

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW: BACKGROUND OF THE SUSTAINING PLACES INITIATIVE

Sustaining Places: Best Practices for Comprehensive Plans is the result of a four-year effort by the American Planning Association (APA) to define the role of comprehensive plans in addressing the sustainability of human settlements. The comprehensive plan, also called the general plan or community master plan, is the official statement of a local government establishing policies for its future long-range development. APA announced the Sustaining Places Initiative at the World Urban Forum in Rio de Janeiro in 2010, after which a 11-member Sustaining Places Task Force was appointed to explore the role of the comprehensive plan as the leading policy document and tool to help communities of all sizes achieve sustainable outcomes. The task force's work culminated in the 2012 APA report *Sustaining Places: The Role of the Comprehensive Plan* (PAS Report 567). Focusing on both the comprehensive planning process and its outcomes, the task force termed the process "planning for sustaining places" and the goal of that process, the desired outcomes, "sustainable communities":

Planning for sustaining places is a dynamic, democratic process through which communities plan to meet the needs of current and future generations without compromising the ecosystems upon which they depend by balancing social, economic, and environmental resources, incorporating resilience, and linking local actions to regional and global concerns. (Godschalk and Anderson 2012, 4)

As documented in the PAS Report, the task force identified eight principles that make up the foundation of planning for sustaining places. In addition, the task force reviewed leading comprehensive plans to evaluate the extent to which they incorporated these principles.

Following publication of the report, APA established a working group to develop these principles into a resource for communities to use to integrate sustainability into comprehensive plans. The working group developed a set of best practice standards derived from the principles, drafted a scoring system and procedure to recognize and potentially designate plans for achievement in "sustaining places," and held a workshop to test the draft standards and scoring system at APA's 2013 National Planning Conference in Chicago. Following the conference, work continued on the project to refine the standards and address issues identified by the working group and workshop participants. As part of this work, APA enlisted the assistance of 10 "pilot communities" that were developing comprehensive plans. These communities applied the standards to their plans and planning processes. Four communities with completed comprehensive plans (including one of the pilot communities) agreed to pilot-test the draft standards and scoring procedure with their plans. The communities re-

ported on their findings at a second workshop held at the 2014 National Planning Conference in Atlanta.

This report presents the completed set of standards and the scoring system that incorporates the work of the pilot communities and the results of the Atlanta workshop. While these standards may evolve further as they are refined and applied more widely, they are offered here as a resource and toolkit for communities seeking to integrate sustainability principles and practices into their comprehensive plans. In addition to describing the standards, the report outlines a voluntary procedure for APA recognition of comprehensive plans that achieve defined levels of quality for inclusion of sustainability best practices.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN STANDARDS FOR SUSTAINING PLACES

The comprehensive plan standards are organized into a framework of related components: (1) six principles, (2) two processes, and (3) two attributes. Each of these components is implemented through a set of best practices. Collectively, these principles, processes, attributes, and supporting best practices define what the comprehensive plan for sustaining places *should do*.

Principles are normative *statements of intent* that underlie a plan's overall strategy, including its goals, objective, policies, maps, and other content. The six principles are:

1. **Livable Built Environment:** Ensure that all elements of the built environment—including land use, transportation, housing, energy, and infrastructure—work together to provide sustainable, green places for living, working, and recreating, with a high quality of life.

2. **Harmony with Nature:** Ensure that the contributions of natural resources to human well-being are explicitly recognized and valued and that maintaining their health is a primary objective.
3. **Resilient Economy:** Ensure that the community is prepared to deal with both positive and negative changes in its economic health and to initiate sustainable urban development and redevelopment strategies that foster green business growth and build reliance on local assets.
4. **Interwoven Equity:** Ensure fairness and equity in providing for the housing, services, health, safety, and livelihood needs of all citizens and groups.
5. **Healthy Community:** Ensure that public health needs are recognized and addressed through provisions for healthy foods, physical activity, access to recreation, health care, environmental justice, and safe neighborhoods.
6. **Responsible Regionalism:** Ensure that all local proposals account for, connect with, and support the plans of adjacent jurisdictions and the surrounding region.

Processes are *planning activities* that take place during the preparation of a comprehensive plan and define how it will be implemented. The two processes are:

7. **Authentic Participation:** Ensure that the planning process actively involves all segments of the community in analyzing issues, generating visions, developing plans, and monitoring outcomes.
8. **Accountable Implementation:** Ensure that responsibilities for carrying out the plan are clearly stated, along with metrics for evaluating progress in achieving desired outcomes.

Attributes are *plan-making design standards* that shape the content and characteristics of comprehensive plans. The two attributes are:

9. **Consistent Content:** Ensure that the plan contains a consistent set of visions, goals, policies, objectives, and actions that are based on evidence about community conditions, major issues, and impacts.
10. **Coordinated Characteristics:** Ensure that the plan includes creative and innovative strategies and recommendations and coordinates them internally with each other, vertically with federal and state requirements, and horizontally with plans of adjacent jurisdictions.

Best practices are the *planning action tools* that communities employ to activate the principles, processes, and

PILOT COMMUNITIES

Community	Population
Savona, New York	822
Foxborough, Massachusetts	16,865
Wheeling, West Virginia	28,213
Goshen, Indiana	31,719
Rock Island, Illinois	39,018
Auburn, Washington	70,180
New Hanover County, North Carolina	202,677
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma	599,199
Seattle, Washington	634,535
Memphis/Shelby County, Tennessee	927,644
	1,178,211*

*in regional planning area

COMPLETED PLANS USED TO TEST THE STANDARDS AND SCORING PROCEDURE

1. *Imagine Austin*, Austin, Texas (adopted 2012)
2. *plaNorfolk2030*, Norfolk, Virginia (adopted 2013)
3. *The 2030 Comprehensive Plan for the City of Raleigh*, Raleigh, North Carolina (adopted 2009)
4. *City of Rock Island Comprehensive Plan*, Rock Island, Illinois (pilot community plan adopted 2014)

attributes in their comprehensive plans. For example, the best practices for the Livable Built Environment principle include, among others, planning for multimodal transportation and transit-oriented development, conserving and reusing historic resources, and discouraging development in hazard zones. Chapter 2 of the report identifies a series of best practices for each principle, process, and attribute. Appendix B provides definitions for each best practice.

The comprehensive plan standards framework includes a plan-scoring procedure for use by communities that want to systematically compare their plans against a national standard. This procedure yields a numeric score based on a review of how the plan addresses the best practices for each principle, process, and attribute. The procedure is available now for communities that want to evaluate their plans by conducting internal reviews; Appendix C contains a scoring matrix that can be used for this purpose. The procedure may become available later for formal external evaluation, should APA establish a comprehensive plan review and designation program. Appendix D describes how such an external designation program would work and Appendix E includes a plan designation application form for communities that elect to participate.

APPLYING THE STANDARDS

Communities desiring to apply the comprehensive plan standards framework to local plans and planning processes will find it useful to follow a basic four-step process:

1. Discuss the standards framework with the community to determine if it will be helpful in the comprehensive planning process.
2. Review the needs of the plan and planning process in order to highlight areas where use of the standards will improve the plan quality and relevance.
3. Incorporate the standards into the plan, using them to fill gaps or upgrade existing plan policies and practices.
4. Score the plan, in order to determine its comparative ranking against a fully realized comprehensive plan for sustaining places.

The experience of the pilot communities provides examples of how the standards framework can be applied at different stages of plan development—from evaluation of an existing comprehensive plan to community engagement during the planning process to providing a best practices “checklist” against which a draft plan can be measured. The pilot communities were selected to represent a vari-

ety of community types and sizes, from Savona, New York (a village with a population of less than one thousand) to Memphis/Shelby County, Tennessee (with a population of over one million in the planning area for the *Mid-South Regional Greenprint & Sustainability Plan*). All pilot community representatives reported that they found the plan standards framework to be a practical tool and resource that improved their comprehensive planning processes. The following are examples of how different pilot communities used the framework.

Planners in **Goshen, Indiana**, used the standards to evaluate their existing 2004 comprehensive plan and discovered that it contained a number of low-achievement practices. They presented these practices to the public in community workshops during the plan update process and received strong support for addressing them in the new comprehensive plan.

Oklahoma City was in the process of creating a new comprehensive plan when selected as a pilot community. Planners used the standards as a checklist to ensure that plan policies being developed through the public engagement process were complete, comprehensive, and conformed to best practices.

Rock Island, Illinois, was nearing completion of its first-ever comprehensive plan when selected as a pilot community. Planners used the standards in combination with public input to ensure that they met the sustainability goals of the grant from the State of Illinois to prepare the plan. Rock Island also volunteered its completed plan to test the scoring procedure.

New Hanover County, North Carolina, established six “theme” committees, each focused on one of the principles, as it was developing policies and recommendations for its new comprehensive plan. Among other benefits of the framework, planners found the Responsible Regionalism principle useful in integrating data and policies from other regional and local plans into the comprehensive plan.

THE FUTURE OF COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING PRACTICE

Planning for sustainability is the defining challenge of the twenty-first century (Godschalk and Anderson 2012). As the leading policy document guiding the long-range development of local jurisdictions across the country, the comprehensive plan has a critical role to play in meeting challenges such as resource depletion, climate instability, and economic and social disparities. In the twentieth century,

the typical comprehensive plan was a general policy document focused on land use and physical development. The plan was divided into separate elements, and it was prepared through a “top-down” process. This model began to change towards the close of the century in response to societal change and trends in planning practice, such as increased demand for citizen participation and a greater focus on implementation.

The following are some key trends that likely will significantly affect comprehensive planning practice in the twenty-first century:

Resilience: The increasing frequency and impacts of natural disasters, as well as severe economic downturns, have highlighted the need for communities to become more resilient—in other words, they need the ability to recover from disturbance and change.

Systems thinking: The traditional model of separate topical elements is being replaced by an approach that views these topics as complex systems whose interactions determine the form and function of an even more complex system—the community as a whole.

Community engagement: Rapid advances in digital technology are transforming the ways citizens can be involved in the comprehensive planning process. At the same time, a critical need exists to reach groups that are traditionally underrepresented in the process.

Equity: Increasing inequality—not just in economic status but also in basic quality-of-life issues such as health outcomes and vulnerability to disasters—is a major national and global concern.

Implementation: In a time of fiscal constraints and questioning of the role of government, successful implementation is vital to establish the value of planning. For the comprehensive plan, this means establishing priorities, responsibilities, and timeframes; effectively allocating resources; developing new implementation models; using targets and metrics to monitor progress; and communicating stories of success.

Adaptation: Conditions that used to be considered stable, such as the climate, resource availability and costs, and the local employment base, are increasingly subject to forces beyond the control of local governments. Such uncertainties call for an adaptive approach that uses monitoring and feedback mechanisms (a form of systems thinking) to adjust implementation programs on an ongoing basis.

There are no easy paths to addressing these and other complexities affecting comprehensive planning practice in the twenty-first century. The plan standards framework described in this report is not a prescription or recipe. Rather it is a resource and benchmark for communities to use as they develop solutions that work for their particular circumstances. The ultimate aim is to help planners and the communities they serve realize the powerful potential of the comprehensive plan to sustain twenty-first-century places.