



LOCAL GOVERNMENT TOPICS

Land
Use



Comprehensive Planning

Introduction

An old saying amongst those in the planning profession is that if you fail to plan, what you are in reality doing is planning to fail. Communities are always facing this dilemma. If the community you work, play, and live in does not have a plan for its future, what ultimately may happen is that the community will fail to adapt to change and to take advantage of opportunities.

The concept of comprehensive planning is very much related to the economic prosperity of communities. A comprehensive plan can be a tool for planning the future growth or decline of a local community. Most importantly, a comprehensive plan can be used to address the constant change and evolution of a community. Comprehensive plans are sometimes referred to as land use plans—they often deal with issues related to the appropriate uses of land. In many cases, comprehensive plans are prepared to address compatibility issues between various uses of land, management and preservation of natural resources, identification and preservation of historically significant lands and structures, and adequate planning for infrastructure needs. In other instances, comprehensive plans are utilized to address issues related to schools, recreation, and housing.

History of Comprehensive Planning

The issue of comprehensive planning in the United States has been addressed since the birth of the country. The original Williamsburg was one of the first highly successful products of an attempt to create a land use plan in the colonies. In 1699, Williamsburg was laid out under the most detailed piece of town-planning legislation adopted in the English colonies up to that point. Williamsburg reflected what is referred to as “axial planning,” which means that it is formal but not pompous.¹ Many argue that the modern phase of American city planning began with the Columbian Exposition of 1893. However, the modern era of planning for growth and development began in 1900, when several papers dealing with the beautification of government buildings were presented at an annual meeting of the American Institute of Architects in Washington, D.C. This meeting resulted in the

appointment of a committee responsible for preparing a plan for the District of Columbia’s park system. In 1901 the final plan for the park system was completed, and it left an impression on many cities and villages throughout the country. Public improvement groups were established in these communities, and they began the work of applying the new gospel of planning. Early on, this planning process was referred to as the “City Beautiful Movement.” This movement established two aspects of the local comprehensive planning process that are still in use: (1) the professional consultant in the field of comprehensive land use planning, and (2) the planning commission, which is used in communities all across the country. The City Beautiful Movement was the beginning of what is more commonly referred to today as “Comprehensive Planning.”²

What Is a Comprehensive Plan?

Comprehensive planning is an attempt to establish guidelines for the future growth of a community. As the term “comprehensive” suggests, this is an all-inclusive approach to addressing the issue of a community’s future growth. A comprehensive plan is the formal document produced through this process. The document is official in nature, meaning that it is designed to be adopted into law by some form of local government. The document should then serve as a policy guide to decisions about community development.

According to William I. Goodman, a well-known author on the subject of comprehensive planning, the key principle in the concept of the comprehensive plan is that it is an instrument to be used by community leaders who establish the policies and make the decisions regarding physical development. According to Goodman, the plan document should fulfill six basic requirements:

1. It should be comprehensive.
2. It should be long-range.
3. It should be general.
4. It should focus on physical development.
5. It should relate physical design proposals to community goals and social and economic policies.
6. It should be a policy instrument first, and a technical instrument only second.³

Goodman goes on to say that the procedure for creating a comprehensive plan also has six basic requirements:

1. There should be only one official comprehensive plan.
2. The legislative body should formally adopt the plan.
3. There should be a lengthy period of public debate prior to adoption.
4. The plan should be available and understandable to the public.
5. The plan should be formulated to capitalize on its educational potential.⁴

What Is Included Within a Comprehensive Plan?

The elements of a comprehensive plan can vary from community to community. In most cases though, the plan consists of a study of existing conditions and a discussion of future trends, goals, and objectives. Land use patterns, housing conditions, population, roadways, and other infrastructure issues are usually the principle elements that are studied.

In some cases, educational facilities are reviewed along with recreational and other government facilities. Social service facilities may also be discussed. Comprehensive plans deal with the land-use-related issues relevant to each of these topics.

The Comprehensive Planning Process

A comprehensive plan should be a vision of what a community is to be in the future. The process of developing this plan should be a community-wide effort. All interest groups should play a part in delineating this vision. Specific goals and objectives should be developed along with a time frame for implementation. The contents of a comprehensive plan can vary from community to community, but in most cases, a plan should consist of the following elements:

1. land use (both existing and future),
2. demographics (existing and projected),
3. housing,
4. infrastructure,
5. education,
6. recreation, and
7. throughfares.

The first phase of the process consists of collecting all available data on these topics. A citizens' participation process should also be developed.

Getting Organized

Before any work begins on the comprehensive plan, a leader should be appointed to coordinate this project. A committee should also be appointed to provide direction to the person or persons held responsible for developing the plan. A

popular scenario is for the county commissioners or village (city) council to appoint the committee and assign the task of leading the process to an administrative department head or consultant.

Data Collection

One of the first steps in the comprehensive planning process is to collect data on existing conditions. The data collected should relate to each of the elements that will make up the plan. For example, obtaining existing zoning maps or land use maps that have been developed in the past can be a starting point for reviewing current land use information. If this information is not available, it may be necessary to conduct a survey of the existing uses of land. A classification system identifying the various types of land use must then be developed. Typically, existing land uses can be identified as falling into three major categories: residential, commercial, or industrial. Additional categories can include recreation/open space, agricultural, and government. You can then break down each major category into other classifications. For example, you can have multi-family (meaning more than one unit) and single family as two classifications within the residential land-use category. The industrial land use category can be divided into heavy industrial classifications or light industrial classifications. Each parcel of land within the community should be classified and identified on a map with a specific classification.

If housing is an element of the comprehensive plan, data regarding existing housing in the community must be collected. Information pertaining to conditions, age, number of units, whether or not each unit has adequate plumbing and kitchen facilities, and whether the unit is owner- or renter-occupied could be relevant. Most of this data can be obtained from U.S. Census Bureau information. The Census Bureau can also provide data related to the demographics of the community population. However, a more detailed house-by-house survey may also be desired.

If the comprehensive plan is to include a study of transportation, then the community's existing roadway system should be evaluated. Reviewing existing maps of the community can initiate this process. A review of current transportation services can also be included as part of the transportation element.

Various methods for collecting data can be used. The best approaches vary depending on what elements are to be included in the comprehensive plan. It is important to remember that most information needed for planning is already available through a number of sources.

Analyzing Data

Once the data has been collected, the next step in the comprehensive planning process is to analyze it. The coordinator and committee should take time to study data provided for each of the planning categories. The data should be analyzed for trends or other significant considerations. Upon thorough review and analysis, the next step in the process is to come up with goals and objectives.

Goal Setting

The comprehensive plan should conclude with a set of recommendations established by the committee. The recommendations should be presented in the form of goals and objectives. The objectives should consist of strategies for addressing each of the main goals.

Citizen Participation

Throughout the entire comprehensive planning process, citizen input should be obtained. After all, the comprehensive plan is a document for the community. The citizens of the community should have a say regarding the future of their community. There are a number of ways to obtain citizen input:

1. Hold a series of open forums or public meetings to obtain public comment.
2. Distribute news releases explaining what is being worked on and inviting written comments.
3. Include a citizen survey as part of the comprehensive planning process and incorporate the results into the body of the plan.

Citizen input helps to determine the goals and objectives of the plan.

Conclusion

In 1972 President Nixon appointed a Citizens' Advisory Committee on Environmental Quality. This committee established a task force to study land use and urban growth. The task force consisted of prominent people, including Lawrence S. Rockefeller from the famous Rockefeller family and Mayor Pete Wilson of San Diego, California. Other appointees were experts from the academic, legal, banking, land development, and conservation communities specializing in different areas. A nine-month study was funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and it led to the publication of a report entitled *The Use of Land: A Citizen's Policy Guide to Urban Growth*. A major conclusion of this study was that land is a basic resource on which human activity ultimately depends. Comprehensive planning is a tool for determining how to use this resource.

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Where to get more information about Comprehensive Land-Use Planning

American Planning Association, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Suite 1600, Chicago, IL 60603, phone 312-431-9100, fax 312-431-9985. www.planning.org

How Will America Grow? A Citizen Guide to Land-Use Planning. 1976. Washington, DC: Citizens Advisory Committee on Environmental Quality.

Illinois Association of Regional Councils, 500 East Capitol Avenue, PO Box 1093, Springfield, IL 62705-1093, phone 217-525-7431, fax 217-525-7438.

Ohio Planning Conference, 129 South Third Street, Suite 510, Columbus, OH 43125-7100, 614-221-4349.

Ohio State University Extension, Community Development, 700 Ackerman Road, Suite 235, Columbus, OH 43202-1578, phone 614-292-8436. www.comdev.ag.ohio-state.edu/

The Practice of Local Government Planning. 2nd ed. 1988. Frank S. So and Judith Getzels, eds. Chicago, Ill.: International City/County Management Association.

Principles and Practices of Urban Planning. 1968. William I. Goodman, ed., and Eric C. Freund, assoc. ed. Chicago, Ill.: International City Managers Association.

The Small Town Planning Handbook. 2nd ed. 1995. Thomas L. Daniels, John W. Keller, and Mark B. Lapping. Chicago, Ill.: American Planning Association Press.

References

¹ William I. Goodman, ed., and Eric C. Freund, assoc. ed. 1968. *Principles and Practices of Urban Planning*. Chicago, Ill.: International City Managers Association, p.1.

²⁻⁴. Ibid.

