After attending this year’s strategic planning retreat held on October 3-4 in Ft. Lauderdale, I reminisced on how exciting it was to participate in my first strategic planning event. The year was 2004, and the event was held in Tampa. At that time I was not fully aware of how important strategic planning is, nor did I fully grasp the concept of vision and mission statements that guide our core principals. That event was the start of a journey much larger than I could have ever imagined.

This year marks the sixth time I have participated in strategic planning for the section: 2004, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2011, and now in 2013. The purpose of having strategic planning retreats is to continually review the section’s vision and mission statements and its goals, make sure they align with where the membership wants the section to be, and determine the best way to get there.

The following is the definition of strategic planning from Wikipedia (italics mine):

“Strategic planning is an organization’s process of defining its strategy, or direction, and making decisions on allocating its resources to pursue this strategy. In order to determine the future direction of the organization, it is necessary to understand its current position and the possible avenues through which it can pursue particular courses of action. The key components of strategic planning include an understanding of an entity’s vision, mission, values, and strategies.

- **Vision**: Outlines what the organization wants to be, or how it wants the world in which it operates to be (an ‘idealized’ view of the world). It is a long-term view and concentrates on the future. It can be emotive and is a source of inspiration.
- **Mission**: Defines the fundamental purpose of an organization or an enterprise, succinctly describing why it exists and what it does to achieve its vision.
- **Values**: Beliefs that are shared among the stakeholders of an organization. Values drive an organization’s culture and priorities and provide a framework in which decisions are made.
- **Strategy**: Narrowly defined, means ‘the art of the general.’ A combination of the ends (goals) for which the firm is striving and the means (policies) by which it is seeking to get there. A strategy is sometimes called a roadmap, which is the path chosen to plow towards the end vision. The most important part of implementing the strategy is ensuring the company is going in the right direction, defined as towards the end vision.”
The one underlying constant behind strategic planning is this: your goals and priorities will change. In 2007, the section's goals and priorities completely changed due in part to aligning the strategic plan to its business plan, which is the first time that had ever been done. In 2011, the section's priorities changed, along with some slight changes to the goals after further review. This year, the section's goals and priorities have completely shifted again; this time, adopting the AWWA's newly released strategic plan. You can find the Association's strategic plan at www.awwa.org/about-us/strategic-plan.aspx.

The members that participated in this year's strategic planning retreat debated passionately on whether or not we should align the section's goals and/or how best to align those goals with those of the Association. We also had a lingering debate on the vision for the section. Typically, when debates linger, it is due to semantics; this was no different, and in the end, we agreed to adopt the Association's mission and vision as our own, with a few slight tweaks of the verbiage. The most interesting part of this development is that the strategic goals were set first, prior to setting the mission and vision; perhaps a bit backwards in the process, but successful nonetheless.

A strategic plan should be a living and breathing document; it should be, by its very nature, dynamic, and it should constantly evolve and adapt to whatever changes need to be made to benefit the membership. The final version of the Florida Section strategic plan will be made available on the website (www.fsawwa.org) when all revisions have been completed. For those of you who were not able to participate this year, please keep a keen eye on the calendar of events so you don’t miss the next strategic planning retreat.

Arguably, there is no better place to witness the implementation of the strategic plan than at the Annual Fall Conference at the various council and committee meetings. It is there that we are able to craft and develop plans of action to benefit our membership. As I mentioned in my January article, perhaps the most valuable privilege you receive as a member of FSAWWA is the ability to bring all the stakeholders together in one room. As Florida's water professionals, we have a body of talent that is unsurpassed. We have utility personnel, engineers, manufacturers, regulators, contractors, and academicians who provide a breadth and depth of knowledge found nowhere else.

This also provides a value in membership found nowhere else. You can engage in meaningful discussions about issues that directly impact the water industry and come up with creative ways to solve the problem at hand—all without the barriers that office walls typically invoke. Instead, there an open environment in which to collaborate, communicate, and create solutions.

As our strategic plan needs to be dynamic, so is our conference, which will be held December 1-5 at the Omni Hotel Resort at ChampionsGate. This year, we are holding an opening general session for the very first time! We have a guest speaker confirmed and I am positive you will find this new addition a welcomed change, energizing you for the workshops, technical sessions, and activities that follow. Immediately after the opening session there will be the grand opening of the exhibit hall.

This is going to be historic occasion for the Florida Section and one you will remember throughout your career. Don’t miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Please make sure to visit the section website mentioned previously for more information on the conference. I look forward to seeing you there!