

Comprehensive Planning: *Building Your Community's Future From Today's Vision*

Learn what makes comprehensive planning so important – and how to make sure you develop the right plan for your community.

As a local government official, you want to guide your community toward positive growth and expansion. But how do you ensure your government is driving this growth with a unified, citizen-driven vision for the future of your community? The answer is through comprehensive planning based on community input and thoughtful placemaking.

“Everybody wants your community to grow and succeed,” says Institute for Building Technology and Safety (IBTS), Development Manager Doug Moore. “A comprehensive plan helps your community figure out how to grow and expand while maintaining the character and values that are important to your citizens.”

What Is A Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan provides a blueprint for future government action. They address compatibility issues between various uses of land, management, and preservation of natural resources; to identify and preserve historically significant sites and properties; and to adequately plan for infrastructure needs and improvements.

“Successful communities don’t just happen, they must be continually shaped and guided,” Moore explains. “A comprehensive plan is what builds the community for your community.”

The best comprehensive plans are based on community input and provide ample opportunities for community engagement throughout the planning process. “By understanding your entire community, your plan will embody its true values and visions,” says Moore. “It’s really about dreaming the future of your community together with your citizens.”

The plan should look and feel like your community, a living document that constantly evolves to address your community’s changing needs and priorities. You will likely

want to revisit the plan to make minor tweaks throughout the year to keep moving it along as your community evolves.

Why Are Comprehensive Plans Important?

Comprehensive plans have numerous benefits for your local government and your community. For economic development purposes, they are vital, if not required, for securing grant funding and piquing the interest of the development community.

When applying for a grant, many funders want to know that your community has a vision and goals, and that you are working toward them. Some even require submittal of a comprehensive plan. Likewise, businesses considering locating in your community want to know you have a plan for continued growth and expansion to help ensure their success.

“Having a comprehensive plan that clearly identifies your future and what you want as a community sets you up to win grants and also helps bring in new business,” says Moore.

Comprehensive plans also help guide the work of every function of municipal government. By guiding your boards,

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commissions, city council and municipal departments, they ensure each local government department does not just move your community forward but moves it forward in the same direction.

Likewise, they tie zoning code and development regulations back to your community's vision.

Comprehensive plans give elected officials insight on the pulse of the community. By engaging your citizens, you can uncover the key values and priorities of residents and ensure these are reflected not just in the comprehensive plan, but in every decision you make for your community.

Should You Partner With A Planning Firm?

Before jumping into the comprehensive plan, it is important to assess your staff's ability and capacity to give the plan the time and attention it needs. For many communities, large and small, the biggest hurdle to comprehensive planning is finding the time and focus to complete the plan amidst day-to-day responsibilities. Many communities collaborate with third-party planners to overcome this obstacle.

Even if your community does have the staff to complete the plan in house, you may find it beneficial to partner with a planning firm to bring a broader, unbiased perspective approach.

“Even large cities with a lot of staff will hire out consultants because they want that outside vision,” explains Moore. “A good planning firm can bring that bigger picture of the world, but also have the heart to bring that back and relate it to your community.”

When it comes to choosing a planning partner, you will want to find a planning firm that adequately meets your needs. You may need to look for a team that has planners, but also landscape architects, main street designers, housing study analysts, and code writing experience. You can even bring in specialists to help with just a specific aspect of the plan if needed – such as for corridor plans or bikeability components.

Although it may seem counterintuitive to ask for outside help identifying the core values of your community, an external, unbiased perspective can help bring out the true values of your citizenry and tie the various components of your community into a single overarching vision.

Engaging Your Citizens

As an elected official, you are in the best position to spearhead communication efforts and bring the plan out to the

community.

“You have to understand what the quality of life is that your citizens want in order to identify what to improve to move forward,” Moore says. “You can't find out what's important to your citizens without making community engagement central to your comprehensive planning process.”

This engagement could happen through community surveys, advisory committees, and bringing together groups from a wide variety of backgrounds. Consider meeting with student groups, senior citizens, hospitals, county representatives and more.

With a comprehensive plan as the blueprint for your community, you will have an easier time attracting grant funding and developers, better retain your citizens, and preserve the sense of place, history, and social ties that make your community the place where your citizens choose to work, live, and raise their families. 🌿

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The Institute for Building Technology & Safety (IBTS), a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening communities, has collaborated with communities across the country to guide them through the comprehensive planning process. Our planners have served in the public sector, so they understand both the daily challenges of local governments and how to get buy-in for a comprehensive plan from your community and your colleagues across divisions.