

NANJEMOY VISIONING PROJECT
Observations and Suggestions from Vivian Mills
November 2001

BACKGROUND

Because I know how important the Nanjemoy Visioning Project is and, like many others, want nothing more than its success, I am offering this informal analysis with its accompanying suggestions, with the hope that it will prove helpful to the visioning process now under way. In preparing this informal “thinking aloud on paper,” I am speaking strictly for myself.

By way of background, it is useful to add that my views relating to the project come from several sources. I have spent all my adult life involved in nonprofit, public interest efforts, both as an active volunteer and as a staff member of nonprofit organizations. As a result, I have had the opportunity to take part in any number of group enterprises aimed at benefitting the public. In the process, I have had the less than happy experience of finding myself involved in a poorly conceived planning effort and the pleasure of participation in well organized ones. (It would be hard to say which experience was the more instructive.) Also, as an independent consultant (a field I’ve been in for over ten years), I frequently serve in the facilitator role, guiding groups through the often difficult process of thinking through what their common interests are, what priorities they can agree on, and how to go about acting on those priorities. It’s something I enjoy enormously, as demanding as it is. However, I hasten to add that I cannot offer myself as a facilitator for the Nanjemoy effort, for the simple reason that I am too intensely involved in it as a member of the group.

Although much of this informal piece will focus on process, it’s important for me to point out that I am not interested in process for its own sake. Process is the tool by which a group strives to establish and reach a positive outcome. The better that tool and the better the group gets at using it, the more likely the outcome will be valued all around.

If I commit any factual errors in the following sections or omit relevant information, my apologies.

For any reader who would like to go straight to my suggestions, they are contained in the last two sections under the headings **MEASURES TO ASSURE AN OPTIMAL PROCESS** and **THE IMPORTANCE AND BENEFITS OF USING A COMPETENT FACILITATOR**.

NATURE VS. PEOPLE—A FALSE ISSUE

Nanjemoy and the surrounding area are like almost no other in Charles County or southern Maryland in terms of sheer expanse of foreshore and an extensive virtually pristine shoreline along

the Potomac River. The watersheds marked out by Nanjemoy Creek and its tributaries support a robust diversity of plant and animal life. Because this region of the county has up to now been touched only lightly by development, the population density is low and the landscape remains pleasantly rural. Its roads afford a welcome contrast to the trafficky, garishly lighted, and often noisy and cluttered urbanized parts of the county.

It is the rural, natural character of the area that stirred the interest of local, state, and national visionaries and decision makers in bringing about the preservation of Douglas Point and the Wilson property along Malloys Bay.

I emphasize the natural and environmental values first because, once destroyed, they are not going to be replaced. As welcome as it is, the protection of Douglas Point and the Wilson land, along with Pursue State Park and Friendship Landing and private land covered by conservation easements, cannot assure the long-term integrity of the entire Nanjemoy area. If the roads leading to any of these sites end up cluttered with haphazard strip commercial development and if surrounding forests and fields end up being replaced by conventional housing developments, opportunities for tourism will suffer and related opportunities for local enterprises serving tourists will suffer in turn. *The most important attribute Nanjemoy now has is its peaceful rural and notably natural character.* This is what makes it so special and so attractive, and it will become even more special over time if it is not destroyed.

Some may ask: don't human needs deserve attention? After all, people live in the Nanjemoy area and, although many commute to jobs elsewhere, some make their living there. Some residents, for a variety of reasons, find themselves struggling with a depressed standard of living and would like opportunities to improve their situations. Meanwhile, many parents and schoolchildren feel the need for additional recreational amenities (ballfields for one) and residents often feel handicapped having to drive considerable distances for services. Gasoline stations, grocery and drug stores, and medical and dental offices either do not exist in Nanjemoy or are scarce. Although recently improved, the Vango public transportation system does not reach all parts of the Nanjemoy area and in any case the schedules are limited. Having a car, or access to a car, is essential (often, even to get to and from an isolated bus stop).

The answer to the question above is an emphatic yes—human needs do of course deserve attention. However, it is a false premise to assume that preservation of natural features and the rural landscape will somehow get in the way of human needs. They do not cancel each other out, provided of course that the community and responsible authorities do the right thing. It is a well-established fact that people have an elemental need for a meaningful connection with nature and the outdoors, and so to ravage those resources is to jeopardize the quality of people's lives. At the same time, as population grows and the economy spurs development, natural places become increasingly scarce. For the visioning group, the chief primary challenge, it seems to me, will be to figure out how to balance or reconcile interest in sustaining Nanjemoy's special character while

providing for the people who live and work there. I believe this can be done, but it will require clear thinking, research into sustainable community models that have worked elsewhere, thoughtful analysis, generous sharing of ideas and viewpoints, and—ultimately—the ability to arrive at an identifiable consensus that will stick.

A key element in the needed visioning process will involve assessing what local people need and want. However, the group must make take care not to confuse the concepts “need” and “want” —the latter carrying less weight. It also should take time to measure, to the extent it can, the intensity of expressed needs, not only today but in the future. If, for example, it is agreed that being able to buy gasoline closer to home is a “need,” where should a gasoline station be ideally located? Should there be more than one? What steps can the community take to affect an appropriate placement? Can a station be built so that it will blend successfully into the rural environment instead of following the typical one-size-fits-all intensely lighted multiple-bay model sporting gigantic signs and loud music broadcast through outside speakers?

COMING TO TERMS WITH WHAT TOURISM MEANS AND WHAT IT MAY—OR MAY NOT—BE ABLE TO DO

The recently ballooning emphasis in the county on tourism as the answer to improving local economic conditions (and in the process increasing the jurisdiction’s tax base) represents yet another element that will necessarily command a high level of attention in the Nanjemoy visioning process. (Indeed, it is already doing so, perhaps prematurely.) But will tourism directly benefit the people who make their home in the Nanjemoy area? No one is in a position yet to say with any certainty that it will. Even if it can be satisfactorily demonstrated that tourism will eventually play a meaningful role, no one knows how long it will take for it to exert a noticeable positive financial effect on the community or what the extent of that effect will be. How soon and to what degree will it stimulate the addition of tourist-connected enterprises such as eating places, lodging, automobile services, guided tours, and sales of items as varied as souvenirs, field glasses, ponchos, bug spray, bottled water, and maps? What about opportunities for renting kayaks, canoes, bicycles, or tents? Does the local community see itself as having the space for or meeting all these “needs”? (I recently heard the National Park Service manager of the Antietam battlefield site that everyone in the quiet little nearby town is perfectly pleased to have tourists travel several miles farther to a much larger place for lodging and restaurants. Similarly, would it be better for such services to be available to tourists in La Plata—not, after all, an arduous drive away—rather than in Nanjemoy? Or in Indian Head? This is something else that the visioning group can appropriately fit into its deliberations.)

Those vaunting tourism as an economic asset for the county are still in the early stages of projecting reliable financial outcomes. Even more relevant, a commonly accepted definition of the different varieties of tourism has yet to be arrived at, at least within our visioning group. Heritage

tourism and ecotourism are not interchangeable and there is no guarantee that one will neatly complement the other. In some circumstances, they may actually compete or conflict with each other. For that matter, experts recognize that ecotourism and so-called green tourism are not synonymous— as similar as they sound—and agritourism is yet another separate category. It will be important for us to have a clear understanding of the similarities and differences, lest we make assumptions that have little chance of panning out.

SPECIAL STRENGTHS OF THE VOLUNTARY VISIONING APPROACH

At the Commissioners' Town Meeting at Nanjemoy recently, Murray Levy, President of the Board of Commissioners, made it clear that the County would give weight to the outcome of the Nanjemoy visioning process provided that it will be able to demonstrate that it covered all the appropriate bases and represented the interests of all the stakeholders. In short, if the task is done well by our group, the County will be unlikely to feel it necessary to set up a separate Commissioner-appointed task force to examine prospects for Nanjemoy's future and to submit recommendations to the County.

The Commissioner's specific challenge is worth heeding. Fortunately, we bring some exceptionally good virtues to the task. A voluntary effort like the one now under way has numerous advantages over a government-sponsored effort. For example:

- Open participation versus limited participation. The current group is open to everyone's participation and will presumably remain open and will engage in an ongoing effort to interest additional members of the community in attending meetings, expressing their views, and getting involved. By contrast, participation in a government-established group is limited to its appointed members. It ordinarily goes public only when its work reaches the point of holding a public meeting or conducting an actual public hearing (and often those are one-shot affairs that come late in the game).
- Sense of accountability. For the most part, members of a community-based planning and visioning group that has sprung into being voluntarily will feel accountable first and foremost to the community itself. Those selected to serve on a government-sponsored entity must of necessity keep in mind that they are directly accountable to the government, which as the official appointing body stands between it and the community at large.
- Power to determine structure. We are in a position to decide for ourselves how we want to structure the task, setting up as many small work groups as we feel necessary and holding as many plenary sessions as we want. A government-appointed group is likely to operate following a format pre-set by the County.

- Power to set the agenda. A group such as ours does not have to be constrained by a job description created by official action. Instead, it is free to range as widely as it wishes, encompassing whatever geographical boundaries we deem best and covering topics and issues as we see fit. A government-established group is more likely to need to adhere to a job description formulated by county officials in authorizing its existence.

There is a place, and often a legal necessity, for government-appointed citizen planning groups. Nevertheless, a grassroots-generated effort like ours has a better chance of pooling the energies and talents of the community at large.

INHERENT WEAKNESSES OF THE VOLUNTARY APPROACH

Having celebrated our virtues, I also feel compelled to point out that our particular approach also has inherent weaknesses—and it's important for us to be conscious of them and to plan to overcome or at least minimize them. Although the Nanjemoy-Potomac Environmental Coalition launched the visioning effort (a constructive decision for which the entire community and the entire county ought to be grateful), it does not appear to see itself as entitled to run the show, so to speak. At the same time, no one group is bringing funds to the table to cover all the costs that may be incurred in the process. For these reasons, there is a certain amorphousness to the undertaking, even though I believe everyone sees it as a shared and cooperative effort.

In my experience the weaknesses that can affect enterprises like this one include:

- Insufficient organization. Groups like ours can make the mistake of letting themselves be *too* loosely organized. If for example records of decisions made at meetings are not kept and shared, almost inevitably later disagreements will occur because people will have different recollections about what was or was not actually decided. Such conflict can undo the project. Lack of attention to basic meeting protocols can lead to participant frustration, which in turn can lead to low attendance and high drop-out rates.
- Lack of coordination. Without some workable form of coordination, larger groups tend to flounder and lose cohesiveness. If regular steps are not made to review progress to date or to make sure subgroups are working in tandem, participants may get lost in the process.
- An ambiguous decision-making process. Unless the group clearly sees itself as a decision-making group, it may spend a lot of time meeting and talking but not get much of anywhere. At the same time, “decisions” may be determined by the most vocal members of the group rather than on a democratic basis, and those with an axe to grind may gain dominance over those who have the capacity to see the overall picture. For lack of a clear, rational, agreed-on decision-making process, the ultimate product of the group's effort may lack credibility and have little impact.

· Inability to stay on focus and to resolve issues. This is probably the most serious hazard. The larger the group, the more diverse it is, and the more it contains widely divergent points of view, the more likely it is to falter in its mission without a suitable system for moving from point A to B (and from B to C and so on) and for resolving issues that arise. In a situation like this, mutual trust tends to be undermined and interest blocs are likely to coalesce and solidify.

MEASURES TO ASSURE AN OPTIMAL PROCESS

In my view, the visioning team has gotten off to a promising start but is nonetheless up against problems related to the weaknesses discussed above. Unless these weaknesses and the associated problems are addressed effectively and soon, the project may falter. These elements deserve the group's immediate attention:

1. The composition of the visioning group
2. The clarity of its organization, coordination, record keeping, and decision-making process
3. The scope of the geographical area it will embrace
4. Its capacity to cover all the relevant subject matter areas
5. Use of outside resources
6. The funds likely to be needed and how best to raise and administer them
7. Responsibility for writing and issuing the final report

Ways to surmount already occurring or potential problems are sketched in point by point below.

A. Composition: bringing all the stakeholders on board

As the Bureau of Land Management rightly pointed out in the program it sponsored in Waldorf last summer, an essential requisite in developing a vision or plan that authentically reflects the community's thinking is to have all the stakeholders involved. Otherwise, the product of the effort will likely be ignored, discounted, or actively opposed by those who did not participate.

The term "stakeholder" commonly refers to any person or group likely to be affected by the planning group's work in any significant way. However, it is important to keep in mind that not every stakeholder can be counted on to welcome the undertaking—some may feel indifferent to it and others, usually a minority, may even oppose it, although they may not make their attitude public. Usually, it's worth the effort to attract the initially uncommitted into the process, especially when the idea is to develop a plan that reflects genuine community consensus. To do so is to demonstrate that the process is open, not closed, and it can have the practical effect of neutralizing the opponent stakeholder. For both the opponent and the indifferent, the experience can also be educational and enlightening. Such participants may even end up strongly committed to a

successful outcome.

Up to now, not all the stakeholders are represented, and intensive efforts to remedy the lack are important before more time goes by.

In this regard, these steps need to be taken:

1. Identify *all* the stakeholder groups. (In some cases there will be key subgroups). A healthy mix will include representation from each of these sectors of the community:

- a. Those with deep roots in Nanjemoy (born and/or raised there; lived there a long time; preceding generations lived there)
- b. Newcomers
- c. Each identifiable racial/ethnic segment of the population
- d. The schools or school system (*e.g.*, principals, teachers, PTA leaders)
- e. Those engaged in farming and/or forestry
- f. Owners of substantial assets, such as acreage in the area
- g. The low-income community
- h. Those engaged in local private sector enterprise
- i. Nonprofit organizations providing human services to the community
- j. Environmental and conservation groups
- k. Groups with special knowledge of historic/cultural resources
- l. Groups with a special interest in or active in recreation in the community
- m. The faith community

The above list is not meant to be comprehensive. (I don't mention middle-income participants since demographics suggest that they are likely to be in the majority.) The plenary group needs to settle on who the important stakeholders are. Care needs to be taken to be sure no one group or small cluster of groups is overly represented.

2. Decide on a practical strategy for bringing in stakeholders or representatives of stakeholder groups into the visioning process—soon—and implementing that strategy by contacting them and soliciting their participation.

3. Set aside time and opportunity to orient the new arrivals—to put them into the picture on what the purpose is and what has taken place so far.

B. Working out organizational structure and process

While an informal approach by and large will work satisfactorily for the visioning effort, a modicum of coordination by a core group is essential and so is the assistance of an experienced

facilitator. These measures should do much to make sure that the group stays on track:

1. Agree on use of a steering committee (the core group) and activate it. This small group should represent the large group as fairly as possible and should probably include the leader from each subgroup. Its main function is to provide central coordination. Meeting as needed, it should have at least these “powers,” which should be approved by the large group:

- a. Make sure that meeting notices are sent out to participants and, when appropriate, to the larger community.
- b. Make as fair an estimate as possible of the expected expenses involved in the visioning process and develop a plan for covering them and for handling them, reporting findings to the large group. (If an existing organization is willing to serve as the group’s fiscal agent, the steering committee still should track expenses. It may also need to solicit funds from time to time.)
- c. Reserve needed meeting space and see to supplies and refreshments.
- d. Recommend a facilitator for the visioning process and work with the facilitator to coordinate the large group’s progress, determine milestones, and identify developing problems that may be stalling progress. (See #2 below and the final section entitled THE IMPORTANCE AND BENEFITS OF USING A COMPETENT

FACILITATOR.)

- e. Help direct the subgroups when necessary to information resources pertinent to their work and help make sure that they cover all the essential bases, to avoid final reports that are suspect or inadequate. Such resources include publications, websites, organizations, and individuals.
- f. I also recommend that one of the ground rules should be that subgroups do not release draft reports in written form to the public or any outside entity until the large group has had the opportunity to receive and consider them. This will prevent several problems, including premature and therefore possibly erroneous conclusions by the public and the awkwardness of reports that seriously contradict the reports of sister subgroups. (The presumed aim is to issue a final overall report in which differences have been resolved and that reflects the large group’s consensus.)
- g. Responsibility for preparation and issuance of the final report, to the county government and to the general public, will probably best lie with the steering committee. However, the decision as to how it should be written, edited, and reproduced can wait until the task is further along.

2. Recruit a highly qualified facilitator as soon as possible. This is a very high priority and, because it is, I elaborate on it in the last section.

C. Defining scope, both geographic and in terms of subject matter areas

1. At this stage, there is no clear agreement on the geographic boundaries of the anticipated visioning plan. Lesser Nanjemoy? Greater Nanjemoy? What, precisely, do such terms mean? Or should it encompass all of western Charles County or the western part only far enough north to include Indian Head? Knowing the scope is a basic initial need—and its determination should be based on a readily understandable rationale. (Note: A good facilitator can help the large group sort this issue out.)

2. One significant subject matter area is missing from the list of subgroups—the Nanjemoy area’s historic and cultural assets. An additional, separate subgroup devoted to this topic should be organized as soon as possible. Its task should be to set out an accurate if brief description of the areas’s history, to identify significant historic features that make up the human and natural environment, and to pinpoint the key elements of the area’s cultural heritage. To the degree that tourism will form a large part of the plan, a sure understanding of local history and culture must figure in it.

THE IMPORTANCE AND BENEFITS OF USING A COMPETENT FACILITATOR

Except for very small groups (for example, three to five people who have already developed a solid working relationship), a competent facilitator is essential to any serious planning project involving a large group of individuals, many of whom may never have worked together before and all of whom, in any case, are tackling this particular challenge for the first time

I feel very strongly that the Nanjemoy visioning effort is too important to let it go forward without the help of a competent facilitator, who will lead all plenary sessions and, as the situation dictates, assist subgroups that may have difficulty moving ahead.

Here is what such a person can do for us:

- keep the group focussed
- assure that it progresses through its self-appointed task in an orderly fashion
- keep discussion open and balanced, giving everyone a fair chance to contribute and encouraging a wide range of viewpoints
- ease the process of overcoming obstacles to decision making
- validate consensus as it emerges and ripens

It is important to define what the term “competent” means in this regard. These are the requisite

criteria for competency in this field:

1. *Ability to be neutral and objective.* The facilitator must not arrive with pre-conceived ideas about the ideal outcome or a preferred outcome. While he or she must of course understand how the visioning effort came about, what its aim is, and what its eventual significance might be to the community and the county, the job cannot involve dictating to the group or influencing it with personal convictions concerning the pros or cons of a given subject area or issue. Any such interference spoils the effort.

2. *Absence of conflicts of interest.* The facilitator must be free of ties to any individual stakeholder or stakeholder group that may create a bias or subject him or her to undue influence. Does this disqualify an experienced facilitator who works or has worked in one of the main subject areas that the group will be addressing? Not in and of itself it doesn't. A facilitator who has, for example, been involved in historic preservation, helped groups effect community change, or developed a background in environmental protection may still serve as an excellent facilitator, *provided he or she is not in the pay of a stakeholder group, does not owe any favors to a stakeholder group, or does not have a personal stake in the outcome except in the sense of wanting to have the satisfaction of its success.*

3. *A demonstrated background in successful group facilitation.* This is not the moment to bring in a novice facilitator or someone who has experience with groups but does not understand what is involved in facilitation. A facilitator needs to feel confident in the demanding role of group leader, have the ability to inspire trust, be an effective listener and a quick thinker, readily grasp concepts, and know how to discern and handle differences that develop within the group. Excellent communication skills and a good sense of humor are also important.

These competencies do not develop overnight. The one way of having reasonable certainty about their presence in a prospective facilitator is evidence of prior actual, successful experience. That means we have to inquire about background and check out references.

4. *Familiarity with and commitment to sound ethical values involved in facilitation.* Any facilitator worth his or her salt respects all the participants and is committed to engendering mutual trust and respect within the group. He or she does not hesitate to squelch *ad hominem* attacks should they occur against another person or a group. In the event a conflict arises that does not yield to facilitation, the facilitator openly identifies the need for mediation and either shifts momentarily to a mediator role or helps the discussants locate a mediator. As a fundamental precept, the ethical facilitator has faith in the group's capacity to create workable, democratic solutions to problems it identifies.

How can we know if a prospective facilitator fits this description? One way is to ask what values he or she believes underpins the facilitation process.

As is by now evident, I don't believe choice of a facilitator should be a casual affair. At the same time, the responsibility should be a group responsibility, not the assignment of a lone person. As the prime organizer of the visioning process, NPEC is the appropriate mechanism for locating one or more prospective facilitators who are known to have a background in facilitation. Then, at least three participants, not all from NPEC, should personally meet with at least the most promising candidate—assuming interest and availability have been indicated. One member of this interview team should check out references. Finally, the interview team should present its recommendation to the visioning group for its approval.

There is, to be sure, a danger that the visioning group will not see the need for a facilitator, let alone a veteran facilitator. For this reason, the interview team has to be prepared to make the case for bringing one in.

One possible objection to investing in a search for a competent facilitator is the time it may take. A desirable candidate may not be available immediately. Furthermore, it may require a month, even more, for the interview and decision process to be completed. Can the visioning process wait that long? It can and should, unless the prevailing view is to risk a shaky outcome based on a shaky process. In any case, the subgroups can continue their efforts in the meantime and the plenary group can defer meeting until the interview team is ready with its recommendation. (It would be a good idea to have the candidate be present that evening to discuss the facilitator role with the group.)

A second possible objection could be cost, an issue that might arise if a *pro bono* facilitator cannot be readily found. (One promising source for the freebie approach is the National Park Service, which provides facilitator help for community planning groups.) In the event cost looks unavoidable, I think the only viable solution would be to seek urgent one-time funding to cover facilitator fees. The Chesapeake Bay Trust may be a promising source and there are others.

In conclusion, the Nanjemoy community and its supporters have the potential to demonstrate to Charles County and to any individual, agency, or organization looking on that we are capable of and committed to work of the highest calibre. The stakes are worth it.