

Comprehensive Plan Standards: A Sustaining Places Toolkit

PLANNING TOOLS

AS PART OF APA's Sustaining Places Initiative, a program dedicated to promoting sustainability in human settlement issues, communities seeking to prepare high-quality comprehensive plans have a new tool: the Comprehensive Plan Standards for

Sustaining Places. This new toolkit helps create and recognize comprehensive plans that apply contemporary best planning practices. It is available at planning.org/sustainingplaces/compplanstandards and in Appendices B and C in *Sustaining*

Places: Best Practices for Comprehensive Plans (PAS Report 578).



The comprehensive plan standards consist of four elements: best practices, plan principles, plan processes, and plan attributes. Plans are scored through content reviews that identify the presence and strength of best practices. Individual best practice points are recorded in a

matrix, which then tabulates an overall plan quality score. Each element of this framework makes an important contribution to the plan's sustaining places score.

BEST PRACTICES are planning action tools that carry out plan visions and goals. They represent accepted professional

techniques for implementing planning principles and processes, as well as plan attributes. For example, a best practice for the "Harmony with Nature" principle would be enacting policies to reduce carbon footprints.

PLAN PRINCIPLES are statements of intent, including six overall plan goals: Livable Built Environment, Harmony with Nature, Resilient Economy, Interwoven Equity, Healthy Community, and Responsible Regionalism.

PLAN PROCESSES are planning activities, embodied in two plan-making performance standards: Authentic Participation and Accountable Implementation.

PLAN ATTRIBUTES are plan design standards, cast as two plan narrative performance standards: Consistent Content and Coordinated Characteristics.

Framework questions and answers

Starting in 2014, the comprehensive plan standards have been a feature of Deep Dive workshops at the National Planning Conference. While scoring sample plans using the proposed framework, workshop participants raised the following questions:

Why are new standards needed when communities have been preparing comprehensive plans since the last century?

New conditions in the planning environment, such as concerns for public health, climate change, and equity, have introduced new planning demands. Traditional plans seldom dealt with these issues. The Sustaining Places Initiative was created to meet the new needs.

Since every community and plan is unique, how can a single set of national standards work across the country?

Use of the standards is voluntary, and the framework is flexible enough to apply to communities and plans of all types and sizes. This year, reviewers looked at plans from cities with populations of 10,796 (Monroe, Wisconsin) to 10,170,292 (Los Angeles County). Plan types ranged from standard paper documents, such as that of Bloomington, Indiana, to the entirely web-based plan of Plano, Texas.

Will adopting national standards impede innovation and hamper local initiative and creativity?

Not only are the standards broad enough to accommodate diverse local initiatives, but the scoring awards extra points for innovative practices not envisioned in the original standards.

THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN STANDARDS

Addressing the interrelationships between different plan components distinguishes comprehensive plans for sustaining places.



SOURCE: *SUSTAINING PLACES: BEST PRACTICES FOR COMPREHENSIVE PLANS*



National standards are flexible enough to accommodate diverse local initiatives and creativity. The *Plano Tomorrow* plan received innovation points for its web-based format, and achieved a Silver Level in the Sustaining Places Recognition Program.

For example, the *Plano Tomorrow* plan received innovation points for its web-based format.

How can outside reviewers objectively review a local plan based on the unique mix of local politics, economic conditions, population demographics, and natural environment issues that shaped it?

Each submission must include a description of the underlying issues that guided the plan. Communities describe their top challenges and priorities, as well as the local regulatory climate. Applicants also provide information on the strengths and weaknesses of the plan, and areas where the comprehensive plan standards practices may conflict with other practices in their plan or may not be applicable.

Are the standards useful in reviews of previously prepared plans? Wouldn't a toolkit for communities that are preparing a new plan be useful?

The toolkit has been used for both. Austin, Texas, and Raleigh, North Carolina, used it to recommend updates to their recently adopted plans. New Hanover County, North Carolina, prepared its first comprehensive plan using citizen theme committees based on the six principles.

Recommendations for using the new standards

Consider how well your comprehensive plan meets the needs of your community. Is it up to date? Does it provide a strategic platform for future development? Does it

encompass the full range of issues on your annual agenda? Does it ensure equity and fairness in your planning decisions? Does it guide your capital budget? Does it shed light on the underlying conflicts in citizen statements during public hearings?

If you decide that your plan is out of date or lacks necessary substance, there are several ways you can use the toolkit:

- Score the plan against the standards to analyze its strengths and weaknesses.
- Guide a review of the plan by the citizen planning board; acquaint the board with the slate of best practices; build popular support for adding new practices to the plan.
- Recommend additional practices, principles, processes, or attributes from the standards to fill in gaps or add new topics to modernize or expand the plan's scope and meet current needs.
- After the APA pilot program is complete, request a review to benchmark your plan relative to national standards and receive formal recognition of its quality.

Each community must decide how to use the standards toolkit based on its own needs, and can find direction by comparing its plan with nationally recognized quality standards. ■

— David R. Godschalk, FAICP

Godschalk is an emeritus professor of city and regional planning at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN STANDARDS FOR SUSTAINING PLACES RECOGNITION PROGRAM

Through recognition and information sharing, APA seeks to encourage exemplary planning that integrates sustainability throughout community planning. The 2016 pilot phase of the Comprehensive Plan Standards for Sustaining Places Recognition Program (tinyurl.com/zqntldp) reviewed and assessed plans submitted by communities and awarded Gold, Silver, or Bronze levels based on their scores. Eight were recognized at the Silver and Bronze levels.

SILVER LEVEL

PLANO TOMORROW, Plano, Texas

ENVISION LONGMONT, Longmont, Colorado

IMAGINE 2040: TAMPA COMPREHENSIVE PLAN, Hillsborough County City-County Planning Commission and Tampa, Florida

BRING IT ON BLOOMINGTON! McLean County (Illinois) Regional Planning Commission

PLAN DSM, Des Moines, Iowa

BRONZE LEVEL

LOS ANGELES COUNTY GENERAL PLAN, Los Angeles County

CITY OF ISSAQUAH COMPREHENSIVE PLAN, Issaquah, Washington

MONROE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN, Monroe, Wisconsin



Rural residents are more likely to engage in physical activity if there are connections between their homes and places where they can exercise. This community has a safe path for walkers, runners, and bicyclists.

Plan4Health: Supporting Healthy Planning in Rural Communities

BEST PRACTICES

PLANNERS AND PUBLIC HEALTH professionals share a commitment to supporting walkable streets, but the co-benefits are often demonstrated from the perspective of an urban or suburban environment. In Eastern Highlands, Connecticut, 10 volunteer planning and zoning commissions, Plan4Health (plan4health.us) and the local health district are making the case for healthy planning in rural areas.

Like many parts of the Northeast, eastern Connecticut is rich in natural beauty. Acres of forest and protected land, multiuse trails, and public parks offer opportunities for walking, biking, swimming, boating, and hunting.

However, these rural areas often lack a village center that is inviting to pedestrians and cyclists, and residential areas are relatively disconnected from the community, commercial areas,

and other spaces that promote leisure and social activities. These factors can lead to reduced physical activity among residents, which can in turn lead to an increased risk of chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes, and stroke.

In response to the health needs of the region and in partnership with the Connecticut Chapter of APA, the Eastern Highlands Health District's Community Health Action Response Team assessed zoning policies and codes that have inhibited active transportation.

Not only do rural communities pose the typical planning challenges and opportunities of any environment, they also offer a chance to empower volunteer planning and zoning commissioners to consider healthy designs—and CHART leveraged the Plan4Health grant to target those local decision makers, creating a healthy planning toolkit for rural communities.

The American Planning Association Vol. 23, No. 1. The Commissioner (ISSN 2330-4499) is published six times a year. Planning commissioner/official members of APA receive the newsletter as part of their membership package; others may subscribe. For information on subscriptions and membership visit planning.org. Kimberley Jacques, Editor; Julie Von Bergen, Senior Editor; James M. Drinan, Jr., Executive Director. Editorial inquiries should be addressed to the editor. Copyright 2017 by the American Planning Association, 205 N. Michigan Ave., Ste. 1200, Chicago, IL 60601-5927; 312-431-9100. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the American Planning Association.

Betsy Paterson Square in Manfield, Connecticut, hosts a farmers market, bike race, and other community events.

Defining the challenges

CHART's efforts began with key informant interviews and focus groups to clarify the local perception of planning and public health.

By conducting a qualitative analysis of the experiences of local planning and zoning commissioners, the team could highlight the shared opportunities for shaping the built environment to support biking, walking, and playing opportunities.

"I think for the planning commission, the best thing we can do is to drive development in a way that allows us to have walkable communities, have trails, have access to open space, protects us from the environmental risks as much as possible, and in some cases make decisions made solely on health-related concerns," said one key informant in Tolland, Connecticut.

Developing the toolkit around the needs and concerns identified during the interviews and focus groups, CHART released the Healthy Communities Toolkit in early 2016. Resources include a brief land-use guide organized around three key areas: physical activity, access to healthy foods, and funding and partnerships.

Recognizing that volunteer planning and zoning commissioners will approach the work from a range of backgrounds, CHART begins each section of the toolkit with a definition, then investigates subtopics. Physical activity, for example, provides a definition of active transportation and community benefits before moving into bikeability and walkability. Each subtopic is centered around Eastern Highlands—and local experiences—but

expands to include resources from across the country.

As CHART rolled out the toolkit and visited all 10 towns in the Eastern Highlands region, the coalition realized it might be daunting to the public or new commissioners. CHART responded by developing the Community Health Quick Audit, which helps communities identify a starting point for strengthening the health of their environment by providing an easy way to assess its current conditions. In the walkability section, wide shoulders at town-center roads are scored by commissioners and residents on a Likert scale. Selections are totaled at the bottom of each section for a final report that will allow commissioners to prioritize areas of investment and help communities celebrate what's going well.

Community empowerment

The Healthy Communities Toolkit empowers commissioners and health district staff alike with the knowledge and resources necessary to increase opportunities for biking, walking, and

playing in their communities. Likewise, CHART encourages residents to attend public meetings and seek positions on the planning and zoning commission to create positive change in their built environment. By disseminating and promoting the toolkit, the coalition is providing valuable resources to small and rural communities. The toolkit is a living document that reflects the needs of community members for today and the vision for tomorrow. The coalition was recently selected to receive the Connecticut Chapter's 2016 Planning Award for its work on the Healthy Communities Toolkit.

For additional resources to support planning in rural communities, please explore APA's Small Town and Rural Planning Division (planning.org/divisions/smalltown). Plan4Health also maintains a special resource page for rural areas on the Plan4Health website. ■

—Elizabeth Hartig

Hartig is the project manager for APA's *Planning and Community Health Center*.



Training Made Easier

LAW

NEW PLANNING COMMISSIONERS and staff need training to make sure they understand the basics of planning law and their roles and responsibilities. APA offers them and the public free or affordable training tools. These tools are based on an outline created by members to guide

the development of APA's education programs; find them online at planning.org/commissioners.

In this article, sections of the outline are annotated with articles from *The Commissioner* and other online resources. APA members (and subscribers to *The Commissioner*) have access to past articles at planning.org/thecommissioner. Articles used for training may be copied and shared.

Introduction to planning

Participating in the planning process starts with understanding its goals and functions. *New Visions for Community Planning*, a documentary profiling the people of Goshen, Indiana, as they develop and put a comprehensive plan to work, is the perfect introduction to how a community plans and benefits from planning: planning.org/events/course/9112838.

Another low-cost, visual option is *Great Plans, Great Communities*, a narrated introduction to the purposes of planning and the problems it tackles: planning.org/events/course/9106988.

Decision making and the commission's role in the planning process

Understanding the role of planning commissioners and the function of the commission itself is critical. APA offers two books as well as a number of articles from *The Commissioner* to help.

The *Planning Commissioner's Guide* is a step-by-step guidebook to get new commissioners off on the right foot and help experienced commission members navigate their roles (planning.org/publications/book/9026697).

The *Citizen's Guide to Planning* describes the land-use planning process, the key players in that process, and the legal framework in which decisions are made (planning.org/publications/book/9026971). These articles are a good starting point for all commissioners.

POWERS AND DUTIES.

"Composition and Function of the Planning Commission," April 2014: planning.org/media/document/9007071.

ETHICS. "Do the Right Thing: Ethics for Commissioners," April 2016: planning.org/media/document/9101253, and "Communicating in an Electronic Age," April 2014: planning.org/media/document/9007071.

MEETINGS. "Public Notice and the Planning Commission," Winter 2013: planning.org/media/document/9007079; "Running Planning Commission Meetings," Winter 2013: planning.org/media/document/9007079; "A Framework for Fair and Effective Zoning Hearings," Spring 2013: planning.org/media/document/9007076.

TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGY.

"Using Technology—Tips and Tricks," June 2016: planning.org/media/document/9104857.

FINDINGS OF FACT AND DECISION MAKING.

"Site Visits Done . . . Legally," June 2014: planning.org/media/document/9007070; "Findings of Fact for Planning Commissions," April 2015: planning.org/media/document/9007063; "Getting the Most Out of Staff Reports (*PAS QuickNotes* 30)," February 2011: planning.org/media/document/9007627.

The comprehensive plan and related plans

As the comprehensive plan evolves and new types develop, the types of plans a commissioner works with multiplies. The following articles will help your commissioners learn the basics of the comprehensive plan, its various elements, and related and emerging types of plans.

THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AND ITS ELEMENTS.

"What Makes a Good Comprehensive Plan? Noteworthy Trends," Fall 2013: planning.org/media/document/9007073; "Planning and Zoning Consistency," October 2014: planning.org/media/document/9007073.

ENVIRONMENT. "Solar Energy Use: Local Planning Issue," April 2014: planning.org/media/document/9007071.

URBAN DESIGN.

"Making Community Design Work for Officials," Spring 2012: planning.org/media/document/9007083; "Managing Change with Urban Design," June 2014: planning.org/media/document/9007070.

PARKS AND OPEN SPACE.

"Parks and Open Space in the Comprehensive Plan," Fall 2012: planning.org/media/document/9007080.

INFRASTRUCTURE.

"Infrastructure Planning," April 2016: planning.org/media/document/9101253.

PARKING. "Reconsidering a Community's Off-Street Parking Standards," Winter 2010: planning.org/media/document/9007093.

Federal laws and case law pertaining to planning TELECOMMUNICATIONS. "New Rules for Regulating

Cellular Towers,” June 2015: planning.org/media/document/9007062.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION. “Wetlands Wisdom,” December 2014: planning.org/media/document/9007065; “Breathe Better Air, Breathe Easier,” April 2015: planning.org/media/document/9007063.

TAKINGS. “What’s New About Takings for Officials?” Fall 2013: planning.org/media/document/9007073; “Takings, Part Two,” February 2014: planning.org/media/document/9007072.

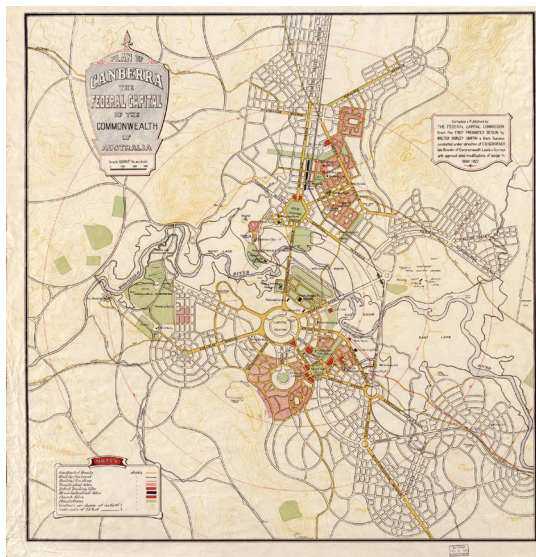
Use these resources as a starting point to engage and train your new commissioners and reinvigorate and inform veteran commissioners as they guide your community’s future. ■

—Carolyn Torma

Torma was APA’s director of education and citizen engagement and editor of *The Commissioner* until her retirement in 2016.

HISTORY

A CAPITAL IS BORN DOWN UNDER



WHEN SIX AUTONOMOUS BRITISH COLONIES came together to form the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, the need for a federal capital was obvious. After a site between Melbourne and Sydney was selected, an international competition was held to choose a designer for the new capital of Canberra, and in 1912, the winner was announced: Walter Burley Griffin, a prominent American architect and former Frank Lloyd Wright disciple.

With drawings drafted by his wife and partner, Marion Mahony, Griffin submitted a design based on the principles of the Garden City movement, complete with buildings influenced by the Prairie School style of architecture. Griffin was appointed federal capital director of design and construction, but after a series of delays and disputes with Australian government officials, he parted ways with the project in 1920. Though the Parliament of Australia moved to Canberra in 1927, delays further impeded construction, and development of the city continued well into the 1980s.

—Ben Leitschuh

Leitschuh is APA’s education associate.

RESOURCE FINDER

Planning for healthy communities in rural areas presents a host of unique challenges that planners in large urban areas may not have to consider. Check out these resources to get you started.

APA AND PARTNER RESOURCES
Plan4Health Rural Communities Resources
plan4health.us/rural-areas

Eastern Highlands Health District Toolkit
healthyeasternct.com
Eastern Highlands Health District
Plan4Health Introductory Video
youtube.com/watch?v=njFRxVSIVzQ

Three Tips for Maintaining Active Community Health Partnerships (video)
youtube.com/watch?v=ulsK5RYI3bw

Toolkit for Rural Communities webinar
tinyurl.com/hq4lcsr

WEB RESOURCES
Active Living Research: Promoting Active Living in Rural Communities
tinyurl.com/on2yv5j

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy: Active Transportation Beyond Urban Centers Report
tinyurl.com/jfxpg8x