

The Comprehensive Plan

*Extension to Communities
College of Design*

What is a Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan, also known as a master or general plan, is a collection of information and materials designed to guide the future development of a city or county. Such a plan can provide a community with a firm foundation for policy and action that will allow it to function more efficiently and effectively. It can strengthen communities' policies and legislation, and it also can promote a more certain future.

Although a comprehensive plan can do all of this and more, many places have outdated plans that serve little function. Some cities have more current plans but fail to rely on them in making development decisions. This publication will describe what a comprehensive plan is, what it contains, and what it can do for a city or county.

Characteristics of the Comprehensive Plan

A comprehensive plan is general in nature. It does not call for specific action or encourage any particular legislative strategy. Rather, it provides a framework and policy context within which to make all decisions relating to land use and future development.

The comprehensive plan also must be long-range. Because it deals with issues as many as thirty years down the road, the plan cannot chart a highly specific course. Instead, it points the way toward goals and objectives and acts as a reminder of the general policies that the city should consider when making development decisions. While short-term, more exact planning is important, it is not within the scope of the comprehensive plan.

Finally, the comprehensive plan must be physically and functionally all-encompassing. Given that growth and change can affect every aspect of a city or county, it is important that the plan cover all aspects of the community's future.

Why is a Plan Needed?

Communities across Iowa are experiencing growth and change. Increasing growth and development pressure can strain local resources, damage the environment, and inconvenience homeowners and other residents. No

growth or slow growth also can bring problems, including stagnant or declining tax revenues and deteriorating public infrastructure.

How then is a comprehensive plan important to communities? First, it must be recognized that all places, large and small, face problems and challenges that a comprehensive plan can help address. Other, more subtle reasons for a comprehensive plan also deserve attention. For instance, rural subdivisions may seem like good additions to an area's housing mix, and county officials may view such developments as additions to the property tax base. However, rural subdivisions often take up at least twice as much land and cost about 40 percent more to provide with public services than do subdivisions within or adjoining existing communities. Further, this development trend leads to the loss of productive farmland and to conflicts with neighboring farmers over dust, odors, and other aspects of modern farming.

A comprehensive plan that addresses where and how future development should take place can help communities avoid these types of problems and make sound decisions about their growth.

How is the Plan Implemented?

Zoning and subdivision regulations are two methods of implementing the comprehensive plan and controlling future development. Many communities use these tools to prevent unwanted development and its undesirable side effects. The Iowa Code states that zoning and subdivision regulations should be based on the community's comprehensive plan.

When a comprehensive plan is in place, the community and potential residents or developers have advance knowledge of the intentions of the city or county. Thus, zoning and subdivision regulations are stronger and less susceptible to legal challenges when based upon a comprehensive plan. With a plan in place, a community has a better idea of how to use zoning, subdivision regulations, budgeting, capital improvements programming, and all other functions to achieve its goals and allow the area to grow or change in positive ways.

Inconsistent or unguided decisions by planners and elected officials alike can do damage in a variety of ways. While each individual decision may be reasonable, the combined effect of many different decisions may negate the expected benefit, or may cause a negative outcome not foreseeable from the standpoint of the individual case. Because each decision can have a lasting effect, it is important to try to determine, as specifically as possible, what that effect will be. A comprehensive plan makes it easier to identify and predict outcomes and to determine how they mesh with the community's overall plans.

History of the Comprehensive Plan

While often thought of as a modern pursuit, planning has a long history. Hippodamus of Miletus is considered the first city planner because of his efforts in several Greek cities in the fifth century B.C. These plans, and much of the collective efforts throughout history, were largely architectural in focus. Much of the consideration that goes into modern plans was of no concern, as most of the work was in designing street layouts and calling for park space and monumental government buildings.

The comprehensive plan as it is known today has been around for a little more than 80 years. Planners' affiliation with a professional society began about the same time. The American Institute of City Planning was founded in 1917. Then, the creation of the Standard City Planning Enabling Act in 1928 touched off a flurry of planning activity across the country. State after state enacted this enabling legislation so that cities could legally undertake planning activities.

However, the act was not perfect. Most critics point to four major weaknesses:

- First, the act was not clear or consistent in its distinction between the comprehensive plan and the zoning ordinance. The plan should provide the type of guidance needed for the creation of a zoning ordinance, but this ordinance is not a part of the plan.
- Second, the act allowed for piecemeal adoption of plan components. It was clear that all parts of the plan related to one another, but the act said there was no reason to wait for all areas to be completed before publishing those that were. The result was a rash of "master" plans for streets or public facilities that should have been only one part of the comprehensive plan.
- The third weakness of the Standard City Planning Enabling Act was that it provided no definition or outline for what technical elements the plan should contain. The next section of this publication will address this question.

- Finally, the act failed to make the legislative body an important part of the planning process. As a result, the plan often lacked the power and political will needed for complete implementation.

Over the past decades most of these problems have been corrected. Although the process remains imperfect, a much more successful and accepted definition of the comprehensive plan exists today.

Elements of a Comprehensive Plan

A comprehensive plan is one document with many distinct sections. While these sections cover different aspects of the community, they all are related. The document will contain written text, maps, illustrations, tables, and whatever else is needed to clearly describe the city and its conditions and goals. The plan should be easy to read and easy to update so that local employees, officials, and citizens can all use it comfortably.

The first part of the plan is an introduction, which should include a brief description of what a plan is and why the community needs one. The resolution adopting the plan usually appears here, to provide a list of reasons for its adoption. A table of contents should be included, and an explanation of how the actual plan was formulated is also helpful.

The next section of the plan is often a brief history of the area and an enumeration of existing conditions. Data on those conditions also can be used to begin to make estimates about future directions. It should be apparent to the reader how the planner or author arrived at his or her conclusions based upon the past and present situation. The locality's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats should be described and evaluated.

Next are a number of different areas that need to be addressed. This is where the plan becomes comprehensive. Population and demography, land use, traffic circulation and transportation, parks and open space (natural resources), housing, utilities and services, urban design, community facilities, economic development, historical preservation, and other elements are all areas that may be covered in the plan. The goals and objectives for the overall plan, as well as for each of these specific areas of study, should be included. A portion describing the workings of the local political system and setting guidelines for intergovernmental cooperation might also be useful for some communities.

Population and demography should be looked at in terms of existing conditions and future trends. An accurate population projection will be necessary for good planning. Ethnic makeup and age breakdowns are among the useful calculations.

Land use is an important plan piece. The existing land-use map should be included along with projections of future use. These maps should be based on the goals and projections from the many other areas of the plan. The maps of future land use will be one of the most studied portions of the plan. Landowners and other citizens will carefully review the maps to learn how specific parcels of land will be treated. Accompanying text should explain the rationale behind the various land uses.

Traffic circulation and transportation are increasingly important aspects of the comprehensive plan. As automobile use rises and traffic worsens, the need for roadway expansions, system improvements, and public transportation increases. All planned and potential new construction should be discussed in the plan. However, the comprehensive plan is not an exact outline of every future project. That level of detail should be left to the capital improvement program, a separate document that describes public capital expenditures over a five-year period.

The **park and open space** element is fairly easy to grasp. Changes to the existing system should be outlined as well as projections of future need based upon forecasted growth. Conservation interests also should be discussed. Other common areas of interest are farmland, wetlands, and special habitat areas.

Housing information can include provisions for affordable housing, planned residential growth, and building and density requirements. Good planning in this area will be necessary for efficient and effective growth.

Utilities and services should include water, sanitary and storm sewer, and treatment information. This section also will be less specific than what is contained in the capital improvement program.

Some portion of the plan should deal with **urban design**. Subdivision standards, neighborhood redevelopment, and even historical preservation may be included.

Community facilities include hospitals, schools and government buildings, and so forth. These entities are an important part of a growing community and should be considered in the comprehensive plan. Further, carefully planned public projects of this type may be used to spur redevelopment and set the standard for neighborhood renovations.

Economic development will also be a necessary element of the plan for most communities. Whether geared toward serious efforts to attract major employers or toward business retention and improvement, an economically strong community is a common goal.

How Is a Comprehensive Plan Created?

The creation of a useful comprehensive plan involves a great deal of research, calculation, and discussion. The development of many of the plan elements requires a high degree of technical knowledge. For this reason, the process is best guided by trained professionals. Even cities with a planning department often hire a consultant to create their comprehensive plan. Either way, the plan should include significant public participation. Numerous public meetings should be arranged and special effort should be made to encourage attendance and disseminate information about the process.

The entire process can take years to complete. Once the plan is finished, the planning commission and the city council should formally approve the document. Although the comprehensive plan does not contain actual laws or regulations, this formal approval will lend strength to future legislation that is based upon the plan. Likewise, future work by any city agency or body should be compared to the comprehensive plan and should be consistent with it.

Finally, it is important to realize that once in place, the comprehensive plan is not an infallible or unchangeable document. Times and conditions change, and some of the forecasts the plan was based on may prove inaccurate. The plan should not be changed out of convenience but can be updated when necessary so that it continues to provide an accurate picture of how the community wishes to progress.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Stanley R. Johnson, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.