

THREE INGREDIENTS TO MAKE YOUR COMMUNITY VISION A REALITY

Cooks in the south are familiar with the “trinity” that forms the foundation of many Cajun dishes: *onion*, *celery*, and *bell pepper*. Just as these three ingredients form the foundation for many tasty Cajun dishes, there are three ingredients that can, when properly combined, make community visions a reality. They are **plans**, **ordinances**, and **building codes**.



How Plans, Ordinances, and Building Codes Work Together

Plans define community expectations and establish the goals and objectives necessary to meet those expectations. **Ordinances** are the rules and regulations that implement the plan and its goals and objectives. **Building codes** establish the minimum standards to which structures must be built.



the PLAN

A plan is a broad vision for a community, and it answers three questions:

1. *How did we get to where we are?*
2. *Where do we want to go?*
3. *How do we get there?*

Why plan? One of the fundamental responsibilities of government is to plan for orderly development. Plans, *when implemented*, can help governments balance the books by anticipating the costs and benefits associated with development. Because plans articulate public expectations about the future of the community, they can guide government decision making and public investment. Plans facilitate predictability for the public, government, and developers.

Communities may create many different types of plans, such as downtown revitalization, parks and recreation, economic development, water and sewer, transportation, and capital improvement. All of these plans should relate to one another. Bringing together all issues necessary to make a community’s vision a reality is the purpose of a tool called the **comprehensive plan**.

Sometimes referred to as a *land use plan* or *master plan*, the comprehensive plan communicates a community’s vision as to how it wants to develop over the next 15 to 20 years, and it defines policy goals and objectives related to the broad spectrum of issues that are related to community development. These issues include but are not limited to the following:

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

Plans are developed through the analysis of the best available data related to each goal and objective and through a highly accessible public process that actively engages 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.

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.¹ 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 ORDINANCE

Most municipalities have **rules** and **regulations** [*ordinances*] governing land use and development. This body of regulations is typically referred to as a **zoning ordinance**.

Zoning ordinances regulate development by **use** (e.g., *residential, retail, commercial, industrial, agricultural, etc.*) and by **dimensional requirements** (e.g., *setbacks, sideyards, minimum lot sizes, height, etc.*).² Zoning ordinances are also used to regulate the **appearance** of development. Use areas are designated on a zoning map, and development requirements associated with each use and zone are contained within the text of the ordinance.

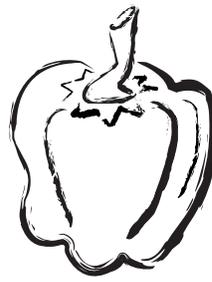
While many towns and cities have ordinances, it is *not* always the case that they have a comprehensive plan.

How do the two relate to one another?

It is the **plan** that provides the **basis**, or justification, for the provisions found within the **ordinance**. The plan should indicate where in the community certain uses should be encouraged or discouraged. The **zoning map**, reflecting the **goals** of the plan, should limit uses to those areas indicated as being appropriate by the plan. The language of the ordinance should then regulate the development of that use in a manner that is consistent with the plan's goals and objectives. This includes circulation (pedestrian and vehicular), appearance (architectural and landscape standards), density, and other aspects that relate to development patterns.

The courts have supported the relationship between plans and ordinances. Provisions in ordinances that are backed up by plans are more likely to be found to be in the legitimate interest of public health, safety, and welfare.

BUILDING CODES



Building codes establish standards by which structures must be built. In the absence of such a code, it is not possible for a community to control the *quality* of built things such as homes and businesses or driveways, parking lots, and sidewalks.

Quality of construction matters. *Building codes provide the basis for communities to control not so much the appearance of what is built* (that's within the realm of the zoning ordinance) *but the safety, soundness, and integrity of what is built*. Building codes also provide conditions for safe occupation of a structure.

It is common for communities to adopt what is known as the **International Building Code**, which can be amended to reflect local needs and conditions. These needs may range from improved energy efficiency to protection against high winds, flooding, and seismic activity.

Keeping up with the times

Plans, ordinances, and building codes are intended to be updated on a regular basis to ensure effectiveness or reflect change. Communities should review their plans approximately *every 5 years*. As plans change, ordinances should be amended to reflect those changes. Building codes should similarly be amended to reflect changes in community needs and building technology.

¹The New Merriam Webster Dictionary, 1989.

²This is the most common type of ordinance. There are others including form-based codes that regulate the form and scale of buildings and their relationship to the street and other public spaces.



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

Community Action Team