

Ten Steps in Preparing a Comprehensive Plan

by Michael Chandler

The primary job responsibility shared by planning commissions across the nation involves the design and development of the comprehensive plan. Whether the plan is labeled comprehensive, master, or general, we are describing the same thing: putting down on paper the hopes, dreams, and aspirations a community holds for itself.

Capturing in words and pictures what a community hopes to become is a daunting challenge. The task is made simpler, however, when the planning commission chooses to systematically organize the process.

While there is no universally accepted “one best way” to develop a plan, this column will describe one “typical” sequence of steps that can be followed in developing a comprehensive plan.

PLANNING’S BUILDING BLOCKS

Preparing a comprehensive plan involves a number of technical, political, legal, and managerial considerations that will vary from one community to the next. There are, however, three phases common to the planning process. The first involves planning the process; the second centers on plan preparation; and,

the third focuses on plan implementation. Bear in mind, however, that effective comprehensive planning is actually more like a continuous loop, since feedback from monitoring implementation of the plan’s recommendations ideally should be used to initiate needed changes to the plan itself.

Step One: Plan to Plan.

No, this is not a typographical error! The first step in the comprehensive planning process must be a plan for planning. Key factors associated with this step include the allocation of time, human resources, money, and energy to the effort. This step is too often overlooked or short changed. Some planning commissions seem to assume the preceding factors will manage themselves or can be dealt with as problems arise. This logic is faulty and potentially fatal to the planning process.

Step Two: Structure and Schedule the Process.

The answers uncovered during Step One will enable the commission to structure and schedule the actual planning process. It is not uncommon for a planning commission or planning staff to prepare a flow chart featuring discrete planning activities, the party(s) responsible for each activity, and the due date.

Other actions associated with the second step include:

- Determining what role the public will play in the plan development process.
- Identifying “key stakeholders” who need to be involved.
- Deciding if the plan will be developed as a “top-down staff/consultant effort,” a “bottom-up/citizen-driven effort,” or some combination.
- Deciding whether the plan will be organized or formatted by chapters, sections, or themes.
- Deciding what role the governing body will play. *Keeping the Governing Body Informed*, p. 10

Step Three: Gather and Analyze Data.

To be relevant, a comprehensive plan must address not only issues and concerns of the present, but also what will likely face the community in the future. To accomplish this, the commission must gather and analyze a wide array of data.

Common to most planning efforts is mapping the community’s natural features, such as soil types, topographic and geologic formations, and surface and groundwater resources. Of equal importance is mapping existing land uses and development patterns.

A solid plan needs quantitative data as well. Data on demographic and socio-economic characteristics such as population and age distribution, levels of educational attainment, and employment patterns is typically collected. Likewise, data related to transportation usage, housing and economic growth trends, school enrollment, and local building and development activity is often examined. And these are just a few examples. Some observers have suggested that everything associated with humankind’s interaction with land should be considered and studied!

Investing the time and resources to

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Begin with questions

Solid comprehensive planning begins with the end in mind. Before initiating the planning process, answers need to be given to several questions:

- How long will the planning process last in weeks or months?
- What future time horizon will the plan address; i.e. ten years, twenty years, fifty years?
- What subject matter will be included in the plan? Does it cover elements required to be included under the state planning enabling law?

– How much money will be earmarked for the planning process? Will the monies be linked to a particular time frame such as a fiscal year? Will contingency funds be available?

– What mix of human resources will be available to work on the planning process? Will local staff planners be given the day-to-day responsibility for developing the plan?

– Will some or all of the plan be developed by outside consultants?

– What time commitment are planning commissioners willing to make?



Keeping the Governing Body Informed

All of the planning commission's hard work will go for naught 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.

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

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gather and analyze data represents the heart of the planning process. A significant challenge, however, involves deciding how to manage the data gathering process. Experience shows that having too much data can be as much of a problem as not having enough. Clearly defining in advance the scope of the planning process should help minimize the potential for information overload.

Step Four: Identify Problems, Issues, and Concerns (PIC's).

The planning commission, in partnership with the local planning staff, will need to sift through the data accumulated with the goal of identifying the significant problems (and opportunities), issues, and concerns facing the community. This step is crucial because the resulting PIC's will function as the foundation for the comprehensive plan.

Determining what PIC's to include in the comprehensive plan will require decision making on the part of the planning commission. It is during this step that many commissions engage the public through community meetings, surveys, focus groups, or advisory committees. Securing the public's perspective regarding the range of problems, opportunities, and issues facing the community is critical not just to developing a sound plan, but to building a constituency that can help ensure the plan's ultimate adoption and implementation.

Step Five: Develop a "Vision" for the Plan.

Once community problems and opportunities have been identified, many planning commissions prepare a "vision statement," capturing in words what the community intends or wishes to become at some point in the future.  *Burlington's Vision.* The vision statement will give direction to the development of plan goals and objectives, the next step in the process. Preparation of a vision statement also offers another opportunity for involving the public. In some communities "visioning" or "futuring" forums have produced exciting results.

Step Six: Develop Plan Goals and Objectives.

Once the plan's vision statement is completed, the next step is to establish specific plan goals and objectives. If the locality is fairly homogeneous and there is general agreement and support for the vision statement, the selection of goals and objectives can be accomplished within a reasonable time frame. On the other hand, if the vision statement took time and effort to reach consensus on, it is likely that developing goals and objectives will require even greater diligence.

Step Seven: Generate and Evaluate Plan Options.

Finally, it's time to start drafting the plan! One common approach involves the development of a draft plan featuring a series of chapters or elements focusing on selected topics. For example, the draft plan might include chapters on the community's natural environment, transportation system, community facilities, as well as residential, commercial, and industrial uses. An alternative approach is to organize the plan around broad themes such as balanced growth, the preservation of rural character, enhanced economic vitality, and so on.

Each chapter or element featured in the plan should provide the reader with an explanation of its purpose, as well as an overview of the specific planning assumptions and goals and objectives contained in the element.

The various plan elements or chapters, once drafted, should next be used to formulate a series of possible land use futures for the locality. Each possible future would be a function of planning assumptions tied to the plan's vision statement, specific community goals and objectives, as well as different growth scenarios. The generation and evaluation of selected plan options presents the planning commission with one more opportunity to involve the public.

Step Eight: Select and Develop a Preferred Plan.

Once the various plan options have been reviewed and studied, the planning commission will need to select a

preferred option or approach. The final draft plan can then be prepared and formally received and considered for adoption by the planning commission.

Step Nine: Adopt the Plan, Set an Implementation Schedule.

Depending on your state code requirements one or more public hearings will likely be required before the draft plan can be adopted. Once adopted by the commission, the plan is forwarded to the governing body for consideration and final adoption.

The plan development process should be considered incomplete if a plan implementation strategy and schedule is not included in the document. This is critical, since a plan will make a difference only if it is implemented.

Step Ten: Monitor for Results and Impact.

Once a plan is adopted, the real work begins. Implementation requires commitment. It also implies accountability. Increasingly, plans are being written with the goal of fostering change. In order to do so, plans must be written in a manner that allows a locality to measure the impact the plan is having in the life of a community.  *Priorities for Plan Implementation.*

Plans also need to be regularly updated. In some states, state law prescribes this review. In Virginia, for example, a locality must review its comprehensive plan at least every five years. However, even without such a requirement, it makes sense periodically to review your plan. ♦

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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. If appropriate, the planning commission may decide to seek formal feedback from 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.

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.

The preceding is excerpted from Michael Chandler's "Developing the Comprehensive Plan: Part III," PCJ #12 (Fall 1993).



Burlington's Vision

An Editor's Note

The Burlington, Vermont comprehensive plan contains a series of vision statements which provide an overarching direction to the plan's more detailed policies and action recommendations. Our plan is organized in a fairly traditional manner, with chapters on land use; the natural environment; the built environment; transportation systems; economic development; community facilities; and so on. Each chapter starts with a vision statement. Here, for example, is the vision statement for the transportation chapter:

Burlington maintains a diverse transportation system that is safe, affordable, efficient and accessible for residents and visitors alike. Land use and transportation policy decisions are considered in relation to one another, and the various modes are linked together as part of a system. The city is focused towards improving linkages between adjacent communities and neighborhoods, making the best use of existing infrastructure, and expanding alternatives to the single-occupant vehicle. —WMS



Priorities for Plan Implementation

by Bernie Jones

Your plan has several dozen, or maybe several hundred, specific recommendations. So where do you start on the morning after it's been adopted? Here are several alternative strategies:

- *Early quick victories:* Start with some actions that are non-controversial, and thus most likely to be quickly adopted, thereby boosting morale, establishing momentum, and building a track record.

- *Importance:* Start with the plan's most important recommendation, regardless of its ease or difficulty.

- *Linchpin:* Start by addressing recommendations which pave the way for yet other recommendations to get implemented.

- *High profile:* Take some actions that are very visible and draw attention to the plan.

- *Maximize implementers:* Work to maximize the number of different parties each actively addressing at least one recommendation.

- *Multiple fronts:* Simultaneously address at least one recommendation from each of the plan's major sections.

It also makes sense to prepare an annual action agenda of recommendations you hope to see implemented that year. The idea here is to bite off a manageable chunk of the plan, involving the necessary implementers in that decision. That makes it their plan as well as yours.

Similarly, prepare an annual status report of what's been done. Keep on top of what's being implemented and let all the relevant audiences know each year what's been done, what has not – and why not. This helps to keep everyone's feet to the fire.

Excerpted from "A Primer on the Politics of Plan Implementation," PCJ #12 (Fall 1993). Bernie Jones has served as a member of the Denver, Colorado, Planning Board, and is the author of Neighborhood Planning: A Guide for Citizens and Planners (APA 1990).