

Developing the Comprehensive Plan: Part I

by Michael Chandler

BACKGROUND STUDIES

Planning commissions have numerous duties and responsibilities. Chief among them is the preparation and updating of a comprehensive plan for the community.

As I noted in my last column [*Issue 9, p. 9*], the planning process begins once a locality decides to commit the necessary time, energy and money to accomplish the task. It is important to remember, however, that the planning process is governed by state law and local codes. Accordingly, "getting started" with developing (or revising) a comprehensive plan requires, as a necessary first step, a thorough understanding of these legal requirements.

ORGANIZING THE PLANNING PROCESS

Whether we label our plan comprehensive, master or general, we are, in most instances, describing the same thing. For most communities, a comprehensive plan is the physical manifestation of putting down on paper the hopes, dreams and goals a community holds for itself.

Properly done, a comprehensive plan will describe how, and at what pace, the community desires to develop physically, economically, and socially. The plan functions much like a roadmap; it is a means to an end.

The roadmap analogy is a powerful one, for it captures a plan's predictive nature. However, caution is warranted. Imagine for a moment you are visiting New York City for the first time and you discover that your guide map, though marked New York, is really a map of Boston. No matter what you do, or how hard you try, the map will be of little value as you attempt to negotiate the streets of New York. In like fashion, if your comprehensive plan is "pieced together" with borrowings from other communities' plans, or is missing several key elements or parts, it too will prove to be of little value.

In order to plan for the future, a planning commission needs to understand the community's past and present. The collection and analysis of this background information is an essential early step in the plan development process. Typically, a planning commission will conduct studies or gather information bearing on the community's demographics; natural environment; economic base; housing stock; transportation systems; community facilities; and land use pattern. The planning commission will then be in a position to analyze trends and draw conclusions about the community.

POTENTIALITIES: THE ROLE OF GOALS, OBJECTIVES & STRATEGIES

A second important plan development consideration involves the prediction of future conditions in the community. With the findings generated by the background studies as a basis, the plan will begin to reflect a futures orientation. In most cases, this orientation will be represented in the plan's goal statements which, when implemented, will bring the plan to life.

The challenge of articulating a community's future through words should not be trivialized. For example, there might be agreement on the goal of "improving our community," but no agreement on how this will be done. Planning commissioners must ask themselves whether such a goal carries with it any real meaning. I would venture a guess that most commissioners would say "no."

In recognition of the critical role words play in planning, it is important that planning commissioners understand the differences between goals, objectives, and strategies.

- A *goal* is a general statement of a future condition which is considered desirable for the community; it is an end towards which actions are aimed.

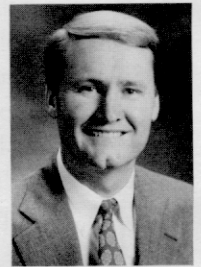
- An *objective* is a statement of a measurable activity to be accomplished in pur-

suit of the goal; it refers to some specific aspiration which is reasonably attainable.

- A *strategy* is a specific proposal to do something that relates directly to accomplishing the objective; it identifies the how, where, and amount to be done.

In the next issue of the *Journal*, I'll continue to discuss key considerations in developing the comprehensive plan, focusing particular attention on the role of citizens in the process and on strategies for getting the plan adopted. ♦

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PLANNING COMMISSIONERS Journal

In Coming Issues ...

- Special issue of the *Journal* focusing on planning to preserve a community's heritage, with features on heritage tourism and the "places of the heart" survey.
- The home occupation boom & its planning impacts.
- More on developing a comprehensive plan.
- Greg Dale's "Ethics and the Planning Commission" column returns.
- When attorneys appear before planning boards.
- Lessons from Scandinavia's "eco-community" planning.
- Preparing for public hearings.

Developing the Comprehensive Plan: Part II

by Michael Chandler

In my last column, I identified background studies and the formulation of goals, objectives and strategies as key ingredients in the plan development process. In this column I'll continue the plan development theme by first examining the role of citizens in the planning process, and then, briefly, reviewing the contents of a typical plan.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The inability to achieve a public consensus about what kind of future a community intends to create for itself is a fundamental reason land use planning fails. To be successful, planning must reflect the wants, needs and desires of the citizens who live in the community. Thus, a primary challenge facing a planning commission involves developing an effective strategy for getting citizen input in the planning process.

A planning commission can choose among a broad range of options when deciding on a citizen participation strategy. For example, citizens can be recruited to serve on ad hoc task forces or citizen advisory committees charged with completing a particular phase or element of the comprehensive plan. This particular strategy has enjoyed broad support because of its simple design and ability to deliver quality citizen input.

Another citizen involvement technique is the community survey. Depending upon the methodology used, a community survey has the potential of reaching a large number of citizens. This, in turn, can yield a tremendous amount of information and opinions on a broad range of land use issues being studied by the planning commission.

Another widely used citizen involvement strategy involves the planning commission working directly with specialized groups or target audiences such as farmers,

developers, environmentalists or small business owners. By grouping persons with like interests, a planning commission can capitalize on their accumulated knowledge and perspective. In some cases, this form of citizen participation is essential because of

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the influential nature of the target audience or special interest group.

Planning commissions are also reaching out to citizens in new and exciting ways. For example, the use of two-way interactive television is gaining in popularity. Air time can often be secured as a public service, with little or no cost to the locality. As many people find it difficult to attend meetings, television may well become the preferred medium for citizen involvement.

The charrette, long a mainstay of design professionals as an idea generator, is also gaining acceptance as a citizen participation strategy. Highly interactive and participatory, a charrette can be designed to present citizens with a real world view of planning and the choices their community must make when deciding about future land use patterns and community development goals.

Another citizen participation strategy finding a niche is "visioning." As a prelude to the traditional community planning process, a growing number of communities are engaging their citizens in a structured visioning process. In most cases the process is designed to provide answers to such key questions as where the community is

headed, what values its citizens find most important, and what kind of future they hope to create. As with a charrette, a visioning forum has the capacity to produce a tremendous amount of information, as well as civic energy and spirit.

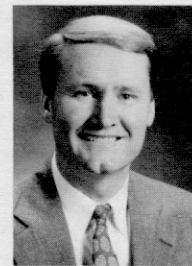
PLAN CONTENT

The background studies referenced in my last column can provide a planning commission with an accurate representation of its community's current position. In many communities, this background information is presented in chapter format. Typically, chapters will be organized around the natural environment, local economy, housing, transportation, commerce and business, community facilities and existing land use.

The goals and objectives guiding the plan, when combined with the vision statement, will provide a clear view of the kind of future the community hopes to achieve. This, in turn, should be reflected in the plan's future land use element — the part of the plan that starts to "put on the ground" the community's preferred future.

In my next column, I'll first discuss strategies for ensuring that your governing body adopts the proposed comprehensive plan, and then focus on ways in which plans get implemented. ♦

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Developing the Comprehensive Plan: Part III

by Michael Chandler

This final column on developing the comprehensive plan has two parts. The first highlights strategies a planning commission can use to help ensure that the governing body adopts the comprehensive plan once it is completed. The second part reviews the basic ways in which a plan can be implemented.

PLAN ADOPTION

The development of a comprehensive plan presents a planning commission with multiple challenges. Deciding how the planning process will be organized, what role citizens will play in the process, and just what the plan will cover are but a few of the questions a commission will have to answer before and during plan preparation.

All of the planning commission's hard work will go for naught, however, if the governing body fails to enact the commission's recommended plan. In order to minimize this possibility, the planning commission should be dealing with the governing body *well in advance* of when it formally transmits a recommended plan to that body for adoption. The following strategies will help achieve this objective:

1. *Commitment to Communication.* Plans are rejected by governing bodies for many reasons. Unfortunately, the lack of communication between the planning commission and the governing body, especially while the plan is being developed, is a primary reason plans are ignored or set aside by local legislatures. The planning commission can avoid this by reaching out to the governing body and opening lines of communication.

Early on, the commission needs to provide members of the governing body with an opportunity to share their perspective and vision relative to the plan development process. The commission

also needs to share with the governing body how the plan will be developed, what its contents will include, and why it will be of value to the community. Expending time educating the governing body about the planning process will yield dividends during plan adoption.

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2. *Develop a Timeline.* The planning commission should develop a timeline that will guide the plan development process. The timeline, with targeted milestones or completion dates, should be shared with the governing body. This action will provide elected officials with a clear picture of how the comprehensive plan will actually be assembled and by what time. No one should be in a position to complain later on that the proposed plan has taken them by surprise.

3. *Involve & Inform the Governing Body.* The planning commission should seek to involve the governing body at various stages of the plan development process. For example, the elected body might be asked to participate in the development of

the plan's goals and objectives. If the commission intends to involve the general public in the planning process through community meetings or public forums, members of the governing body should be invited to such events. As milestones are reached, written and oral status reports should be given to the governing body. Such efforts will help build the lines of communication between the commission and the governing body.

4. *Schedule Joint Work Sessions.* During the plan development process, the planning commission and the governing body might consider meeting in formal work sessions. Through discussion of the various elements and phases of the plan development process, the planning commission can both inform and learn from the governing body.

5. *Hold Joint Public Hearings.* A final strategy (if lawful in your community) might involve joint planning commission - governing body hearings on the draft plan held *before* the commission takes formal action on it. The premise behind this strategy is that support for the plan may be easier to secure if both bodies are willing to engage the public together.

The key word to bear in mind when considering any plan adoption strategy is *communication*. Designing a strategy that places a premium on communicating with the governing body will substantially enhance the likelihood that the plan will be adopted.

IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

A comprehensive plan cannot by itself effect change. Despite the fact that a plan may describe in both words and pictures what the community wants, the plan itself can only recommend actions to accomplish those desires. A plan relies on separate, legally defined methods for bringing about desired changes.

Fortunately, all communities have a set of basic tools and techniques that can be used to implement the comprehensive plan and make it a living document for the community. The balance of this column will provide an overview of the principal tools of plan implementation.

1. Zoning

Zoning is the process by which local governments divide the land area in their jurisdictions into districts or zones to regulate the activities allowed and the height, bulk and density of development in those zones.

It is important to bear in mind the distinction between a comprehensive plan and a zoning ordinance. Fundamentally, the comprehensive plan functions as a guide — it articulates the aspirations and dreams a community holds for itself. Zoning, in contrast, is the primary tool a locality will use to implement the land use element of the comprehensive plan. For example, while the land use plan may recommend that an area be used for residential activity, it is the zoning ordinance that legally establishes residential districts and maps out their location (through zoning maps which are ordinarily incorporated by reference into the zoning ordinance).

Note that if your zoning ordinance is inconsistent in any way with your comprehensive plan's recommendations, the zoning ordinance will prevail (due to its legal status as an ordinance of law). Accordingly, when communities revise their comprehensive plans they should also carefully review their zoning ordinances to ensure that the zoning provisions remain consistent with the comprehensive plan's recommendations.

As communities have become more active in planning for their future, zoning has grown in both scope and complexity. Innovations include agricultural zoning, historic district zoning, mixed use zoning, performance zoning, and density bonus zoning, to cite but a few.

2. Subdivision Regulations

Subdivision regulations are local ordi-

nances that govern the conversion of raw land into buildable lots and parcels. Subdivision regulations are an important plan implementation tool because they establish requirements for public improvements, specify standards for land developments, and outline procedures for submittal, review and approval of subdivision plats.

The subdivision review process generally has two stages: (1) the submittal of a preliminary plat showing the layout of lots, roads, open space areas, utility and drainage facilities, and approximate dimensions including preliminary plans and profiles; and (2) the submittal of a final plat presenting the subdivision layout and other elements contained in the preliminary plat in greater detail, and incorporating those changes required by the planning commission and/or staff at the time of preliminary plat approval. [Editor's Note: For more on this process, see "An Introduction to Subdivision Regulations, Issue 5, pp. 10-11, and Issue 6, pp. 10-11].

In recent years, many communities have expanded their subdivision regulations (if authorized by state enabling law) to address matters such as erosion and sediment control, the preservation of open space, regional stormwater management, and the placement of utilities underground. In communities that have no zoning, subdivision regulations usually represent the only local control over the land development process.

3. Capital Improvements Program

It is quite likely your comprehensive plan has a chapter devoted to public facilities such as schools, parks, libraries, streets, water lines, sidewalks and the like. In many instances, the plan will provide an inventory of existing community facilities, as well as a projection of needed community facilities. Some communities never realize their projected community facilities or public improvements, while others regularly bring their projected improvements to life. The difference, in many instances, can be explained by the use of a capital improvements program ("CIP").

The CIP is a management and fiscal planning tool that identifies and prioritizes needed public improvements and facilities. Properly designed, a CIP will enable a community to identify its capital needs, rank them by priority, coordinate their scheduling, and determine the best way to pay for them within the community's fiscal capacity.

Organizationally, the CIP is a straightforward document. Most feature three sections: (1) an overview of how the CIP process works; (2) a review of the community's fiscal condition; and (3) a descriptive listing of those capital projects recommended for funding during the CIP period (in addition to describing each project, this section typically includes the justification for the project's inclusion in the CIP, and information on how the project will be financed).

Most CIPs have a six year timeline — but are updated annually. The CIP is generally prepared by the planning commission and adopted by the governing body.

SUMMING UP:

While there are a variety of other planning tools — ranging from impact fees to economic incentive programs — zoning, subdivision regulations, and capital improvement programs remain the three principal mechanisms for implementing a comprehensive plan. The key to remember is that these tools should be used to further the community's vision as detailed in the comprehensive plan's policies and recommendations — no one wins if zoning, subdivision regulations, or capital improvement programs are enacted in isolation from and without reference to the community's adopted plan. ♦

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