

QUICKNOTES

The Local Comprehensive Plan

The local comprehensive plan, sometimes referred to as the general plan or the master plan, is the foundational policy document for local governments. It establishes a framework to guide public and private decisions about future growth, preservation, and change within a municipality or county over the next 20 to 30 years. While the comprehensive plan has traditionally focused primarily on physical development, many contemporary comprehensive plans also discuss a wide range of economic, environmental, and social topics that affect the sustainability of a community.

Background

All states either allow or require local governments to prepare comprehensive plans. However, there is no consensus about what, precisely, constitutes a comprehensive plan. This is largely due to the fact that many state enabling laws are still rooted in the U.S. Department of Commerce's Standard Zoning Enabling Act (SZE) and Standard City Planning Enabling Act (SCPEA), published in 1926 and 1928, respectively. The SZE stated that zoning regulations must be "in conformance with a comprehensive plan" but did not define the term. Subsequently, the SCPEA purposely avoided defining the comprehensive plan (or master plan in the act's language), choosing instead to give examples of the subject matter that should be covered in the plan.

While the content and format of comprehensive plans can vary considerably from place to place, there are still a number of common characteristics that help distinguish these plans from other types of local plans (e.g., subarea or functional plans). First, comprehensive plans have a broad scope, meaning they address an extensive range of topics of communitywide concern. Second, they are comprehensive in terms of geographic extent, meaning that a comprehensive plan covers the full area of a local jurisdiction. Third, they present multiple goals and policies to be implemented over a long time period.

While these three core characteristics have defined comprehensive plans for decades, there is also a set of basic best practices for contemporary plans. First, planners and public officials should develop a comprehensive plan with input from all segments of the community. Second, comprehensive plans should be readily available to and easily understood by any interested community members. Third, comprehensive plans should be formally adopted as official policy by the local legislative body.

Reasons to Prepare a Comprehensive Plan

The local comprehensive planning process gives a community an opportunity to step back and see the big picture. By looking at multiple topics over a long time horizon, planners, public officials, and community members have a chance to discuss both compatibilities and potential points of conflict among different goals and policies. This makes the comprehensive plan an important tool for coordinating local decision making.

The comprehensive plan is the legal foundation that legitimizes local development regulations. In fact, many states require zoning and subdivision ordinances to be in conformance with an adopted comprehensive plan. Ideally, the local comprehensive plan is a primary guide not only for updates to development regulations but also for the creation of local capital improvements plans, which detail planned capital expenditures over a multiyear period.

An up-to-date comprehensive plan provides a measure of certainty to landowners and developers and reduces the likelihood of arbitrary decisions by local officials. Because a comprehensive plan shows how a community hopes to change over time, it gives applicants a sense of the types of



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development projects that are likely to be approved in a specific location and helps owners and developers avoid spending excessive time and money on incompatible proposals. The data gathering and analysis that informs a comprehensive plan also improves the factual basis for land-use decisions. Last but not least, the comprehensive planning process builds an informed constituency. As planners, public officials, and community members exchange ideas and listen to alternative perspectives, they become invested in the vision of the plan and willing to assist in implementing plan policies.

Plan Content and Format

Traditionally, a comprehensive plan is comprised of a series of thematic elements (i.e., chapters or major sections). Common topics for plan elements include land use, transportation, housing, economic development, and community facilities. In recent years an increasing number of communities have added elements addressing the environment, natural hazards, public health, climate change, intergovernmental cooperation, or energy to their comprehensive plans. While the themes of the plan may be more or less expansive depending on state requirements, community context, and local interests, there are a number of basic features common to many comprehensive plans.

Virtually all comprehensive plans include a discussion of issues and opportunities. This discussion describes the legal authority or mandate for the plan; summarizes the community's long-term vision for growth, preservation, or change; provides data and analysis that establish the context for the broad goals and objectives of the plan; and sets the stage for policy considerations detailed in subsequent plan sections.

Most comprehensive plans contain one or more sections presenting goals and objectives related to the thematic elements of the plan. Goals are general statements about desirable future conditions. Objectives are statements of measurable outcomes in furtherance of a certain goal.

Finally, many comprehensive plans include both specific policy statements and action steps. Policies are statements of intent with enough clarity to guide decision making, and actions are directives about programs, regulations, operational procedures, or public investments intended to guide the implementation of specific policies.

While many comprehensive plans are formatted and designed to read like a richly illustrated book, advances in website design and improvements in broadband access open up additional opportunities for communities to share plan content in more accessible and interactive formats. Many contemporary plans have their own websites that allow community members to view plan themes or features using hyperlinks and embedded media content.

Plan Implementation

While a broad base of community support is often the most important factor that influences if and when plan recommendations will be enacted, providing a detailed implementation program in the plan itself can be an effective tool to organize local efforts. This implementation program should include a list of specific public or private actions connected to each policy recommendation in the plan. Ideally, the program will also identify a responsible party and include a cost estimate and a time frame for each action.

Summary

The local comprehensive plan is a community's official statement about how it hopes to grow or change over the next 20 to 30 years. Comprehensive plans differ from other local plans in terms of scope, geographic coverage, and legal authority. While different communities will choose to emphasize different themes in their plans, the hallmark of an effective plan is that it provides valuable guidance to public- and private-sector decision makers.

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FURTHER READING

1. Published by the American Planning Association

American Planning Association. 2014. "Comprehensive Plan Standards for Sustaining Places." Available at www.planning.org/sustainingplaces/complanstandards.

Meck, Stuart, ed. 2002. Chapter 7. Local Planning. In *Growing Smart Legislative Guidebook*. Chicago: American Planning Association. Available at www.planning.org/growingsmart.

2. Other Resources

Kelly, Eric Damian. 2010. *Community Planning: An Introduction to the Comprehensive Plan*, 2nd ed. Washington, D.C.: Island Press. Available at <http://islandpress.org/community-planning>.

Meck, Stuart. 2006. "Comprehensive Plans." In *Planning and Urban Design Standards*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. Available at www.planning.org/store/product/?ProductCode=BOOK_RPUD.