



“Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.”

John Fitzgerald Kennedy

Comprehensive Planning Fundamentals

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Everybody plans. People make financial plans, work plans, and even grocery lists to efficiently achieve their goals. Planning helps each of us work toward accomplishing objectives in an orderly, step-by-step fashion. It also helps a community avoid costly errors by allowing for a good look at the issues. Communities that fail to plan are like people who shop without grocery lists—they spend too much on junk food and not enough on what is actually needed.

The comprehensive planning process encourages governments to think strategically about all aspects of their community and the way these elements interact. Planning allows us to take a look at where the community has been, how it got to this point, where it wants to go, and how it can get there. Without a clear picture of citizen goals, policy makers must often

make decisions in a manner that may not be in the best interests of local residents.

Planning encourages a community development process that initiates action rather than one that simply reacts to events. But comprehensive planning is not easy. Before it is attempted, the concept, purpose and process of planning must be clearly understood. This fact sheet is a comprehensive planning primer intended to raise awareness and start to prepare the community for planning.

Comprehensive planning history

The comprehensive plan has its roots in the governmental reforms of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The U.S. Department of Commerce Advisory Committee on Planning and Zoning institutionalized comprehensive planning in the Standard Zoning Enabling Act of 1926 and the Standard City Planning Enabling Act of 1928.

In 1920, Milwaukee became the first Wisconsin municipality to adopt zoning, which was upheld by the Wisconsin Supreme Court in 1923. By the end of the decade, many cities and villages across the state had developed zoning ordinances. Zoning was originally a safeguard against incompatible uses, such as factories and residential areas, locating near each other. In 1929, the legislature expanded the



use of zoning to allow for the management of rural areas. This was largely a response to mismanagement of rural lands, especially by lumber companies in northern Wisconsin.

In the sometimes hasty, reactive response to land use problems, planning and zoning were often considered the same thing. Many individuals and communities still hold this misconception. The new Comprehensive Planning Law in Wisconsin works to clear up this confusion.

What is planning?

- Planning is an orderly, open approach to determining local needs, setting goals and priorities, and developing a guide for action.
- Planning is a concentrated effort by a community to reach a balance between the natural environment and residential, commercial, industrial and agricultural development.
- A plan is a guide for public officials and private citizens to use in making informed decisions that will affect their community.

Change is inevitable. Planning is a process that helps a community prepare for change rather than react to it. The process involves working citizens through four basic questions:

1. Where is the community now?
2. How did the community get here?
3. Where does the community want to go?
4. How does the community get there?

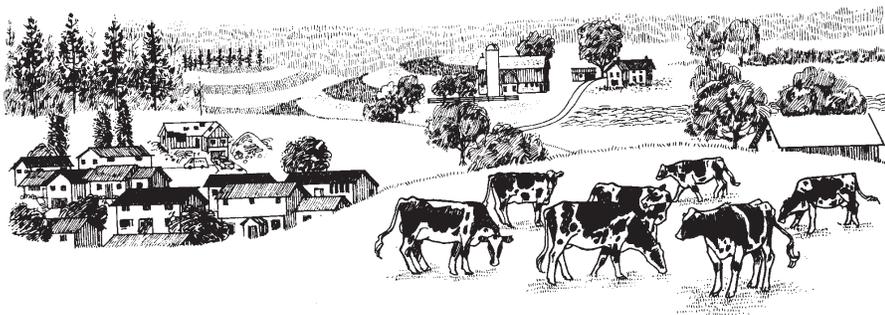
Planning is not:

- An attempt to replace market forces of supply and demand. It helps shape and channel market forces by establishing certain guidelines or rules to manage development.
- Action. A plan is only a guide for action and implementation.
- An instrument of immediate change. Change will occur incrementally as the plan is implemented.
- A silver bullet. Planning provides a limited set of options for communities to slowly foster change.
- Static or only conducted one time. Good planning requires continual review of implementation successes and failures, citizen desires and the surrounding environment so that the plan can be adjusted as needed.
- Zoning. A comprehensive plan is a foundation and guide for many tools that can be used to implement the plan. Zoning is one of those tools.

Planning is not zoning

Planning is focused on the future and establishes community goals, objectives and policies regarding future use, development and conservation of land. Planning is visionary and identifies where and how citizens would like to see the physical development of the community take place.

Zoning is one tool that helps a community implement the plan. Zoning divides an area into districts, which are subject to different regulations that cover the current type and intensity of land use. A zoning ordinance defines which parcels of land belong in a particular zoning district. Planning and zoning work best together. The plan is the long-term foundation that guides today's zoning decisions.



THE PLANNING PROCESS:

- **Explores diverse community opinions and fosters consensus-based decision-making that incorporates shared values.**
- **Takes every opportunity to gain public input.**
- **Teaches citizens about their shared resource base and how each component of the community is interconnected within a social web.**
- **Relies upon technical analysis of data, trends, maps and public input to strike a balance between different opinions.**

With effective planning, communities can:

- **Make informed decisions.** The comprehensive planning process provides facts on existing conditions and trends and helps a community understand the potential positive and negative impacts of managing growth in different ways. This provides a basis to make informed decisions and allows a community to coordinate individual developments so that they complement rather than detract from each other.
- **Develop and preserve community character.** Can anyone envision Door County without cherry trees, or the Wisconsin Northwoods without a vibrant forest- and water-based tourism economy? Planning for the physical design of a community facilitates the preservation of the cultural, economic and environmental features that help make a community a special place. Planned growth can be used as an ingredient to expand the community's unique character.

- **Achieve predictability.** Good planning provides private landowners and developers with a guide that defines where and what type of development the community desires. This information allows individuals to plan for the purchase and use of property consistent with community goals.
- **Produce positive economic development.** Planning helps a community retain existing businesses and industries while attracting new ones. It is often used as a tool to revitalize downtowns and create vibrant mainstreets. The planning process allows a community to consider workforce, education and local infrastructure capacity, among other things, so that appropriate economic development strategies can be developed.
- **Adopt a balanced approach.** Any local government function involves political, personal, and community values. Comprehensive planning and managing future growth involve balancing the community interest and the private interest. Planning encourages a balanced approach as the community develops, thus ensuring that community rights and private property privileges are both protected.

When communities fail to plan effectively, they may experience:

- **Negative fiscal impacts.** Development may not always be good for the community's bottom line. It requires a plethora of services, including police, fire, sewer, water, schools, and school buses. Residential development, for example, often pays less in taxes than it demands in services. When development is low density, further from the central city, or leapfrogs across rural areas, the effect on service costs is even greater.
- **Negative agricultural impacts.** Urban development in the rural or rural fringe areas of the state often directly conflicts with agricultural operations. Nuisance and trespass complaints and traffic incidents are more frequent in areas where conflicting uses clash with one another. Land values often increase, making farm expansion almost impossible. Implement dealers and support services lose business as farm operations decline.



- **Negative water impacts.** Wetland loss, increased levels of impervious surface, encroachment upon environmental corridors, and paving over groundwater recharge areas all have detrimental effects on both ground and surface water. For communities that want to keep their feet dry (rather than wet during a flood), want to provide a safe and reliable drinking water supply, and depend upon recreation and tourism, especially water-based, failing to plan can have significant consequences.
- **Possible negative impacts on the private property owners.** How would you like to have your neighbor open a junkyard? Would you prefer to live next to a single-family home or a 1,000-cow farm? What if your well, the source of drinking water, was polluted by the neighbor's consistent misuse of their property? Local governments that fail to plan neglect to protect citizens and the community from the whims of individuals.
- **Negative transportation impacts.** As we move further out from where we work and play, the number of hours we log in our cars and road miles traveled increases significantly. Not only do we need to spend more money on increased road maintenance and new highway development, people spend more time in their cars and less with their families.

- **Negative air impacts.** All this time in our automobiles means we are using more fuel and spewing more emissions into the atmosphere. Cars are major contributors of carbon dioxide, which causes global warming, and a cocktail of other chemicals that lead to smog and respiratory health problems.

Planning limitations

Planning for a community's future does not come without certain costs and limitations. It requires a tremendous expenditure of social capital. If an effective plan is to be developed, citizens, organizations and elected officials must spend a lot of time and energy throughout the planning process. Leadership is required as plans are developed and implemented. Leadership, especially on potentially divisive issues, requires the expenditure of political capital.

Many communities also require professional assistance in the form of a new public planning employee or a private planning consultant. Obvious financial costs do result. Planning is not only limited by the resources that are attributed to the effort, but is normally only effective at accomplishing incremental change on the margin. The market economy is still the driving force in any community.

Finally, planning is only as good as the implementation measures put into action to achieve what has been laid out in the plan. If an implementation

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- Wisconsin will add 430,000 households between 1990 and 2015—an increase of 24%.
- Wisconsin has lost 47% of its wetlands, about 5 million acres. In some southern counties, wetland loss is greater than 75%.
- Eighty-five percent of the food produced on farms in Wisconsin comes from urban areas or adjacent counties where development pressure is the greatest.

gap exists between the plan and implementation, the planning process has essentially failed. Ultimately, a community must weigh the costs and benefits of planning and not planning.

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