

# COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING: GUIDING YOUR COMMUNITY

What guides the decisions made by your community to arrive at the place it wants to be? A comprehensive plan attempts to answer three questions about your community:

- How did we get to where we are?
- Where do we want to go?
- How do we get there?



## Comprehensive Plans: An Introduction

Not knowing where you are going or how to get there can make for a fun road trip, but it is not a good approach to community development and spending public dollars.

Most communities develop plans for one purpose or another. Plans relating to infrastructure development, including water and sewer and streets and roads, are among the most common. Plans that relate to the appearance of “downtown” or “Main Street” are also typical. Some are intended to guide public investment, while others may be developed in the pursuit of funds such as grants.

## Why plan?

One of the fundamental responsibilities of government is to plan for orderly development. In the absence of a plan it can be very difficult for public officials to weigh and prioritize policy and budget decisions. Plans can serve to provide context for decisions made in all areas of government. By identifying the destination and providing a map of the steps to get there, plans can help the public and its officials understand what decisions will lead towards a desirable future. If implemented, plans can help the day-to-day decisions add up to the place where the community wants to be while facilitating predictability for the public, government, and developers alike.

## What makes a plan comprehensive?

Comprehensive is defined as “covering completely or broadly.”<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive plan is a planning tool used to communicate a community’s vision as to how it wants to develop over the next 15 to 25 years, and it defines the policy goals and objectives related to the broad spectrum of elements related to community development necessary to achieve that vision.

These elements include but are not limited to the following:

- Land use
- Priority development areas
- Priority conservation areas
- Economic development
- Heritage and cultural resources
- Infrastructure
  - *transportation*
  - *energy and utilities*
  - *education*
  - *housing*
  - *water and sewer*
  - *solid waste*
  - *health care*
  - *emergency services*
  - *recreation*

Information contained within a comprehensive plan will vary depending upon the needs of, and the approach by, the community creating the plan.

In general, plans may contain the following:

- Statement of purpose
- Summary of how the plan was created, including how the effort was organized, how information was collected and analyzed, and the public decision-making process
- An inventory and analysis of existing conditions related to development elements (above)
- Anticipated trends
- Community vision and/or guiding principles
- Goals and objectives associated with each element related to community development
- Steps and time line necessary for plan implementation
- Progress review and evaluation process

## Gathering information and making sense of it all

Part of any planning process involves gathering the best possible information related to all of the elements that have an impact on the development of your community and how they relate to one another. For example, you will want to develop an understanding of present development patterns and land uses and how these relate to infrastructure. Heritage and cultural resources can be used to inform what places should be preserved and what places and events of the past and present contribute

to your community's identity. You will want to explore not only the present state of your economy but what it is about your community that lends itself to particular types of development. You will want to understand the demographics of your community, including its range of incomes, types and places of employment (including the places where people work outside of your community), racial and ethnic diversity, patterns of home ownership, commuting patterns, the range of ages, and the presence of poverty. What elements of the natural environment contribute to quality of life, and what natural hazards are of concern including floods, wildfire, tropical systems, and even earthquakes? Thoughtful analysis of these and other elements and their interaction will help you understand how your community "works," which will help you plan for future development.

## Know where you are and how you got there.

When planning a trip, one generally begins with a starting point and a destination. An important step in comprehensive planning is a real-world, honest assessment as to where the community stands at present. What decisions did the community make in the past that led it to where it is now? What conditions were within its control? What conditions were beyond its control? What created opportunities for development, and what created barriers? What inequities exist within the community, and what are the costs associated with those inequities? An honest assessment of the past of the place can help identify community strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) in the present. By identifying its starting point, a community is in a good position to identify effective goals and objectives necessary to reach its desired destination.

The following are examples from a SWOT analysis conducted by the city of Oneonta, New York, as part of its comprehensive planning process. This is a partial list intended to serve as an example of the findings of a SWOT process.

## Examples of SWOT from Oneonta, New York

(Note: the following is a partial list under each category.)

### Strengths

- Growth in arts/culture venues
- Presence of nonprofits in community
- Excellent health-care resources
- Vibrant/strong educational network and population
- Friendly/walkable downtown
- Agriculture on outskirts of city - clear distinction between “city” and “country”
- Municipal infrastructure/roads

### Weaknesses

- Parking downtown
- Travel for shopping
- Loitering on Main Street
- Lack of wayfinding/signage
- Tax burden – impact on residents – lack of commercial/industry
- “Shop worn” – condition of roads, signs, curbs, etc.

### Opportunities

- Potential for growth in arts/culture
- Soccer hall of fame/baseball – promoting as a tourism draw
- Developing the rail yard for commercial/industry
- Downstate migration to upstate
- Improve on and off-road bike trails, “bikeability”
- Transportation network enhancement (all modes)
- Develop upper stories on Main Street for apartments and offices

### Threats

- Age of current housing stock – potential for dilapidation
- Perception of and actual drugs, illegal drug trafficking, and impact on the image and safety on Oneonta
- Lack of youth programs – quality of life for children K-12 <sup>2</sup>

## The vision

The importance of a commonly-held vision for the future – or destination – of a community should not be underestimated. A community is essentially a group of travelers on a shared journey. There may be multiple paths that get to a single destination, and the travelers may debate these different paths, but it is very difficult if not impossible to arrive together at an undefined location. (Just try to think through a set of directions to an unknown place.) For this reason, the vision for the community should not be created by, and for, a few select members of the community. The visioning process should be open to and welcoming of the community as a whole.

The vision may be incorporated into the plan as a statement or series of statements or may be presented as a series of guiding principles. The following are examples:

### A vision statement from Brookfield, Wisconsin:

*“Located in the heart of Southeastern Wisconsin, the City of Brookfield is a community of choice for families and businesses and a premier sustainable place to live, work, shop, and play.” <sup>3</sup>*

### Vision statements from Calvert County, Maryland:

(Note: This is a partial listing of visions contained within the plan.)

- *“Our landscape is dominated by forests and fields.”*
- *“Our Town Centers are attractive, convenient, and interesting places to live, work, and shop.”*
- *“We are building a strong local economy based on renewable resources, high technology, retirement, recreation, and tourism.” <sup>4</sup>*

## Guiding principles from Oxford, Mississippi:

1. *Recognize Oxford's historic ways of town building, and use those traditions to provide a framework for future growth.*
2. *Understand the Mississippi hill country landscape and guide growth responsibly within it by encouraging compact development and using natural features to establish town boundaries.*
3. *Protect natural drainage areas to preserve water quality, provide open spaces, and reduce future storm water management costs.*
4. *Establish a densely connected network of streets and roads to guide future growth that equally serves automobiles, pedestrians, bicycles, and future alternatives for transit.*
5. *Relate existing and future development to the network of streets and roads and natural drainage areas, emphasizing appropriate mixes of land uses instead of single use districts.*
6. *Recognize that design principles utilized for buildings, landscapes, and streets form a central part of Oxford's plan for preservation, redevelopment, and new growth.<sup>5</sup>*



The above image illustrates how the City of Oxford is using the “historic ways of town building” to provide the “framework for future growth.”

## Using goals and objectives to get you to your destination

Progress toward a destination may be measured by certain interim stops or mileposts. A comprehensive plan uses goals and objectives to not only identify steps necessary for progress toward the destination but also as measurable indicators of progress.

Whereas the vision represents the “big picture” idea about the community’s future, the goals and objectives are best thought of as distinct things to be accomplished. Goals should be identified for each element that relates to the achievement of the community’s vision (e.g., land use, infrastructure, economic development, priority development and conservation areas, etc.). Objectives should then be developed that are necessary to achieve each goal. Goals and objectives are most effective when they are objective or measurable. That is, progress toward each can be clearly and effectively measured, and the ultimate achievement of a goal or objective is clearly defined.

## The process is as important as the plan.

All processes associated with the development of the community’s comprehensive plan should actively engage all segments of the community. The public should have easy access to all information and the process itself. The end product should be a shared common vision of the direction of the community that can then be used to inform development policy and public investments.

Outreach to those who might not ordinarily participate in public decision-making processes should be part of the planning effort. You are all on this journey together, and the visioning process is a great way to get to know your fellow travelers and their hopes for the place you call home. Doing so allows all members of a community to challenge their assumptions about one another and see one another anew while also giving the process a chance to produce a plan in which all have a vested interest and care. The process should give all who participated in the effort a sense of “ownership” of the community’s future – and the sense of pride and responsibility that comes with that ownership.

A plan is just a plan until it becomes policy.

Even the best plan is of little use to a community if it is not formally adopted as policy by the legislative arm of the local government entity in question (Board of Aldermen, Board of County Supervisors). Policy is defined as a definite course or method of action selected to guide and determine present and future decisions.<sup>6</sup> If the plan is the broad vision for the community, it must be translated into policy to have any real effect. Policy is implemented through law, rules, and regulations – or ordinances. The plan is, therefore, implemented through ordinances.

## Reviewing and revising plans

No plan is etched in stone. It is virtually impossible for anyone to predict the future with such accuracy that a plan will not require revision every few years (typically 5 or fewer, as necessary). Unanticipated events – be they natural or manmade – may alter assumptions as to what is desirable or possible and what goals and objectives can be achieved. Every few years the community should undergo an honest appraisal process as to what has or has not been accomplished and why. The extent of the review and revisions will be dictated by the appraisal. In some cases, plans may require only simple amendments, while extensive change may necessitate a full revision. If your community has a comprehensive plan in place that has not been reviewed or revised for quite some time, it may be necessary to explore a full revision.

As was noted previously, plans are implemented through ordinances. As a plan is amended, so should the ordinances that implement the plan be amended.

## Getting started

Creating a comprehensive plan is not as daunting as it may seem. Much can be accomplished by harnessing the skills and abilities of your friends and neighbors. Collect the best information you can, and assess it in a straightforward and honest manner. At a minimum you can begin to assess where you are starting from and where you would like to go. If your process is honest, open, and inviting, you will likely be able to create a target vision for your community that can begin to guide public decisions. The Mississippi Development Authority and the state universities can provide information and guidance. Experienced planning consultants can be of great value not only in the development of the planning document but also in the facilitation of the process.



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*Community Action Team*

<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprehensive](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprehensive)

<sup>2</sup> City of Oneonta, New York Comprehensive Plan Appendix A: May, 2007 [www.oneonta.ny.us/community/compplan.asp](http://www.oneonta.ny.us/community/compplan.asp)

<sup>3</sup> City of Brookfield Community Vision Report: December 16, 2008, Brookfield, Wisconsin [www.ci.brookfield.wi.us/index.aspx?NID=675](http://www.ci.brookfield.wi.us/index.aspx?NID=675)

<sup>4</sup> 2004 Comprehensive Plan Calvert County, Maryland: December, 2004 [www.co.cal.md.us/business/planning/comprehensiveplan](http://www.co.cal.md.us/business/planning/comprehensiveplan)

<sup>5</sup> Comprehensive Land Use Plan City of Oxford, Mississippi: October 7, 2004. [www.oxfordms.net/docs/OxfordComprehensivePlan.pdf](http://www.oxfordms.net/docs/OxfordComprehensivePlan.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> The New Merriam Webster Dictionary, 1989.