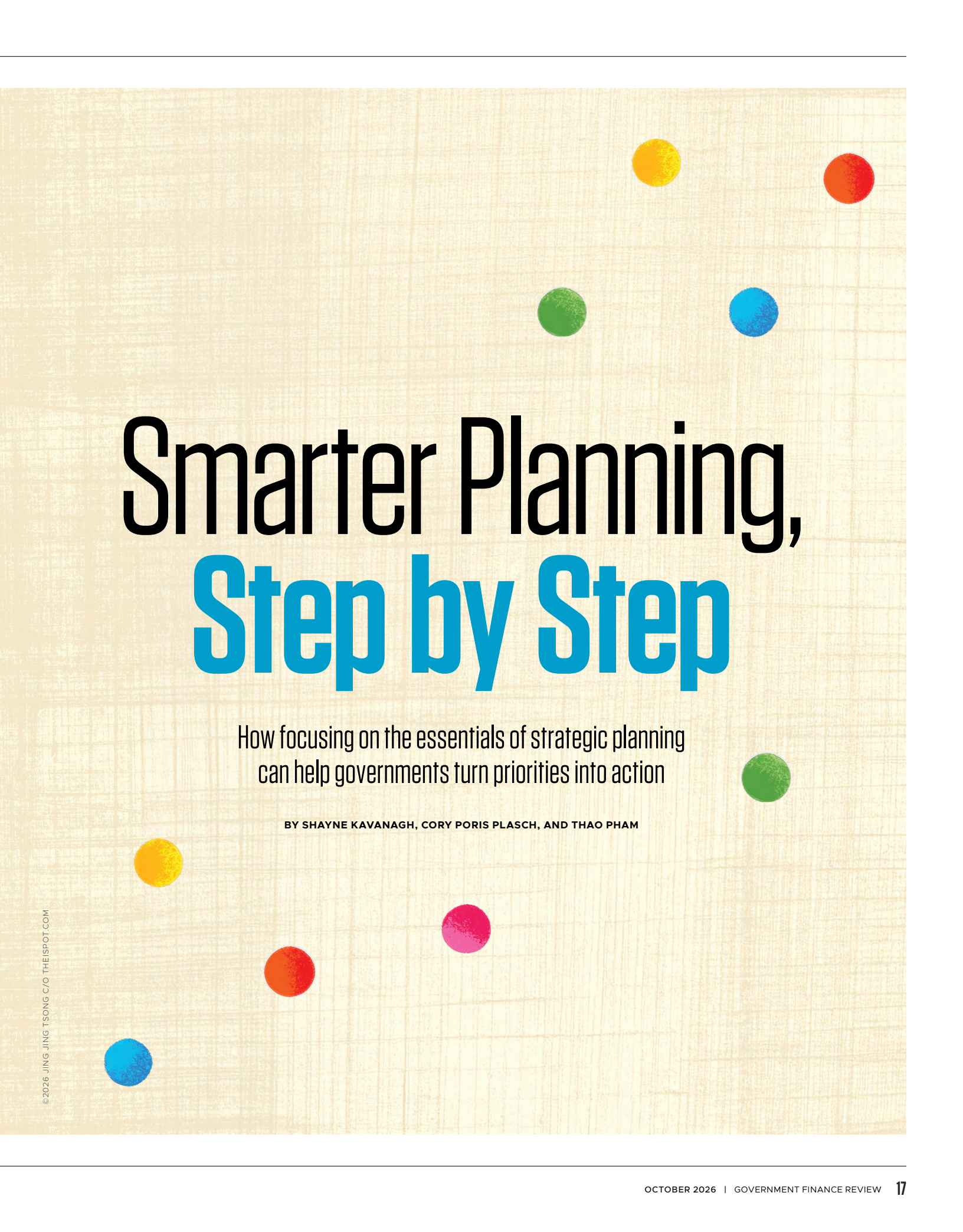




# Smarter Planning, Step by Step

How focusing on the essentials of strategic planning  
can help governments turn priorities into action

BY SHAYNE KAVANAGH, CORY PORIS PLASCH, AND THAO PHAM

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little more than half of local governments engage in some form of strategic planning, according to an August 2025 survey conducted by GFOA.<sup>1</sup> This is progress, but it still means that almost half are not. Part of the reason for this gap is that strategic planning is often perceived as a significant undertaking for local governments, and comprehensive strategic planning can, in fact, be time-consuming. In that case, could insights into the essentials of strategic planning help more local governments access the benefits of strategic planning by focusing them on the highest value elements? In this article, we discuss those essentials: the benefits of strategic planning, how those benefits can be obtained for a reasonable cost, and ways to gain additional value beyond the essentials.

## Why Strategic Planning Matters

Strategic planning is valuable to the public, elected officials, and staff.

The central question taxpayers have for government is: What am I getting for my money? Strategic planning is an essential part of the answer because it helps governments focus on delivering value to their communities. It provides the vision for public priorities that later can be used to align resources. It allows local governments to assess community preferences beyond those expressed by the most vocal individuals. This is critical in building public trust. More importantly, the planning process helps produce tangible results such as better streets, improved public safety, or whatever else the community deems most important. This is the real “bottom line” for most members of the public.

For elected officials, planning can help build consensus. Conflicts may prove to be less severe than first presumed when strategic planning provides the space to go beyond initial disagreements and find areas of underlying agreement.

To illustrate, one local government was deadlocked over development, with votes on proposals ending 3 to 4 or 4 to 3. Developers stopped coming, unwilling to invest the time and resources required for a proposal without a clear understanding of what would be approved. A strategic planning session revealed that the board member most consistently opposed to development wanted to focus on owner-occupied residential properties in the short term because two large apartment complexes had just been built. The board member also wanted to

build out more of the existing commercial district before adding additional commercial development parcels to the community.

With those parameters clearly defined, new developments in the community increased, and proposals began receiving 7 to 0 votes. The issue was not if the community wanted development, but how that development would be structured.

Planning provides an opportunity to step back from the day-to-day “noise” of operating a local government and identify the long-term “signal” of what it takes to build and maintain a thriving community. This signal provides a shared reference point throughout the year—especially during budget discussions—and helps leaders stay grounded when navigating competing demands. It also offers a measured response to vocal individuals or groups by placing their concerns in the broader context of what the community values.

For staff (and finance officers), the big benefit of planning is clarity: clear expectations of what elected officials want to achieve and what they are willing to give up to get it. This provides a strong basis for budgeting choices and more focused discussions between elected officials and staff throughout the year.

## The Essentials of the Strategic Planning Process

At its most essential, a strategic plan is a short list of things to do, rooted in community priorities and needs. We’ll call this list “strategic priorities.” Critically, this does not necessarily require a large community outreach effort. Results from prior community outreach efforts, surveys, and records of public inquiries and requests can all support strategic planning. Elected officials’ and staff’s knowledge of the community can also be documented using common strategic planning tools, such as SWOT analysis, which examines strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

In addition to the strategic priorities, strategic planning must also define:

- Who is going to carry out the tasks associated with each strategic priority and when they will be completed.
- What constitutes success or completion.
- A process for reporting progress to keep the results of planning at the front of decision-makers’ minds.

To illustrate, imagine a community wanted to make its downtown more attractive. A concise yet effective strategy could focus on improving the look of downtown

by creating a façade improvement program with matching municipal grants, assigning responsibility to the community development department, setting a target of improving five facades within three years, and monitoring both process and outcome metrics.

As Will Jones, city administrator for the City of Mequon, Wisconsin, notes, “Repeatedly underscoring the linkage between public spending and strategic planning is critical to garnering support for projects or expenditures that may be outside the norm, but that are critical to moving identified priorities forward to fruition. This, in turn, creates a rhythm or reliance upon the strategic plan as a reasoned and well-thought-out rationale for supporting certain budgetary initiatives, even in the face of organized or political opposition.”

The essential elements described here can provide a great deal of benefit for relatively little effort—the very definition of high value.

### Beyond the Basics: High-Value Elaborations

There are several ways to extend strategic planning beyond the basics we described. The value of these elaborations will vary depending on the context. Generally, they will provide greater value as strategic priorities become more complex. More complex priorities have a lower chance of success and may benefit from additional planning.

Complex items generally require new ways of thinking or new processes to achieve the desired results. An example might be a strategic priority focused on improving recruitment. The associated performance metric could be reducing the time needed to fill open positions. This is generally defined as the number of days between a vacancy becoming official and a job offer being extended.

Achieving that goal will likely require new processes such as using software to reduce paperwork, increasing data sharing between departments, and keeping job descriptions up to date. Employees may need to change routines that are well established and widely understood. The benefits can be significant, especially for difficult-to-fill positions; however, the complexity involved makes careful planning essential.

Because planners must decide if these elaborations are worth the added complexity, let’s now consider which provides the greater value.

First, consider the potential for cross-functional implementation teams. Complex community problems often fall within the purview of more than one department. For example, imagine that a community wants to create and carry out a street improvement plan. This may sound like a public works issue, but it actually needs help from several other departments to succeed—finance to arrange long-term financing. Community planning and economic development to work with local



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—LISA HEGLUND, FINANCE DIRECTOR, CITY OF LOCKPORT, ILLINOIS

businesses to manage disruption. Communications and public relations to manage resident expectations about schedules. And more.

Second, targeted community outreach can help when a strategic plan addresses potentially controversial topics or when a community is diverse enough that existing sources of input may overlook important groups.

Third, performance measures provide a more precise definition of success. This can be particularly helpful when completion of a strategic priority isn't self-evident. For project-based priorities, such as building a specific asset, success can often be measured with a simple question: Is the project complete or not? Complex problems often cannot be fully solved or completed, only managed. Performance measures help create a shared understanding of how well an issue has been managed.

A community may have "Improved Outcomes for At-Risk Community Members" as its strategic priority, with three performance targets:

1. Establish a coordination plan for at-risk individuals managed by a community network of city staff, social service agencies, and non-profits by June 2027.
2. Have 80 percent of frontline staff trained in mental health first aid and trauma-informed practices by December 2028.
3. Achieve an annual 3 percent decrease in repeat 911 calls for mental health or welfare checks at the same residential addresses.

The first performance target requires a way to track progress toward completion. The first step may be developing an internal committee. The next step may be identifying key community partners to help coordinate services. Another step may be developing a system to coordinate available services. Perhaps the process has 12 steps in total. In this case, progress would be tracked through each step [e.g., step 1 of 12 is done by Q1, step 2 by Q2, and so on].

The second performance target clearly lends itself to regular reporting on how many staff members have been trained: 10 percent by Q1, 25 percent by Q2, and so on. In this case, the government could track the training process as well. It may choose to prioritize police, fire, and library staff. It will also need to determine the content of the training and if it should vary by department. Do patrol officers need different or additional training modules than fire or library staff? Progress could be tracked through key implementation steps, such as researching and selecting training modules or consultants, applying for grants, and conducting the training.

The third performance target allows them to measure if they are impacting outcomes for at-risk individuals. Specifying a decrease in repeat 911 calls allows them to see if the plan established in the first performance metric is having the intended impact.

Several performance measures could contribute to an online dashboard, making it easier for elected officials, staff, and the public to see how the government is creating value.

Finally, a local government could invest in creating strong linkages between the strategic plan and other planning processes, such as budgeting, land-use planning, and capital improvement planning. As Lisa Heglund, finance director for the City of Lockport, Illinois, emphasizes, "Strategic planning is an essential piece in municipal finance, because every dollar we allocate today has long-term implications for our community's stability and growth. Without a strategic plan, we're reacting instead of leading."

Budgeting will be the most universally useful linkage because many complex strategic priorities will require additional resources. The usefulness of land-use planning and capital planning linkages will, of course, depend on the nature of the strategic priorities.

To illustrate, a community may have "Public Works Efficiency and Delivery Enhanced" as its strategic priority, with the following performance target: Determine the city's public works facility expansion needs by December 2028.

This performance target will have implications for the capital improvement plan (CIP) and the budget and may be influenced by the comprehensive land use plan. The CIP outlines future public works projects and investments. Any public works facility expansion would eventually be included in the CIP and reflected in the budget.

But the CIP can also be used to determine expansion needs. How much space will public works require in the future for the vehicles and equipment needed to serve the community? Will additional staff be needed and, if so, will more space be needed for offices, restrooms, or conference rooms?

The answer to these questions may be found in the comprehensive plan, which outlines the community's land-use plans for the next 10 to 20 years. What are those plans? If growth is expected to expand the service area, a new facility will need space for additional vehicles and equipment. If the comprehensive plan indicates higher-density development in the future, different types of vehicles or equipment may be needed to serve the community effectively. Understanding projected growth will help determine the future needs of the public works facility.



At its core, strategic planning asks two deceptively simple questions: **What are we trying to achieve, and how will we know when we've done it successfully?**

The answers to those questions create alignment across elected officials, staff, and the community.

## Coming in Hot: The Tough Questions

Strategic planning is not easy, even when limited to the essential elements we discussed here. It also raises some tough questions.

### **The elected officials have a lot of destructive conflicts with each other. Won't strategic planning crash and burn?**

This might be the toughest question. In some cases, participants can be pleasantly surprised to find they actually agree on an underlying issue, as our earlier example showed. A step further in this direction is to take an “appreciative inquiry” approach, which focuses on identifying what is good and working well in the community and then how they can be strengthened and preserved. Most people willing to participate in a strategic planning process feel positively about something in the community, and there is a good chance they value many of the same things. Strategic planning can also provide an opportunity to work with a skilled facilitator who helps participants engage in more constructive dialogue.

That said, we must also recognize that there are bad-faith “conflict entrepreneurs” who thrive on conflict and have little interest in finding common ground. Fortunately, these people, though they exist, are rare. Conflict entrepreneurs can often be engaged through a skilled facilitator or a planning method that emphasizes points of agreement.

When you have a genuine conflict entrepreneur, careful planning is imperative. There can be concerns about challenging this individual, particularly if they are in an elected or staff leadership position. In that case, it is important to determine what everyone will accept as a “source of truth” about community priorities. Sources may include statistically valid resident satisfaction surveys, data collected by outside consultants for comprehensive plans, branding studies, and similar research. Encourage the discussion to focus on information collected from a variety of viewpoints. Avoid relying on input from just a few individuals or from social media. A data analysis exercise can be an effective way to move the discussion forward, as long as all participants agree that it is a valid way to determine strategic priorities.

### **The chief executive has a very strong personal vision—is that de facto a strategic plan?**

The saying, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together,” is instructive here. A strong personal vision will often have little staying power beyond the tenure of the official if there is not an enduring framework to carry it forward. It has also been said that a vision without implementation is a hallucination. Strategic planning is the vehicle for implementation. That said, the planning process requires input from others.

To address this issue, first determine the extent of the personal vision. Is it limited to one or two strategic priorities? Or does the chief executive want to have their stamp on the entire plan? Once the scope of the vision is established, determine what sources of truth can be included in the discussion to finalize the strategic priorities.

Then determine whether a team should be given the opportunity to develop potential performance metrics and report back at a later time. Ideally, performance measures build on data that is already being collected or can be easily tracked. Different performance metrics can reflect different assumptions about what success looks like. Considering multiple ways to track success can help make those assumptions clear. One effective approach is to have a designated team develop three or four metrics that show progress and then allow the chief executive to choose one or two. This can help integrate the priorities of both parties.

### **Don't people hate having their performance measured?**

Performance measures can indeed be uncomfortable. Strategic planning should use them as warning devices that a plan is getting off track and as a way to start conversations about how to get it back on track. Performance measures are sometimes misused (or misconstrued) as tools for measuring the performance of people, not progress. But without performance metrics, we cannot be sure we share the same understanding of what success looks like.

Imagine we have an objective of “A Thriving Downtown.” How can we measure success toward that objective? If we are concerned about the appearance of the downtown area, our desired performance target may be to decrease the number of vacant storefronts. If there is a financial or sales tax component, we may want a performance target that increases the number of new building permits in the downtown area. But if we want to increase visitors, we could measure the hours downtown parking meters are in use. A performance target could be to increase those hours or increase the number of downtown events.

The intent and purpose of the objective are important. In the downtown example, it may be best to have more than one performance target. For example, the community might seek to increase both the number of hours parking meters are in use and the number of new building permits. But regardless of the performance metric ultimately chosen, progress does not measure the effectiveness of the economic development director. While that individual can certainly influence the plans, programs, and strategies that impact downtown business attraction, others will also need to be involved. Elected officials may need to enact policies such as tax increment financing (TIF) districts. Public works may need to undertake streetscape or other infrastructure improvements. Community development may need to initiate zoning changes to maximize the



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—GENARO “CHIP” IGLESIAS, CITY MANAGER, CITY OF SOUTH MIAMI, FLORIDA

opportunities to bring businesses downtown. Strategic plans are truly a team effort, with multiple people playing their part to achieve the best chance of success.

**Shouldn't everything we do be in the plan? If a program or project is not in the plan, then it will be seen as unimportant!**

There is a strong temptation to produce a long list of items from planning rather than a short list. This can result from a well-meaning desire to address every issue that was raised and give everyone a role in the plan. A short list leads to focus, whereas a long list leads to hazy direction.

Strategic planning should be kept separate from operational excellence. For example, police patrol and solid waste removal are essential services for most communities. They should be provided efficiently and effectively but are typically not strategic. Strategic items generally involve stepping outside normal operations to address an emerging or persistent problem. These issues require focused attention and a deliberate solution.

## So How Do We Get Started?

Strategic planning doesn't have to be a large undertaking to deliver real value. Even a focused goal-setting exercise can be a meaningful start. Staff are often surprised to find that elected officials are eager participants. A good plan gives everyone a shared sense of purpose and direction. It also creates space to tackle challenges that cut across departments and address some of the community's most pressing issues, including financial sustainability, operational efficiency, and organizational transparency.

Strategic planning is not a luxury reserved for well-resourced governments or visionary leaders. It is one of the

most practical tools any local government can use to turn public dollars into public value.

As Genaro “Chip” Iglesias, city manager of the City of South Miami, Florida, explains, “Strategic planning is essential for local governments because it gives purpose to our decisions, discipline to our priorities, and accountability to our actions. It is how local governments turn vision into action and service into lasting impact. When done well, strategic planning helps ensure that every investment, policy, and initiative is aligned with the needs of our residents and the long-term vision, and helps a community reach its fullest potential.”

At its core, strategic planning asks two deceptively simple questions: What are we trying to achieve, and how will we know when we've done it successfully? The answers to those questions create alignment across elected officials, staff, and the community. Even a short, focused list of priorities can move a community forward. The key ingredients are clear ownership, honest performance metrics, and a commitment to regular reporting. Whether a government starts with the essentials or builds toward a fully integrated planning framework, the investment pays dividends in clearer budgets, stronger public trust, and results residents can see. The communities that plan don't just respond to challenges; they shape their own futures. ■

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<sup>1</sup>In the summer of 2024, GFOA conducted a survey with the survey research firm Civic Pulse. The survey received 497 responses from local governments across the United States. Critically, the survey was not limited to GFOA members. Civic Pulse's sampling methods do not use GFOA member databases. The survey was limited to municipalities and counties. Also, to keep the survey short and convenient for respondents to complete, we only addressed a limited number of topics (though future iterations of this survey could cover others). For more information, see [gfoa.org/materials/gfr0825-pulse](https://gfoa.org/materials/gfr0825-pulse).