



To Produce an Effective Plan, You Need a Plan for Planning

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Given the time and effort required to prepare a plan, it is easy to think of completing and adopting a plan as an end in itself. However, a plan is really a *means* to an end. The only reason for having a plan is to use it as a guide to decision-making that will produce a better community than otherwise would have resulted. If a plan is not referred to when zoning changes are requested, when capital improvement priorities are being established, and when other actions that will affect land use are being considered, there is little value in having a plan. We herein outline a common sense “plan for planning” to assure that your plan is useful and effective.

A PLAN FOR PLANNING SHOULD:

- ☛ Consider who is going to use the plan, and how.
- ☛ Help in building agreement on goals.
- ☛ Take stock of local resources and qualities.
- ☛ Encourage people to plan by celebrating successes and giving recognition.
- ☛ Consider the planning process, including provisions for updating the plan.
- ☛ Consider the geographic area planning should cover—explore the possibility of cooperative planning with other communities or jurisdictional units.
- ☛ Consider the form, content, and appearance of the plan.
- ☛ Consider who should prepare the plan and prepare a Request for Proposals (RFP).

The goals adopted and put forward in the plan should provide the basis and justification for everything else in the plan. How should these goals, often difficult to agree upon, be arrived at? Since the goals reflect *community* values they should ideally be developed by a representative cross-section of the community. One way to build consensus within the community is by undertaking a *visioning* process, which can provide citizens an opportunity to think about what they would like their community to be like.

In working to formulate community goals and a vision of the future, it is important not only to consider how people might like the community to change, but also to identify qualities and resources that people feel are important to preserve. This “taking stock” should be done before getting too immersed in planning. Some questions to ask include: What makes the community a good place to live? What qualities make the community different from others? What contributes to the local sense of place? Are there environmental features that people feel are important to protect? The qualities identified can be natural or human-created, or they might be social or cultural resources based on the distinctive origins of the community’s people. The

list of qualities that is generated can be the starting point for a shared understanding of the community and set a foundation for the planning process.

It is critical that the process followed in preparing the plan be viewed as legitimate by the community. Issues that need to be addressed include: How much and what type of citizen participation will there be? Will the process be controlled by a citizen steering committee, public agency, or private consultant? The answers to these questions can have a bearing on the long-term public support of the plan, as well as the shorter-term financial considerations of the planning process.

Local governments should not limit the scope of planning to rigidly-defined local jurisdictional boundaries. (City and village plan commissions have the authority to plan outside their boundaries in the unincorporated area.) The planning process should strive to establish a broadly-based consensus, ideally involving both unincorporated and incorporated units of government. Cooperative planning between all levels can lead to more effective plans and more cost effective planning. The advantages are multifold, from avoidance of costly litigation from land disputes, to cost savings in the planning process, to better long-term land use. Unfortunately, cooperative planning and intergovernmental cooperation run counter to normal practice, and require considerable effort to succeed.

When creating a plan, communities will need to consider how the plan will appear, and what its content and form will be. Plans come in all sizes and shapes. The key is to have a plan that is attractive and engaging so people will *want* to read it. Plans can have different emphases and organization. Comprehensive plans traditionally cover land use, housing, transportation, community facilities, utilities and infrastructure, natural environmental resources and conservation, historic and cultural resources, economic development, natural hazard mitigation, growth management policies, design guidelines, and so forth. The content of the plan should reflect the relative importance of local planning issues. All the topics do not have to be considered simultaneously. If resources are limited, the community may choose to work on one or two elements at a time, adding more at a later date, and allowing for revision as necessary. Additionally, by focusing on issues of broad agreement the community can develop a track record of success for more difficult issues in the future. There are outstanding examples of comprehensive plans that have followed this "living document," sectional approach. Finally, there can be different versions of the plan for different uses and audiences.

Some communities find that they are capable of preparing a useful plan on their own, using the knowledge of members of the local plan commission and interested citizens. Small communities with little development pressure may be in a good position to prepare their own plans. The municipal planning department, if one exists, may be able to prepare all or part of the plan. However, many communities find that they need professional assistance. Outside consultants are more likely to see things that might not occur to local residents. Such outside assistance can also come from the county planning department or regional planning commission. If outside assistance is solicited, the community should prepare a Request for Proposal (RFP). This RFP needs to clearly describe the process by which the consultant will be selected, by whom, and a time line for the process. The RFP preparation will force the community to explain clearly *what* it wants the plan to achieve, and *the process* it intends to follow.

*Summarized by Branden Born from Department of Urban and Regional Planning Extension Report 97-2; the report is available from the Department for \$3.00.