

Plan Making: A Primer

We have all run across plans of various types in our lives. We may have seen blueprints of a house or apartment. We may have looked at plans a developer had for a parcel of land. We may have worked on a business plan as a small-business owner. For the farmers among us, we may have developed a planting plan. While these plans differ in their topical content and format, they share at least two traits. They describe a desired future state or condition and provide information that is helpful in reaching it. Plans that cities, towns, counties, or regions prepare also do this.

What Is a Plan? A community prepares plans of various types in order to describe a desired future and to outline how it proposes to reach that future. Community plans are communicated with words, graphics, and maps—usually on paper, but increasingly digitally on the web. Plans can be prepared by planning department staff, by consultants, by civic organizations, or by a combination of these. Successful plans are prepared with the active participation of citizens, the business community, and other stakeholders who either are affected by plans or have resources that are key to their implementation. Plans are adopted by the planning commission, the local legislative body, or governing body. Once adopted, a plan becomes a document that public officials, citizens, the business community, and other interests should look to when they consider taking actions or adopting policies that affect the future of the community. Plans should be reviewed and amended regularly in order to address changing conditions and changing attitudes. Plans are important tools for expressing what a city, town, county, or region wants to become and what actions are necessary to move toward that goal.

Everything Is Related to Everything Else. Urban and regional planners firmly believe that plans affecting a community's future should be comprehensive in scope. Plans should analyze the interconnectedness of all aspects of a community or region. For instance, one cannot address one topic, such as transportation, without exploring its relation to the use of land, to economic development, to environmental considerations, and to a host of other community attributes. You cannot look at a single community factor in isolation.

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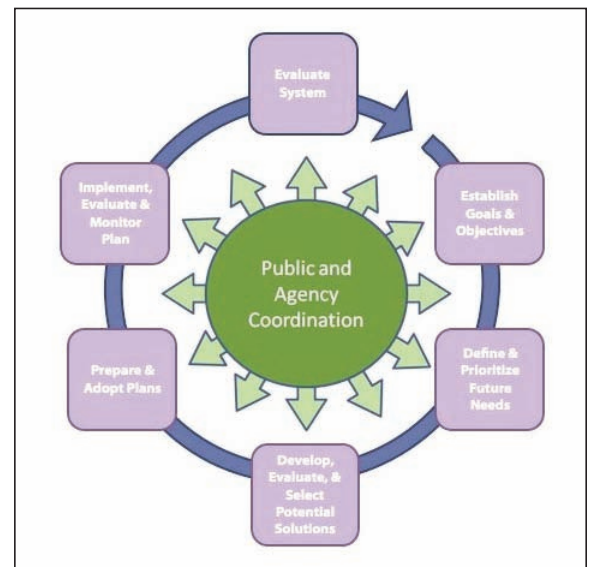
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Making Great Communities Happen

Plans Come in All Sizes and Shapes. Jurisdictions prepare plans either for the entire community or for part of the community, such as a neighborhood, a downtown, or a highway corridor. Regional entities, such as councils of government, regional planning agencies, or metropolitan planning organizations, prepare regional plans for groups of municipalities or counties or for a region based on a watershed, habitat area, or other natural feature. A community or region can prepare a plan that is comprehensive in scope—it covers all topics—or it can prepare plans that are more strategic, addressing only topics that pertain to a specific problem or strategy. Finally, there are plans that deal with only a single, specialized topic or function, such as transportation, housing, economic development, climate change, community health, or parks and open space. The comprehensive plan is the kingpin of them all. It covers the entire community and addresses all topics. In some states it is called a general plan or a master plan. Many states require consistency between a comprehensive plan and a zoning ordinance.

What types of plans a community actually should have depends on its size, relationship to surrounding communities, and whether it is growing or declining. A small, isolated, rural community that is not growing or is declining may get by with just a comprehensive plan. Rapidly growing suburbs or cities may need the full complement of plan types.

What's in a Plan? What is contained in a plan is often referred to by planners as the "plan elements." The plan elements that are included depend on the type of plan, the characteristics of the jurisdiction, and the degree to which a community wants to depart from traditional elements. Some states require certain elements to be present in a comprehensive plan. While there is no immutable outline of plan elements that can be applied to every community or for every plan type, most plans accomplish at least four things:

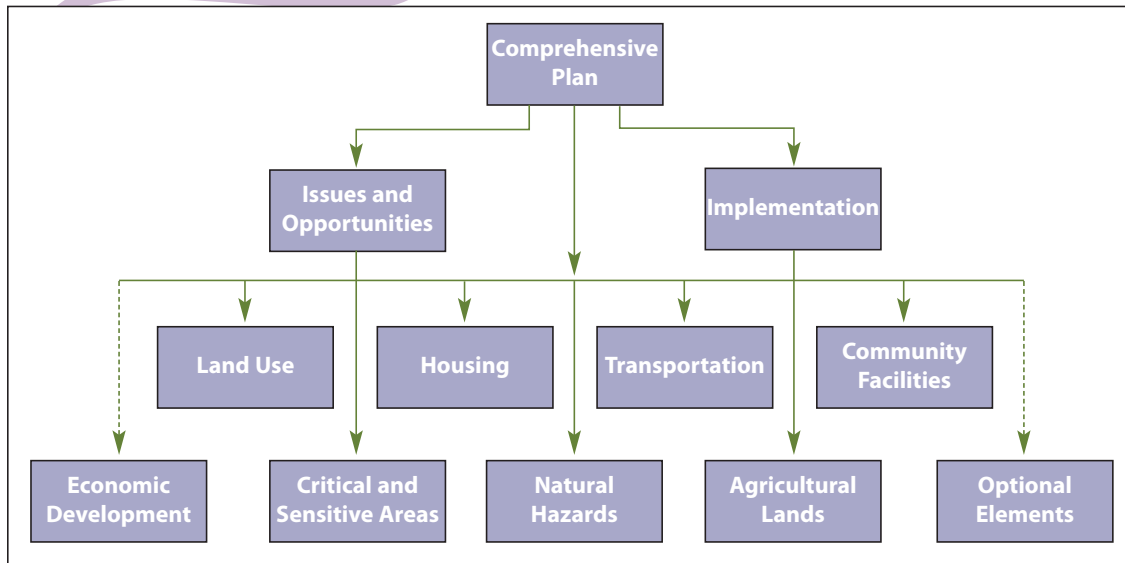


Transportation Plan Development Cycle

Diana C. Mendes, AICP

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- **Plans Describe a Desired Future.** Plans usually start out describing what the community, subarea, or region wants to become in the future. Sometimes the description is referred to as a vision statement; other times it is called “long-range goals and objectives.” The planning process invariably includes an intensive effort to involve stakeholders in developing the vision, goals, and objectives. Visioning processes often involve analysis and comparison of optional futures or scenarios.
- **Facts and Figures.** Next, a plan usually focuses on factual information about the region, the community, the subarea, or the function being addressed. It examines existing conditions and trends by presenting background data on topics like population characteristics, housing stock, traffic conditions and travel demand, economic statistics, environmentally sensitive areas, and much more. This function provides the factual foundation for the plan.
- **What Should Be Done.** Recommended actions usually make up the next major task of a plan. What does the plan recommend to reach the stated vision, goals, and objectives? Suggested actions are usually grouped by topic.



Comprehensive Plan
Elements

- **Who Does What, When, and With What Resources?** Having presented a set of recommended actions, an action plan identifies the entities responsible for implementation, presents a timetable or schedule for action, assigns costs, and then identifies sources of funding. An action plan makes it possible to check back and gauge progress periodically in the future.

Do Plans Matter? They sure do. They influence public and private investments in development, infrastructure, and community facilities and services. They form the foundation for zoning and other regulations affecting where and how we build and what land is spared from development. Moreover, plans affect a wide variety of community attributes that, taken together, influence our quality of life: jobs and prosperity; community health; energy conservation and renewable energy; climate change; parks and open space; urban design; exposure to natural hazards; protection of the natural environment and habitat; protection of water sources; housing choice and affordability; pedestrian, bicycle, vehicular transportation, and bus and rail services; and much more. Most important, plans can provide a roadmap to a sustainable future.

Reaching Agreement About a Plan. Building a consensus about what a plan should say is often the toughest challenge facing planners, planning commissioners, and the public. Central to the conversations that lead to the adoption of a plan is protection of the rights and needs of all components of the population—minorities, kids, the business community, elders, working people, retirees, renters, home owners, landowners, developers, the disabled, and community institutions. Balancing the needs of the environment, housing, transportation, the economy, climate change, and health in a plan is a daunting task. That’s why most of the time required to prepare a sound plan is devoted to conversations with stakeholders.

Stale Plans Can Be a Problem. Plans should not be considered static, end-state documents. They should be considered dynamic, ever-changing guides that fairly reflect a consensus of opinion about what the jurisdiction should become. Plans need to be kept up to date; they need to be thoroughly revised periodically. Plan making is an activity that is routinely undertaken by businesses, institutions, farms, developers, and other enterprises. It is extremely important that cities, towns, counties, and regions also seriously undertake the preparation of plans to prepare for a long-range, sustainable future.

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