

Attributes of Effective Plans

by Gene Bunnell, Ph.D.*

Interest in land use and growth management issues in Wisconsin has never been greater. Throughout the state local governments are preparing land use plans--some for the first time ever. But for plans to be effective they must be *used*. This summary outlines the plan attributes that increase the likelihood that a plan will be relied upon to shape future decisions and actions.

AN EFFECTIVE PLAN:

- Tells a story, including what is special about the locality.
- Presents *essential data*.
- Describes alternative futures, and consequences of alternative courses of action.
- Inspires and communicates a vision of a desirable future.
- Communicates key ideas clearly.
- Offers a reasoned and integrated program of action.
- Explains the planning process, including provisions for updating the plan.
- Takes into account the interests of future generations.
- Recognizes diverse interests and builds a sense of ownership in the community.
- Provides a way of monitoring and evaluating community change.

An effective plan tells a story about a community--what the community was like in the past, what it is like today, and importantly, what it might be like in the future. The plan should be well written and accessible to the community, presenting information essential for decision-making. It is important that plans not become padded with unnecessary data, as they should be something that people *want* to read! A plan needs to present data that communicates important facts and insights about the community and how it has been changing. Data should only be presented in the plan if it is *informative* and *meaningful*, and sheds light on important issues addressed in the plan. In short, data in the plan needs to make the story of the community tangible and understandable.

One of the most important things a plan must do is convey an understanding and appreciation of the distinguishing qualities of the community. It needs to communicate a sense of place, while at the same time describing the relationships between the community and larger region in which it is located. Comparisons with other regional communities or larger entities, such as the state or nation, may be helpful to interpret the significance of changes that are happening at the local level.

Plans can be *catalysts for positive change*, as well as the *means to preserve* valued resources and qualities that might otherwise be lost. A good plan balances the demand for development with the need for conservation and resource protection. An effective plan can describe different scenarios, as well as the effects they might have on socio-economic conditions, environmental quality, etc.

The plan needs to express communities' aspirations for the future, and inspire the imaginations of citizens. The future a community desires is typically expressed in a "vision statement," and a formal listing of goals and objectives. These provide the foundation for the rest of the plan. Thus, they need to be clear enough to serve as a guide for action. It will be difficult to communicate a clear sense of direction and establish priorities if the plan includes too many goals and objectives.

The plan itself must provide the community with an integrated program of recommended policies and actions that enables the community to move steadily and deliberately toward the future it desires. Communities that don't have plans tend to react to problems in an *ad hoc* fashion. This results in a series of incremental and unrelated actions--the opposite of a coherent approach to problem-solving. Given the complexity and inter-relatedness of issues facing communities today, a comprehensive and deliberately formulated strategy offers a much greater likelihood of success. Additionally, the plan needs to include provisions for periodic review and updating, so that it can be adapted to address the complex problems of the future.

To be effective, a plan needs to present a compelling case that the strategies and actions it recommends are necessary and desirable. It must also convince citizens and elected officials that these strategies and actions have a good chance of achieving the desired results. It makes little sense for a plan to call for actions for which there is no political support or that the community cannot afford. Effective plans should be inspiring and motivating, but they must be *realistic*.

Effective plans also explain how the views and concerns of stakeholders were considered, as well as how the plan balances competing interests. If the legitimacy, representativeness, and fairness of the plan is not clearly established, opponents and critics of the plan could undermine its implementation. Thus, the plan needs to include a brief section that explains how it was prepared, how the goals were arrived at, and *who* had input to the planning process. It should describe how the concerns of citizens were solicited and identified (by mail surveys, focus groups, public meetings, etc.), and the opportunities provided for citizen review of draft findings and recommendations.

While the concerns of the present citizens need to be considered in the planning process, it is just as important to think about the interests of future generations of residents. Considering their needs and interests is central to striking an appropriate balance between development and environmental resource protection. This is often described as seeking economic and environmental *sustainability*.

Finally, an effective plan does more than articulate goals and outline means for achieving them. It also provides a way of evaluating how well the community is doing in implementing the plan and moving towards attaining its goals. By specifying appropriate indicators, or benchmarks, that can be monitored over time, a community can evaluate the success of the plan.

The best measure of the value of a plan is not whether and how much a community has changed, but how the community *would have changed* had it *not* had a plan, or had a different plan. Recognizing this distinction is essential if citizens and elected officials are to have a fair basis for evaluating the impact of the plan.

*Summarized by Branden Born from Department of Urban and Regional Planning Extension Report 97-3; the report is available from the Department for \$2.50.