advertised for firms interested in preparing the plan in the fall of 2013. Five companies responded and council interviewed each of them in lengthy sessions. Bids ranged from \$160,000 to over \$400,000. After careful consideration council chose The Lawrence Group, whose bid was \$213,000. They began work in November by interviewing council and staff, stakeholders, property owners, developers, and a cross section of residents and local leaders.

In February they conducted a well-publicized weeklong planning charette at the Cuthbert Center in Azalea Park. Sessions ran well into the evening hours to accommodate residents who work and 500 residents came forward to express their ideas about Summerville's needs for the future.

The Vision Plan is a large document with lots of information and illustrations and is available on the town's website at www.summerville.sc.us. An overview of the plan was presented by The Lawrence Group at our June council meeting and council gave it first reading.

This plan is not a permit to build houses, shopping centers, roads, parks, schools, or other municipal facilities. It is vision of what Summerville could look like in 2040. For any of these wish list projects to take place, property owners, developers or public entities will have to find funding and follow the normal approval process.

I compare the Vision Plan to a Rubik's Cube because over the next 25 years there will be many twists and turns as our leaders guide development in our town. Guiding principles of the Vision Plan are to keep Summerville family friendly, connect Summerville to the region with transportation choices, offer rich economic opportunities, maintain our small town charm and have a leadership team that makes smart investments that yield high results.

The plan was aired last week by the town Planning Commission for public comment. Some expressed concern that 880 new housing units could potentially be built in the downtown area through infill and redevelopment of vacant or underutilized sites. Those houses could be built under current zoning regulations but that does not mean they will be. Others expressed frustration over our traffic congestion and fear future development will only make things worse.

Town Council is keenly aware of our traffic problems and we have plans for a new road into Summerville from the new Sheep Island Interchange that should be under construction this time next year. I personally, along with Town Engineer Russ Cornette, am working with the state Department of Transportation and others on completion of the last leg of the Berlin G. Myers Parkway.

Summerville will be dramatically impacted by the thousands of new homes and apartments being built in the East Edisto project just south of town and the Nexton project just north of town. Those new families will be using our

streets and parks and recreation facilities and yet we have no control over that.

That is why it is absolutely critical that we have a Vision Plan for the things we can control within the city limits.

Collins' editorial did little to calm fears. Worse, council formally adopted the plan at the July 9 meeting. This only enflamed those who opposed the plan. Councilman Walter Bailey sought an amendment that would allow the plan to be adopted as a "discretionary document." This would allow more flexibility to pick and choose what projects to work on, but his amendment was voted down 5-2.

Over the next few months, the opposition grew more intense. Collins had a difficult time understanding why people were reacting as they did. After all, he made his intentions to conduct the vision plan known, he invited people to participate in the process, and now they are upset? From his perspective, a small group of luddites were blocking progress. But what should he do?

Town meetings were getting more heated each week. Should he pull the plug or slow down? Doing either would undo all of his progress. Maybe he should just continue and ignore the agitators. After all, he has a mandate, doesn't he?