

# THE IMPLEMENTABLE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN: A CASE STUDY WITH THE TOWNSHIP OF PINE, ALLEGHENY COUNTY, PA

## Appendix A Case Study

### Deciding to update the Township of Pine's Comprehensive Plan

When professional staff members at the Township of Pine began, in 2012, to consider reviewing the community's comprehensive plan, they already knew the township was operating smoothly. Finances were in order, the township was growing, and a new Community Center had opened a few years before.

The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC), which enables municipalities to adopt comprehensive plans, requires municipalities to review their adopted plans every 10 years to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of the community. New opportunities, concerns for the future and changing demographics can render planning that was done more than 10 years ago less than relevant. Pine's assistant manager (now manager) and its planner wanted to be sure the township's plan would remain an effective guide for the future of the township.

They raised the possibility with the township manager at the time, and to the board of supervisors, which approved funding in the 2013 budget (although the township chose not to move forward in 2013). The township planner also stayed in close communication with the director of parks and recreation, who at the same time had been thinking of updating its Comprehensive Recreation Parks and Open Space Plan (comprehensive recreation plan) for the community.

The three recognized they might want to proceed with both plans concurrently, so that any proposals that might emerge could later be considered holistically. They invited Pashek Associates to discuss a potential project. The firm was known to Pine Township through a swimming pool feasibility study (2004), trail feasibility study (2005) and business analysis of a potential aquatic center (2013).

The consultant considered this a chance to help the township press ahead with the next round of park and recreation development in the community and to discuss a new approach to community planning that Mr. Pashek had been developing with Denny Puko, planning program managers with the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED). This new approach, called the Implementable Comprehensive Plan, might be a good fit for Pine Township, Mr. Pashek thought, as the community transitioned from a rapidly growing suburban community to a municipality that was expecting less growth.

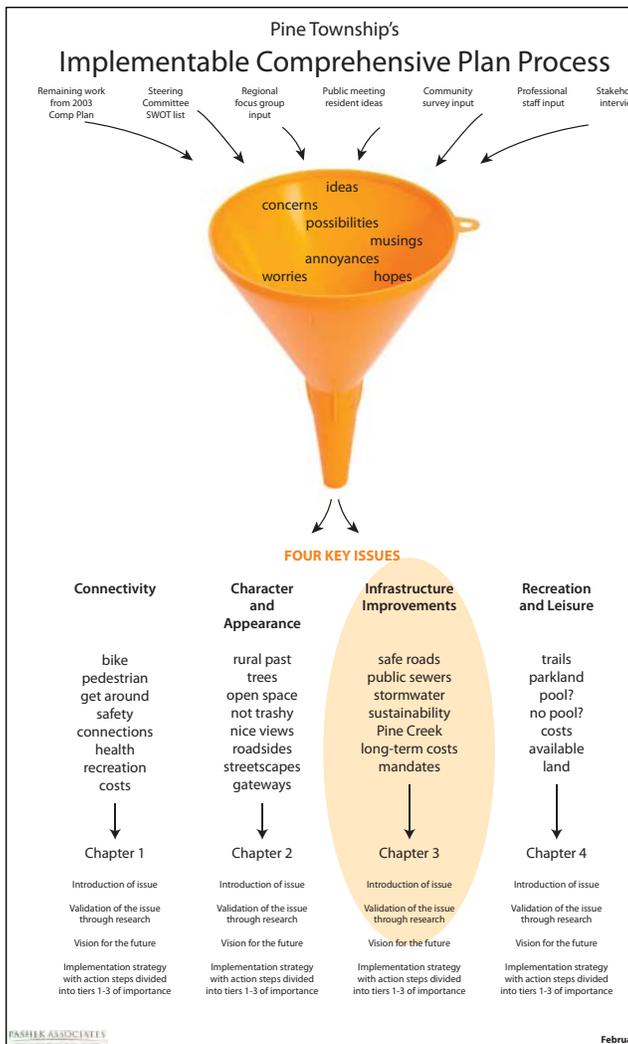
**Vision:** The Township of Pine provides for the public good through a planning process that involves citizens in decisionmaking; that anticipates future needs; that continually strives to exceed standards and expectations; that respects human, financial and natural resources; and that considers its work to be a public trust.

# Case Study

## Choosing an Implementable Comprehensive Plan over the traditional planning model

The MPC establishes the intent, purpose and scope of comprehensive plans. It details minimum requirements for content that should be included in a comprehensive plan in the areas of:

- future development
- land use
- transportation
- community facilities and utilities
  - development compatible with that of neighboring municipalities, and
  - protection of natural and historic resources.



The Implementable Comprehensive Planning process guides a community as it selects the small handful of issues it feels are not only very important but also can realistically be addressed or positively affected within about three to five years.

The MPC requires that a municipality’s comprehensive plan aligns effectively with the comprehensive plan of the county in which the municipality lies.

The traditional approach to comprehensive plans tends to be research-heavy, closely following a template that is similar for each municipality regardless of differences. Common are dozens of pages of demographic background that do not seem to tie into any recommendations found later in the plan. Moreover, the traditional plan seems to document large amounts of information that people living in the community already know or can find instantaneously via the internet.

The Implementable Comprehensive Plan model emphasizes highly action-oriented, specific, measurable and feasible strategies for getting things done. Through this planning process, the community focuses in on the issues that most concern it. These become the “Key Issues” of the plan. Key Issues are typically limited in number to help the community focus its energy and assets. Most importantly, the Key Issues are matters that the community can address through practical and realistic means. Implementable Comprehensive Plans also emphasize communication that everyone understands, and avoid planning jargon and excessive use of acronyms.

About 90 percent of an implementable comprehensive planning process is dedicated to identifying the Key Issues through an in-depth public process; conducting targeted research needed to thoroughly understand the issues and how to address them; articulating a future vision; and developing action-oriented strategies for attaining that vision. Another critical component of the process is

“capacity-building” to ensure the community can continue the work of the plan after the consultant’s part is done.

The fundamental difference between a traditional plan and an implementable plan is the shift in focus from a goal of completing a plan to a goal of implementing changes in the community, with the plan as a way of facilitating that process.

The idea of an Implementable Comprehensive Plan appealed to staff members at the Township of Pine, who have little patience for studies whose conclusions call for another round of research, or plans that produce charts and stats but not much in the way of tangible action steps.

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### Facets of community involvement

One of the basic tenants of an Implementable Comprehensive Plan is that issues are identified based on a broad based public involvement process. The methods of collecting public input for a traditional comprehensive plan are similar to that of an Implementable Comprehensive Plan. They depart in the way the two plans use the public process:

Whereas the traditional comprehensive plan process often bases recommendations primarily on professional input (consultant and/or municipal staff) crafted around the MPC template of community issues, the Implementable Comprehensive Plan forges recommendations directly from the building blocks of public input. It is this direct link that forms the basis for support for the plan, since residents are most likely to support a plan that clearly addresses their issues. For example, in the Township of Pine, residents were concerned about maintaining the look and feel of their community, which became the Key Issue “Community Character and

Appearance.” (In traditional planning this would not have rated its own chapter.) Based on public input, the planning team was able to structure a series of actions that would enhance the visual character people enjoyed about their township.

Although the scope of work required four focus group meetings, preparation of the plan ultimately included one meeting on infrastructure, one on trails and connectivity and five on community character, in addition to those meetings for the comprehensive recreation plan. Moreover, as the planning process proceeded, the

Type of Public Involvement	Number
Steering Committee meetings for Comp Plan	3
Study Committee meetings for the Comp Rec Plan	4
Public Meeting for the Comp Plan	1
Public Meeting for the Comp Rec Plan	1
Public Meeting as part of Adoption	2
Focus Group meetings for the Comp Plan	7
Regional Focus Group Meeting with planners	1
Meetings to present a status report to supervisors	2
Questionnaire posted on Township website	
Booth at Community Day	
Key Person Interviews	

township and consultant decided that the plan would benefit from additional exposure, so the township added the digital questionnaire and the booth at Community Day.

## Identifying the township's Key Issues

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There were several steps that propel the planning process from many ideas, opportunities and concerns to the development of several focused Key Issues that may change the community in a positive way. They were:

1. List all of the ideas, concerns and possibilities from the community based on various forms of public input. Mix in township staff and consultant ideas, to form a list of as many as 100 topics.
2. Cluster the ideas into several broad areas of focus. For example, in the Township of Pine, residents at the public meeting raised concerns about traffic and intersections as well as older homes that had private septic systems. At the same time, staff members were concerned about new issues related to stormwater management and municipal separate storms sewer systems (MS4s). These topics were grouped into a Key Issue called "Public Infrastructure." This is a flexible period of the Key Issue identification process; it can seem initially that a topic might be an excellent Key Issue for the community, but after research the township and consultant may decide the topic might better be addressed another way. In Pine, an example was this: Early on, a Key Issue was "fiscal responsibility," because financial prudence and anticipated slowing growth were on the minds of the steering committee, township staff and the consultant. However, this focus shifted as the planning team concluded that making truly useful recommendations would be challenging on this topic, considering that all issues have fiscal components and that the township is in excellent financial condition.
3. To make sure the Implementable Comprehensive Plan ultimately is practical and useful, the steering committees and township staff help to rank the ideas for their importance to the community and the likelihood that they will be accomplished in the next five years or so. Thus, each Key Issue subsequently includes some ideas that have varying degrees of "need to be addressed in the community" and "likelihood that they can be addressed soon."
4. Through focus groups, interviews and additional research, each Key Issue was then more fully developed. The focus groups are clusters of people who are interested in or are experts on matters related to a specific Key Issue. For example, for the transportation topic within the Public Infrastructure issue, the planning team met with a representative of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, an elected official's representative, and the township civil engineer, among others. The research state includes interviews with people knowledgeable about a specific topic and a review of existing data. Based on this analysis, topics raised in the public process were recast into strategies for implementation of Key Issues.
5. Based on the research, the consultant and township identified which of the topics within the Key Issues are Tier 1 strategies, which are Tier 2 and which are Tier 3. More and deeper research and more specific recommendations for how the municipality can move the topic forward are developed for Tier 1 topics. Less detail goes into Tier 2 topics, and brief information is provided for Tier 3 topics. This research also allows the planning team to validate that the issue is relevant, create a vision for the future for that issue and develop strategies to achieve change in the community for topics with the highest need and potential for success. The consultant's initial prioritization of the tiers were tested with township staff and modified based on their input.
6. In the end, each Key Issue has:
  - An introduction explaining the issue
  - Additional "talking points" as to why this is a key issue for this community
  - Vision for the future for that issue
  - Validation that the issue is important to the community and needs to be addressed
  - Ranked implementation and management strategies

## Lessons Learned

As with any relatively new process, there is no definitive road map for developing an Implementable Comprehensive Plan. The planning team found “lessons learned” and got new ideas while working on the plan for the Township of Pine.

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### A. Figuring out funding sources to pay for the consulting work involved in both the “comprehensive recreation plan” and the “comprehensive plan.”

The township budgeted in 2014 \$25,000 for the comprehensive plan and \$20,000 for the comprehensive recreation plan. Mr. Pashek suggested a goal of \$70,000 for the comprehensive plan and \$40,000 for the comprehensive recreation plan, for a total of \$110,000. The consultant made inquiries with Pennsylvania and Allegheny County agencies about additional funding.

The Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) had very limited funding statewide and would not likely be a funding partner for this project.

Allegheny County provides grants to municipalities through the Allegheny Places Municipal Planning Grant program, which is funded by the county capital budget. The program’s purpose is to enable municipalities to be consistent with AlleghenyPlaces, the county comprehensive plan, primarily through funding land use ordinances and comprehensive plans. AlleghenyPlaces recognizes the importance of multi-municipal cooperation and planning for the future of the county, and only funds multi-municipal comprehensive plans. However, municipalities can propose other projects that meet the grant program goals. The county sees great potential in the Implementable Comprehensive Plan model, and is interested in helping municipalities understand how the process differs from a more traditional planning process. The county awarded a \$30,000.00 grant to the township for tracking and documenting its planning process, and making the information available to other municipalities interested in Implementable Comprehensive Plans.

Concurrently, Mr. Pashek was talking to Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) staff regarding this new Implementable Comprehensive Plan model and whether the principles embodied in that process were applicable to their planning processes. Conversations also included DCNR’s potential financial support of a joint comprehensive plan and comprehensive recreation plan. There had been some history of DCNR’s funding portions of a DCED-funded comprehensive plans. Mr. Pashek felt that DCNR would likely match the \$20,000 in the township budget for the comprehensive recreation plan. Because of the department’s interest in this new process, DCNR agreed to fund an additional \$10,000 in support of the Implementable Comprehensive Plan for public process and environmental mapping. So the total budget for the comprehensive plan and comprehensive recreation plan was:

Funding Source	Amount
Township Comprehensive Plan budget	\$25,000
Township Comprehensive Recreation Plan budget	\$20,000
Allegheny County grant	\$30,000
DCNR grant	\$30,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$105,000</b>

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### B. Trying to get multi-municipal participation in the planning process.

Many municipal components, such as business districts, watersheds and transportation corridors, span political boundaries. So that municipalities provide even better long-range planning, the state and county have decided to dedicate much of their planning assistance grants to those communities that band together to do comprehensive planning. The Local Government Academy also only funds multi-municipal planning.

The Township of Pine shares several regional characteristics with adjacent communities:

- Route 19 functions as the major commercial corridor for McCandless, Pine, Bradford Woods and Marshall.
- Watersheds and Sewer Authorities cross political boundaries.
- Most of the communities around Pine share some of the same challenges.

Pine Township's planner, Mr. Kurpakus, reached out to the adjacent communities with the help of Kay Pierce, planning manager at Allegheny County Department of Economic Development, to see if there was any interest in working together on a comprehensive plan. Marshall had recently completed a new plan and McCandless and Bradford Woods were not interested in pursuing a plan at the time, so the Township of Pine found itself going it alone. However, since the planning staffs of these communities shared a history of collaboration, the Scope of Work, at the suggestion of Allegheny County, included a focus group meeting of planning professionals from nearby communities to discuss common issues.

### C. Creating a “scope of work” for a project with an unknown scope.

Neither the township nor Pashek Associates knew what might bubble up from the community as its Key Issues. How many would there be? Would it be clear that what was a “key issue” vs. a run-of-the-mill issue? How much work by the consultant should the township require? How much should Pashek Associates agree to? For a time, both parties felt they couldn't begin a comprehensive plan without a scope-of-work agreement, but also felt they couldn't develop a scope of work until they were far enough into a comprehensive plan to know the Key Issues.



Residents contribute ideas about the priority of issues in the Township of Pine.

After extensive discussions, the scope was written to encompass four Key Issues. Both the consultant and township recognized that despite a very specific scope of work, there needed to be some flexibility in the process to allow the planning to adjust to the real needs of the township, even if that meant shifting focus mid-way through the process. This process identified the need for some pre-planning before setting a scope of work for a planning consultant.

Ideally Steps 1, 2 and 3 under “Identifying the Township's Key Issues” on Page CS-4 would be completed using a broad-based public process to define a few Key Issues facing the municipality. Then a scope of work could be crafted to specifically address those needs in the community. This would also solve concerns that Allegheny County and municipal solicitors might have with attaching a scope of work to the formal agreement (between

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the county and municipality or between the municipality and the consultant). Flexibility and room for interpretation, often needed for the Implementable Comprehensive Plan process, tend to concern those that want a clear list of tasks and deliverables that can easily be measured. How does one know that you have fulfilled a contract if the scope of work has built-in flexibility?

### **D. Approvals of non-traditional planning.**

#### *Meeting the requirements of the Municipalities Planning Code*

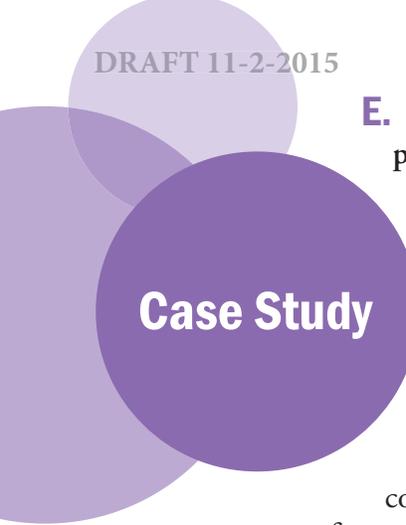
On one hand, all parties enthusiastically embraced the idea of a plan that would be focused and meaty, not broad-brush. But the Township of Pine, including the township solicitor, and Allegheny County's Division of Planning needed to be certain that an Implementable Comprehensive Plan would fulfill the requirements of the state's Municipalities Planning Code. Mr. Puko from the state DCED and Mr. Pashek, the consultant, explained how this non-traditional approach that expends the most time, money and energy on a small handful of Key Issues could still touch lightly on all the requirements of the MPC.

Instead of a Comprehensive Plan organized by MPC planning elements (like transportation or community facilities) the plan's chapters focused on Key Issues in the community that needed to be solved. In the past, these issues have in fact embraced several of the MPC planning elements within one Key Issue. But, to be sure of meeting the MPC requirements, a chapter was proposed to address any other topics required by the MPC that were not covered in earlier chapters.

#### *Approval of an Implementable Comprehensive Planning process by Allegheny County and state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources*

For years, the county has evaluated comprehensive plans developed by municipalities or groups of municipalities. The county has looked at whether the plan meets the requirements of the MPC, whether the plan is consistent with the planning of adjacent communities and the county's own comprehensive plan and whether the municipality is provided information that will be helpful going forward. By creating an issues-based plan, evaluating a plan for conformance to the MPC becomes challenging. To the county's credit, staff have researched and discussed the principles of the Implementable Comprehensive Plan and have been willing to give this new model of planning some latitude in terms of the MPC.

As public agencies get larger and more complex, there appears to be less flexibility about new planning models and how DCNR might review an integrated comp plan/comp rec plan based on the Implementable Comprehensive Plan model. How can DCNR determine if what it receives in terms of work product is appropriate for the value of the grant provided to the municipality? Can DCNR develop a comfort level with a plan that is process-and-issues oriented instead of focusing on the data collection and report development that have been the mainstays of a traditional comp rec plan?

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## E. Challenges of integrating a comp rec plan into a comp plan that is based on the principles of an Implementable Comprehensive Plan

The standard DCNR comp rec plan is data-intensive with a standard methodology that has little flexibility to adjust to the needs of the community. The Implementable Comprehensive Plan focuses on process and issues, and allows the community to set the framework of the plan during the planning process, based on problem-solving of real issues.

Initial discussions between professional staff at the Township of Pine and the consultant centered on whether this could be a truly integrated plan, one document, focusing on Key Issues that would include some that were park and recreation-related.

Would the comp plan issues override Key Issues faced by the Parks and Recreation department? Who would ultimately decide what were township priorities in an integrated plan — the comp plan steering committee or the parks and recreation study committee? At times all involved thought the marriage of these two plans into one issues-based plan was too difficult and that the result should be two stand-alone documents. As the parties finalized the scope of work, the consultant and township decided to press Allegheny County and the state DCNR to consider this new model of planning and to truly integrate two traditional planning models into one innovative plan.

But the practicalities of that decision became a matter of discussion during the planning process in terms of the desire for an aquatic center. The comp plan steering committee, led by members of the township board of supervisors, were not especially interested in considering an aquatic center for the community for several reasons, including a concern that it might require a tax increase. The study committee for the comp rec plan, responding to public interest in a pool, wanted that to be one of the highest priority issues in the plan. Later, as the planning team confronted the issue of the aquatic center, it considered going back to two separate documents but finally decided to carry on with the integrated approach.

Timing became an impediment to proceeding with one combined plan. The comp plan and comp rec plan money was budgeted by the township in 2014. The township planner was anxious to get the comp plan started in 2014, with the plan wrapping up in the summer of 2015. But the DCNR grant, applied for in April 2014, was not awarded until late October of 2014. Contracts for the grant did not get signed until the second quarter of 2015, with a proposed 100% draft due from Pashek Associates by the end of June 2015. We did request from DCNR and received a “Letter of Retroactivity” which allowed that if Pine Township received a grant from DCNR for the comp rec plan and comp plan, the money used by the Township in 2014 could be counted as part of the match for the grant even though the contract for the DCNR grant was not dated until January 1, 2015.

The timing of the DCNR grant and allowances created planning process inefficiencies. The comp rec plan portions at times lagged behind the work associated with the comp plan instead of being truly integrated, from a timeline perspective.

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### F. Comprehensive plan steering committee makeup

Several very positive aspects of the makeup of the steering committee played out during the process. Having active members of the leadership of the board of supervisors was important. These individuals were able to guide the plan in a way that predicts the plan will be approved during the MPC adoption process. Including representatives of the township's planning commission, environmental advisory committee, business owners and school district was helpful in terms of discussing a wide range of topics. The consultant, in retrospect, feels it should have done more to include more women, younger people, stay-at-home parents and representatives of other demographic groups as members of the steering committee, to make it more representative of the community. A very diverse steering committee tends to create additional discussion and momentum.



Prioritizing community issues at a public meeting.

### G. Planning and public involvement in a community with few big problems

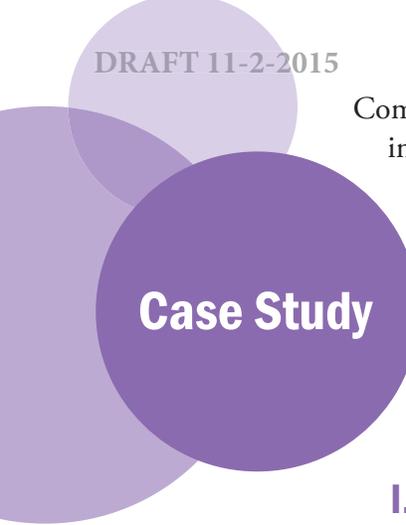
The Township of Pine is an attractive place to live and do business. Public education is excellent. Elected leaders and professional staff have done a terrific job of guiding the community as it grew. As the consultant discussed the concept of an issues-based comprehensive plan with Mr. Kurpakus, he mentioned that things were generally going well in the township and wondered aloud what major issues there could be. The township had successfully completed most of the tasks identified in the comp plan prepared about 10 years ago. The planning team wondered if the lack of significant matters of concern in the township might negatively impact the development of Key Issues. In fact, this may have explained the relatively low response rate on the questionnaire posted on the township website.

In general, the consultant has found that, in communities like Pine, the Key Issues tend to center less on matters of critical concern and more on matters that contribute to quality of life. Yet, as the planning team delved into the process, township staff's involvement led to commitment and enthusiasm for the Key Issues that were identified and to the specific strategies and timelines proposed for making changes in the community.

### H. Municipal staff personalities and the success of the plan

The Implementable Comprehensive Plan focuses on real issues and practical problem solving. The consultant believes that the success of this plan is in large part due to the attitudes held by township staff. With Mr. Kurpakus as a “get it done” kind of guy, township Manager Scott Anderson guiding the team through the choppy waters of what will get approved, and Parks and Recreation Director Joni Patsko balancing the desires of the recreation committee with those of the elected officials, the consultant felt confident the team was headed in the right direction throughout the process.

Also, the staff's desire for a hands-on, easy-to-use document matches up nicely with the Implementable

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Comprehensive Plan principles. Staff simply wanted to know very specific steps on how to implement strategies so they could begin that process. Aligned with that desire to get things done was a wish to not have a planning document that was hundreds of pages long and that reported information they already knew. Throughout the process, township staff were supportive in helping the consultant make the report and its recommendations more graphic and less reliant on lengthy word descriptions. Staff members saw this comp plan as a workbook that they could refer to as they implemented strategies. The consultant believes that this effort will become the standard for Implementable Comprehensive Plans because of Pine Township's staff.

### **I. Developing a product that documents the process and is more a workbook for Township staff than a traditional “plan” with hundreds of pages of narrative.**

One of the principles of the Implementable Comprehensive Plan is to focus less on a jargon-filled planning report with hundreds of pages of narrative and maps, and more on an illustration of the decisions that have been made through the process.

The goal would be to make the “workbook” very visual and easily understood by any resident who might want to champion a Key Issue. A goal will be to make the written material so easy to access ideas, that elected officials will keep their workbook handy and refer to the workbook when setting policy and annual budgets.

The challenge is to meet everyone's expectations of what a comp plan and comp rec plan must include while honoring the principle of an accessible and easy-to-use document. The consultant had significant support from Mr. Kurpakus to keep it simple, and he asked if what we planned to write could be boiled down to a checklist of action steps. Kay Pierce from Allegheny County Planning and Denny Puko from the state DCED gave feedback at various points in the process on the look of the workbook. To be sure, this shift from a reference book to a workbook is itself a work in progress and will continue to get better as we all learn how to better meet the needs of each community that wants an Implementable Comprehensive Plan.