

RETHINKING COMPREHENSIVE PLANS

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After 47 years of planning under Pennsylvania's Municipalities Planning Code (MPC), there is a perception that a comprehensive plan follows a standard format and the MPC provides the template. In this article I'll suggest it is time to think differently, and that doing so will create a better and more "implementable" comprehensive plan.

About 1,700 of Pennsylvania's 2,561 municipalities and all counties have prepared a comprehensive plan. A common perception is that a comprehensive plan is a big book with an encyclopedia of information and chapters titled Land Use Plan, Community Facilities Plan, etc., and that these big books are to be redone every 10 years. The focus is on preparing the book. The work is expensive, costing tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of dollars. Yet too many municipalities report that their plan is not being used or wasn't adopted. The book sits on the proverbial shelf. Finances are tighter than ever and municipalities cannot afford to invest a large amount of money and effort without commensurate results.

What, then, can be done differently? First let's establish a new benchmark for success. The success of a comprehensive plan is not measured by the quality of the document or the ingenuity of its recommendations. Success is measured by results. Is the plan being implemented? Are its guiding principles used and followed? Do community improvements result because of it?

Second, let's establish that a comprehensive plan is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. A municipality is presumably preparing a plan because it wants to learn how to solve problems, meet needs, and enhance the quality

of life of its citizens. If so, then why settle for a consultant and steering committee preparing a book, submitting the book to the governing body, and hoping something will come of it? More can be done to ensure planning doesn't end with the book, but continues to implementation and desired results.

There are five keys to a comprehensive plan that will be "implementable" and get results.

1. Focus on the municipality's real, relevant issues. Before starting the plan, a municipality should outline the problems, needs, and opportunities it wants solutions for in the plan. It could be managing the growing development and traffic congestion in a highway corridor. It could be capitalizing on historic or scenic characteristics. It could be promoting more walking and biking. Ask the consultant to focus on these real, specific issues. If you ask for the MPC template, that's what you'll get. Avoid collecting and presenting costly information and maps not relevant to the municipality's priority issues. Save consultant work and cost. The MPC does say a comprehensive plan shall make careful studies, but the requirement doesn't defy common sense. Study priority issues in detail and give less attention where not warranted.

2. Organize the plan the way officials and citizens think. A citizen will not tell an elected official that he or she does not like the municipality's housing plan. A citizen may say he or she is concerned about deteriorating homes in the neighborhood. That's how a plan can be structured – chapters one-by-one tackling the municipality's priority issues in plain language, not planner jargon. The MPC does not prescribe a template and require a plan to have chapters titled Land Use Plan, Housing

Plan, etc. The MPC does prescribe what subject matter must be in a comprehensive plan (much of which is “may” not “shall”). Chapters can be organized by focal issues. Use the same approach for consultant and community meetings. Make them work sessions to generate ideas and find solutions for the focal issues, not reviews of draft chapters.

(Keys 1 and 2 do not suggest a comprehensive plan should be short-term project planning. A plan should address long-term vision and core land use issues like location, character, and intensity of development. But, to be effective, a plan should ultimately focus limited municipal resources on strategic priorities.)

3. Devise workable recommendations with action plans. Recommendations for a plan’s focal issues should have details. It is not enough to recommend that a municipality should, for example, promote walking and biking. There should also be an action plan: What should be done? Require sidewalks in the subdivision ordinance? Build bike trails? How much will these things cost? How will the municipality pay for them? What groups have the expertise to help implement these actions? Plans with workable details are more likely to get results. It is better for a comprehensive plan to have 5-10 detailed action plans for priority issues than to have 50-100 generalized recommendations.

4. The plan is not done until capacity to implement is in place. A municipality cannot effectively implement a comprehensive plan on its own. It needs help from agencies and organizations with expertise, staff or volunteer help, and access to financing. As part of the plan process, these groups need to be recruited early, involved in planning work sessions, and encouraged to take responsibilities. Successful plans create implementation teams that continue working after the plan is finished to carry out action plans.

5. Build community ownership and commitment. It is important to involve the citizenry in a comprehensive plan to find

supportable solutions and generate excitement for new ideas and directions. It is also important to build plan support and excitement with elected officials. They need to be “owners” of the plan from day one. If the aim is – and it should be – to make the plan matter in future municipal actions and spending, then elected officials need to be involved and not learn about the plan at the end. It makes sense to have governing body reps actively participate in planning work sessions, and to have briefings for the whole governing body at plan milestones.

With focus on real issues, workable solutions, and implementation, the comprehensive plan document can look different. It can be a three-ring binder with tabbed action plans that elected officials take to meetings and refer to when creating the annual budget and work schedule. Parts can be pulled out and used by implementation teams or copied and inserted as support in funding applications. Text can be more pointed, action-oriented, and plain-language.

The time is right for a “new school” comprehensive plan – meet, talk, inquire, involve teams of others, generate ideas and solutions, and make decisions and action plans. Then assemble the key information and action plans into a three-ring binder and adopt it as the comprehensive plan – and DO IT!

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