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What is a Comprehensive Plan?

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A comprehensive plan is the official statement of local government policy regarding the physical development of the community. There is, however, no universally accepted definition of a "comprehensive plan" in Wisconsin. Unlike the laws of many states which include detailed definitions of comprehensive planning, the laws of Wisconsin do not provide a definition of a comprehensive plan.

The lack of a statutory definition about what constitutes a comprehensive plan in Wisconsin frequently leads to confusion when one talks about planning. Adding to the confusion are the various other names which are used to describe the major planning activities of communities in Wisconsin. These names, which are often synonymous with the term "comprehensive plan," include: "master plan," "development plan," "general plan," "land use plan," and "growth management plan."

The confusion is compounded by the fact that the law also does not indicate the essential difference between zoning (the regulation of existing land uses) and comprehensive planning (a long-range view of what those land uses should be) and how the two activities are related. Finally, the law allows for adoption of portions of the plan which often encourages uncoordinated functional planning (e.g., preparing a wastewater treatment plan without preparing a land use plan).

The recent report of the State Interagency Land Use Council, entitled *Planning Wisconsin*, recommends that counties should be required to adopt comprehensive

plans. The report recommends that cities, villages and towns would also need to have land use plans. The report uses the terms "land use plans" and "comprehensive plans" interchangeably. Would the required plans be land use plans or would they truly be *comprehensive* plans? It is not clear from the report what the required content of a comprehensive plan would be. Nevertheless, the report represents an opportunity to clarify these fundamental planning issues.

The Evolving Nature of Comprehensive Planning

The theory and practice of planning is constantly evolving. In the 1940s, for example, a comprehensive zoning ordinance was considered the same as a comprehensive plan. The plan was implicit in the regulatory process. Rarely did a separate plan exist which articulated the public objectives of the regulatory process.

Today, a comprehensive plan is generally understood to be a document separate from the zoning ordinance. A plan is *comprehensive* if its various components encompass all or most of the functions that make a community work such as utilities, transportation, housing, land use, parks and open space, etc. A comprehensive plan also considers the interrelationships of those functions. Identifying those interrelationships can help a community better understand how the decisions it makes will impact the community.

Comprehensive planning therefore helps coordinate the