

Technical Briefs

1

Planning and the Comprehensive Plan

The comprehensive plan is a community's compass. It is designed to help residents chart a course to a mutually agreed-upon future. The comprehensive plan is a tool that can be used to foster change or effectively deal with unanticipated changes. The planning commission plays a vital lead role in this process, deciding when an update is necessary and leading community involvement in shaping the plan.

Every city or town has its own identity, much of which is derived from the physical layout of homes, business, industry, and agriculture. In communities where roads, parks, local services, and various amenities seem well integrated, it is usually because a comprehensive plan has guided the community's development. These plans are most effective when used as the basis for ongoing and daily decision making. That way everything—from the location of a shopping center to the development of houses to the widening of a main arterial—is integrated and compatible.

While land-use plans have existed in this country since the late 17th century, it is only in recent times that courts have begun relying on them as a basis for reviewing local government decisions. Increasingly, courts will uphold a zoning or land-use determination that is in

conformance with a comprehensive plan or strike down one that is not supported by the plan.

While there is much truth in the old adage, "if you fail to plan then plan to fail," there is no one, single plan that is a perfect fit for every city or town.

Comprehensive plans—their contents, graphics, and format—vary from one community to another. In general, however, a comprehensive plan should be:

- inclusive of all aspects of development;
- long range (15–20 years);
- focused on a community's physical development;
- able to relate physical development to the community's goals and its social and economic policies;
- developed with input from all segments of the community;

- formally adopted by the local legislative body;
- readily available and easily understood.

The unique conditions and circumstances of each community, as well as state statutes, will dictate a plan's contents. Some states require that local comprehensive plans include certain components and be updated at specific intervals. At a minimum, most plans contain a land-use, housing, transportation and infrastructure element. Other possibilities include:

- parks and open space;
- air quality and the environment;
- energy conservation;
- historic preservation;
- urban design;
- economic development;
- culture, arts, and leisure;
- education;
- health and human services.

The development of a comprehensive plan should be a community effort. All stakeholders should be involved in

Technical Briefs 1

establishing the community's goals. In order to do that, it is essential to understand the current state of community affairs. The planning commission can lead community input in this process, and additional data can provide insight into community characteristics, land-use patterns, and social, economic, and demographic trends.

Potential plan elements and critical issues within the community will help determine what data to gather. If housing is a plan element, data might be collected about the existing housing stock—age, condition, number and types of units—and the existing and projected housing need. Once collected and analyzed, data will provide the basis for modifying earlier goals or setting new ones.

Goals are broadly written and encompass fundamental community values. They provide insight into what a community wants to preserve or change. Often, in the final document, goals and their accompanying objectives are grouped by element. For example, under economic development, a goal might be “to encourage a more diverse industrial mix to guard against cyclical fluctuations.”

For each goal, there usually are multiple objectives. An objective is a quantifiable step that, when taken, can help achieve a goal. If a community transportation goal is “to promote efficient circulation and accessibility,” then an objective might be, “establish a network of pedestrian and bicycle greenways

connecting neighborhoods with the town center and recreational facilities.”

Building consensus around goals and objectives is a time-consuming and sometimes controversial process. Because a comprehensive plan can affect residents' property, livelihood, and overall quality of life, they should be encouraged to participate in the planning process. Online, mail, or telephone surveys, public forums, focus groups, charrettes, and media and public information campaigns can be designed to either gauge public sentiment or elicit participation.

In putting together the actual plan document, it is important that it not only describe but show. Maps, charts, graphs, photos, and other visual elements can speak as loudly as words. Important components of the plan include the land-use maps. One map usually shows the location of existing land uses that will not change while another shows proposed land uses—residential, commercial, business, industrial, and mixed use.

Although the comprehensive plan communicates a community's vision, it is regulations, ordinances, and other governmental tools that turn the vision into reality. Zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, incentives, capital improvements programs, and annexation agreements are among the implementation tools available. Some plans detail the implementation strategies that will be used.

Once adopted by the local governing body, the comprehensive plan should be widely disseminated and used to guide planning and land-use decisions, not left on a shelf. The plan is a guide to the community's future, and a document that can help keep planning

commissioners on track with the long-term goals for their community. The plan must be updated periodically to keep pace with the changing and growing community. Rules for amending comprehensive plans appear in state enabling legislation. ■■

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