

The Comprehensive Plan

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Introduction

Would you consider going on a trip around the world without a map or a guide? Would you embark on an adventure overseas without the benefit of a plan? It is not likely. Yet many communities undergo growth without the benefit of a map to lead them into the future. Communities need comprehensive plans—and the ability and will to implement them.

Each year, the number of families relocating from urban areas to rural communities increases. Highways, communication technology, and the desire to raise families in a small town setting all contribute to the move. Areas that were once isolated are now connected and facing pressures as their populations grow. If this growth is not guided, the results may be haphazard development and a negative effect on the local economy.

Planning scares some people. No one wants to be told what to do, and some feel planning threatens individual rights. But a successful comprehensive plan is comprehensive both in the amount of effort and information that goes into it and in the number of people involved in formulating it. A comprehensive plan is a team effort involving the local plan commission, community leaders, and other concerned citizens.

What Is a Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan is a document or series of documents prepared by the plan commission with input from citizens and community leaders that sets forth policies for the future development of the community. It is the result of in-depth study and analysis of currently existing physical, economic, and social characteristics, and includes a projection of future conditions. When adopted by a local

legislative body, it serves as a guide for public decisions relating to total physical and economic development.

If a town, city, or county decides to implement a planning process, the Indiana Code (sec 36-7-4-501) requires that the plan commission prepare a comprehensive plan. A comprehensive plan should include three parts:

- 1) statement of objectives for the future development,
- 2) statement of policy for land use development, and
- 3) statement of policy for the development of public ways, public places, public lands, public structures, and public utilities.

There are three parts because planners realize that a community is a complicated inter-relationship of people, space, facilities, ideas, powers, services, and functions. A planner must be able to collect an adequate body of information concerning all community aspects, understand it, and finally use it as a basis for projections. The typical plan predicts or forecasts community needs for up to 20 years into the future. It is both long-range and comprehensive.

What Is a Comprehensive Plan Based on?

A comprehensive plan states the general goals and objectives of the plan and summarizes major trends affecting the future of the area. The plan is based on inventory, analysis, and evaluation of pertinent data. This data comes from such sources as existing land use surveys, population studies, studies of the community's economic base, community facilities studies, housing analyses, natural resources studies, attitude surveys, and maps.

Five types of maps are most useful when preparing a comprehensive plan: base zoning, aerial photographic,

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topographic, existing land use, and infrastructure. Maps can show many attributes of the community, including land use, physical features, natural resources, general environment, and desirable qualities and characteristics. Maps are also useful for identifying population demographics and densities, public and semi-public service facilities, local transportation elements, thoroughfares, age of structures, housing inventory and studies, economic conditions, governmental structure, and assessed land values.

Some communities use the GIS (geographic information systems) method to combine maps on a database. GIS allows the user an opportunity to view many desired combinations on a single map.

This information helps the community determine objectives for future development based on what is needed to strengthen the municipality. It is also a useful tool to create the elements and policies of the plan.

A successful plan is easily understood, community supported, financially supported, action oriented, visual, balanced, and adaptable to change. It is clear in direction and the result of a team effort.

How Is a Comprehensive Plan Adopted & Changed?

Citizens and community leaders participate in the formulation of community-wide goals and objectives. After public hearings, the plan commission recommends the plan to the county commissioners for review and consideration. Evaluation and revisions are an ongoing part of the plan.

If the community's objectives should change, the plan can be amended. The procedure is the same as that followed in the adoption of the plan. The plan commission prepares the amendment, holds a public hearing, and then recommends the amendment to the county commissioners. It is actually a good idea to review the plan every three to five years to make sure it is still consistent with community goals.

Conclusion

There may be concerns about the cost of doing a study-intensive, all-inclusive comprehensive plan. Community leaders may be tempted to look for a canned comprehensive plan. They may be tempted, but they shouldn't be fooled.

Communities are as individual as people are. A community's comprehensive plan should be unique, not borrowed from another municipality or county. If the background research and proposed policies are not hammered out in the community, the resulting plan will not be effective. The main objective is for the plan to fit specific, individual needs and help the community reach its long-range goals for growth.

Planning can do a world of good for a community by capturing clearly the community's values, goals, and objectives, and becoming a policy guide for physical development. It provides a strong legal basis for land use decision making and makes it possible to use public resources more efficiently. It can also prevent many problems before they occur and guard against decisions that serve only special interests. Economically, it can enhance the community by projecting future land requirements, ensuring that enough developable land is set aside, and protecting existing and future investments.

Plans cannot automatically solve all problems for a community, but they can go a long way in preparing for the changes that the future may bring.

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