



Planning 101: An Introduction to Land Use Planning in Maryland

Garrett County, Maryland

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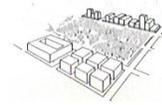
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A comprehensive plan is the vision of what the community wants to become and the steps needed to meet that goal.

Comprehensive plans are composed of a series of separate, but interrelated, core elements that address specific topics defined in the Land Use article of the Maryland Code. The common elements to be addressed in this planning effort are shown to the right.

The elements of the plan are interrelated in that they share common assumptions about population and economic growth, the geographic area to which the plan applies, and the time frame, typically from 10 to 20 years. The elements must reinforce and not conflict with each other. For example, a comprehensive plan whose economic development element anticipates substantial employment growth must address housing needs for the new employees. If that is not done, the need for new housing will impact nearby communities and traffic congestion will increase.



PLANNING ELEMENTS

Required

1. Community Facilities
2. Area of Critical State Concern
3. Goals and Objectives
4. Land Use
5. Development Regulation
6. Sensitive Areas
7. Transportation
8. Water Resources

Optional

9. Mineral Resources
10. Municipal Growth
11. Fisheries
12. Community renewal
13. Conservation
14. Flood control
15. Housing
16. Natural resources
17. Pollution control
18. Public utilities; and
19. Priority preservation area



ALL COMPREHENSIVE PLANS INCLUDE A SET OF CORE COMPONENTS

- ◆ A statement of authority to prepare and adopt the plan.
- ◆ Background data and analysis, including area history, a description of existing social, economic and physical (natural and man-made) conditions and trends, and economic and demographic projections.
- ◆ Documentation of stakeholders' interests (e.g., interests of residents, public officials, the business community, developers) and involvement in the process.
- ◆ A vision statement and/or statement of desired goals and objectives.
- ◆ Evaluation of the selected plan and design alternatives.
- ◆ A future plan map or maps depicting various components, including land use, transportation, community facilities, and housing areas.
- ◆ An implementation framework or schedule that describes specific measures to carry out the plan, their costs (if known), and the time frame for execution.



WHAT ARE THE PURPOSES OF A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN?

Present the big picture and state the vision.

A plan gives community members an opportunity to clarify their ideas about the kind of community they are creating through their many specific decisions. Through information gathering, analysis, and evaluation of alternatives, the plan ensures that public actions are based on factual analysis. The preparation of a comprehensive plan is an opportunity to create a vision for the community, an overall image in words that describes what the local government wants to be and how it wants to look at some point in the future. The vision serves as the unifying concept for the plan.

Involve the citizenry.

In many communities, the preparation of a comprehensive plan is the local government's most visible means of involving the public. Workshops, questionnaires, interviews, social media, planning exercises, and public hearings are all ways to gauge public sentiment regarding where the community should be going and what it should look like.

Guide regulation and public investment.

A comprehensive plan, through the adoption of goals and policies, establishes a framework for the administration of zoning and



subdivision regulations and the location, financing and sequencing of public capital investment. When individual proposals for developments are reviewed by the local government for zoning changes or development applications such as for subdivisions, the comprehensive plan provides guidance for location, use and type of roads, and similar improvements. Similarly, when a community is reviewing its annual capital budget or long-term capital improvement program, the comprehensive plan aids in setting priorities.

Give direction.

Since it indicates how a local government will act over time regarding development and redevelopment, the comprehensive plan provides direction to the private sector that will shape private initiatives such as development proposals.

Protect the community.

If, unfortunately, the jurisdiction finds itself in court over land use issues, having a comprehensive plan that explains the community's goals and future plans is an excellent defense. Similarly, if a municipality's comprehensive plan is outdated and has not been updated recently, this can hurt a community if its land use decisions are challenged.



HOW DOES MARYLAND DEFINE A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN?

Several statutes contain general descriptions of what a comprehensive plan is and what it should contain, each with different yet complementary emphases.

Under the *Maryland Code, Land Use Article, Section 3-101*, a planning commission is charged to “enact, adopt, amend, and execute a plan.” A planning commission shall then recommend the comprehensive plan to the appropriate governing body for adoption.

HOW DOES A COMMUNITY GET STARTED ON A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN?

In Maryland, the planning commission oversees the process of preparing the comprehensive plan, after being charged to do so by the legislative body. After the draft plan is completed, the planning commission forwards it to the legislative body for adoption.

Between initiation and adoption, many steps must occur. These include:



Decide who is going to write the plan.

In larger communities, the planning staff may have the professional experience and resources, including mapping and geographic information systems (GIS), to put together a plan. It may also make sense to invest in hiring staff to lead the planning efforts, rather than hiring an outside consultant. Alternatively, the planning department staff may be small, overworked or inexperienced, or there may be no planning department at all. In such cases, communities should consider retaining a private planning consultant or contracting with a public agency such as a regional planning commission, or a nonprofit organization. To begin the process, the community should develop a scope of work and a request for qualifications, interview the organizations or individuals that respond, and select those that best suit its needs.

Establish a schedule and budget for completing the plan.

The planning process must have a beginning, middle and end, and result in a document that is ready to be adopted. If the process goes too long, it will wear out and lose the attention of citizens and officials, as well as run up costs. A schedule advises everyone when drafts of the plan are due for



review and for adoption. A budget allows the community elected officials, city council, or county commissioners to set aside money for the project; lets the local government staff know how much time can be charged to the plan; and determines how much can be spent on consultants. It also is important to budget for the cost of production, graphic design, and layout. Many communities today are reducing the cost of their comprehensive plans by making them available online and/or on digital media, instead of printing them. Regardless of the final format, a community should make sure its plan is readily available during both the public involvement process and once the plan is adopted.

Decide how residents are to be involved.

Early involvement by the public is crucial to ensure understanding of the planning process, facilitate the development of new ideas and consideration of alternatives, and, ultimately, build support for implementation.

A common technique used to involve residents is a visioning process, intended to allow a community to better understand the values and concerns of its residents and use them as a basis for planning. Visioning highlights the trends and forces that are affecting the community.



Agree on issues to be addressed.

Comprehensive plans typically have two focuses: (1) broad issues such as those relating to the physical composition of the community, its relation to the region, and management of growth and conservation; and (2) specific issues, often stated in terms of problems, such as development in certain neighborhoods, traffic congestion on specific streets, a lack of affordable housing, or changes in business districts. Defining and refining the issues will come from the citizen engagement process as well as debate among the plan commission and village or county board or city council.

Collect and analyze data, as appropriate.

Data to be collected will depend on the particular plan section involved and are described for individual elements (such as transportation or housing). Data can be in the form of historical or descriptive accounts, statistics in tabular form, graphs and charts, and, increasingly, interpretative mapping through GIS.



Agree on goals, policies and guidelines that pertain to the vision.

A *goal* is a statement of a desired end. Sometimes the term “objective” is used in place of a “goal.” A *policy* is a general rule for action on a specific issue, derived from more general goals. A *guideline* provides more specific direction on how the policies may be implemented, preferably with time and responsibility identified. Goals, policies and guidelines are usually developed gradually, as the concerns of the comprehensive plan crystallize and are refined.

HOW CAN RESIDENTS BECOME INVOLVED IN COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING?

- ♦ **PUBLIC HEARINGS:** These are meetings that are required to be held before a plan can be adopted. They require public notice. At such hearings, residents offer their opinions on the proposed plan.
- ♦ **WORKSHOPS:** These are informal meetings to discuss sections of a plan. Resident comments should be included in the talks among plan commission members and others involved in creating the plan.



- ◆ **CHARRETTES:** These are design workshops where participants quickly develop and evaluate alternative plans.
- ◆ **SOCIAL MEDIA:** Many local governments use the Internet to provide information about the planning process, schedules, and drafts of planning documents, as well as allow the public to comment by e-mail.
- ◆ **SURVEY RESEARCH:** Whether by mail, telephone or the Internet, survey research gauges public reaction to various issues considered in the planning process.
- ◆ **INTERVIEWS:** These can be done either one on one or in small focus groups, and are especially appropriate when highly detailed information is needed.
- ◆ **FLYERS OR INSERTS IN LOCAL NEWSPAPERS, NEWSLETTERS:** These are vehicles for providing communication to a wide audience of residents.
- ◆ **PROFESSIONAL FACILITATION:** This is an excellent tool to help large groups define issues and reach agreement. Since facilitators are neutral regarding the issues, their function is to ensure that all points of view are heard and considered, and that no one point of view or person dominates. They are particularly valuable when issues surrounding the comprehensive plan are controversial.



- ♦ **SMALL GROUP MEETINGS:** Conducted in neighborhoods or focus groups, these are especially appropriate when detailed, area-specific information about planning issues is desired.
- ♦ **ADVISORY TASK FORCE:** A legislative body or planning commission may create an advisory task force to broaden the scope of representation and knowledge base of the commission, and receive advice on specific parts of the plan. Advisory task forces also are helpful when the planning commission is occupied with current planning issues.