

Preparing An Implementable Comprehensive Plan

by Michael Chandler

Planning commissions are charged with preparing comprehensive plans. That is one of their core responsibilities. The value of a comprehensive plan, however, lies not in its preparation or adoption. The real measure of a comprehensive plan's value is whether the quality of life enjoyed by the residents of a community actually improves as a result of the plan. Thus, a planning commission should be judged according to the degree to which the plan is implemented. In this way, the plan can become a tool of leadership in the community.

The ten questions that follow should help ensure that when your commission develops — or updates — the comprehensive plan, you end up with an *implementable* plan that will improve the quality of life enjoyed by residents of your town, city, or county.

1. *Is the plan realistic?* A plan should indicate not only what is desirable, but also what is possible, given available resources. Most plans feature a full range of objectives. A good plan will also include the ways and means to measure whether the community actually achieves what the plan calls for. In doing so, the plan becomes a vehicle for resource allocation, as well as managerial accountability.

2. *Is the plan comprehensive?* A solid plan will address the full range of conditions that affect the quality of life within a community. To be effective, the planning process must recognize the inseparability and interrelationship of human, economic, social, and environmental conditions. One cannot be considered without the others.

3. *Is the plan specific?* Human, economic, social, and environmental conditions are not uniformly felt across a community. Thus, a plan must reflect the unique needs of individual neighborhoods and the citizens who live within them. As such, a comprehensive plan should be geographically

targeted. In this way, different strategies can be developed to meet the distinct needs of different parts of the community.

4. *Is the plan linked with related functions?* Planning cannot take place in a vacuum, isolated from other governmental activities performed by a locality. At a minimum, the planning process should be linked or integrated with the community's annual operat-

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ing budget, as well as the capital improvements program or budget. Such linkage is necessary because many of the recommendations contained in a comprehensive plan will lay fallow without the fiscal support of the local government.

5. *Does the plan link public and private interests?* Improving the quality of life in our communities cannot be the sole responsibility of government. In like fashion, we cannot view the private sector as a source of unlimited benevolence. An effective planning process will bring public and private interest together in a combined effort to address not only community problems, but community opportunities as well.

6. *Is the plan citizen-focused?* If a plan is to gain the political and community support required for its implementation, the process by which it is prepared must be open to all those affected by it. In addition, opportunities for direct citizen involvement during plan implementation should be a key feature in the plan management process. [For more on the importance of citizen partici-

pation, see "Developing the Comprehensive Plan: Part II," in PCJ #11].

7. *Is the plan understandable?* It is vitally important that citizens whose lives will be affected by a comprehensive plan be able to read and understand the document. Anything less should be viewed as unsatisfactory and unacceptable.

8. *Is the plan problem- and solution-specific?* A meaningful comprehensive plan will identify community problems in an objective and forthright manner. In turn, a solid plan will propose solutions which, if implemented, will remedy or redress the identified problems.

9. *Is the plan change-specific?* A comprehensive plan should be viewed as incomplete if a specific "change strategy" is missing from the document. Having a change strategy means that the plan should offer specific strategies to alleviate identified community problems and shortcomings.

10. *Is the plan current?* It is essential that a plan be updated when necessary to reflect changing conditions, as well as changing community perceptions. Allowing a plan to grow stagnant through neglect is self-defeating, as well as short-sighted.

The degree to which an organization experiences success is a function of its performance. An organization that realizes its desired end results will be judged successful. For a planning commission, this means not just preparing a comprehensive plan that the governing body adopts, but developing a plan that can be — and is — implemented. ♦

Michael Chandler is an Associate Professor and Community Planning Extension Specialist at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. Mike also regularly conducts planning commissioner training programs. His column is in each issue of the *Planning Commissioners Journal*.

