

CHAPTER 1: THE PLANNING PROCESS ¹

INTRODUCTION

Land is one of our most valuable natural resources and the way it is used or developed creates a significant part of our physical surroundings. Any change in land use becomes a permanent part of our daily lives in the future. Yet all valuable resources must be used reasonably, economically, and equitably to benefit both the property owner's interest as well as the general public.

Municipal government must recognize that no one person, agency, or group controls the development process. Government's responsibility is to provide a framework for change. Without a framework or plan, the development process is reactive. This reactive process results in piecemeal uncoordinated development.

The choice is up to the elected official - to plan or not to plan for the community? Local government can provide a framework for change. Elected officials make the decision whether a community wants to react on an ad hoc basis or decide if their citizens are better served by a proactive approach that plans for the future.

The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code has been modernized to make it easier than ever to plan and plan cooperatively. Opportunities abound for those officials interested in shaping future land use patterns in their communities. The first step a community must take, if it wants to be proactive with land use planning, is to develop a comprehensive plan.

Today, municipal plans mean more than in the past. State agencies are required to consider and rely upon plans and zoning ordinances that are generally consistent. Without a plan, state agencies, developers, elected officials and landowners have nothing to guide them in the decision-making process.

Clearfield County's municipalities have a choice as to how they grow. They can stand by and do nothing which leaves growth in the hands of others or they can be proactive and guide development by implementing a comprehensive plan for their community. As of the writing of this plan update, only 35% of the municipalities in Clearfield County have comprehensive plans and over 60% of those plans are over 10 years old.

Many municipalities lack the resources to develop or update their own comprehensive plan; therefore, it is of utmost importance that the County's plan be inclusive to the needs of these municipalities. While a local comprehensive plan is desirable, a county plan can serve as a basic tool for these municipalities. A county comprehensive plan is not a "one size fits all" document, but it can contain many community development goals and objectives and implementation strategies that are of general importance to all communities within the County.

¹ Excerpts taken from the DCED's publication entitled "The Comprehensive Plan" 7th Ed. Aug. 2001.

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Chapter 1 Balancing Private Property Rights w/ Public Good

The County's Planning Office has and continues to give priority to providing technical assistance, in particular education to local municipal governments as to how they can balance the rights of their property owners yet also control how land is used in their communities. Since authority to regulate land use lies at a local municipal level, getting support and cooperation of our elected officials is crucial to the success of any county level land use planning.

Balancing Private Property Rights with the Good of the Public

Land use regulations restrict or limit use of private property for the benefit of the public good. The State's police power delegated to local elected officials allows this without the government acquiring or purchasing the land. Land use controls can create basic tensions between the rights of individuals to make free choices about the use of their property and the obligation not to adversely affect the public good or cause harm to the environment. Balancing these rights can present difficulties.

Planning agencies can play a major role in balancing these interests. Governing bodies must be careful that land use ordinances do not place too many constraints upon private property that restrictions become so severe that they constitute a taking requiring compensation. Public officials must be prepared to demonstrate that the imposition of the regulation is connected to legitimate protection of the public good.

Careful comprehensive plan preparation and implementation of the land use ordinances can help document a community's effort to balance the rights of the general public and those of the individual property owner.

What is a Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan is a document that states basic objectives and policies that guide future growth and development for a community. It can assist municipal leaders in their decision-making. It is a factual report that examines how the past led to the present, and reports in detail how to chart the community's path into the future.

It contains sections or studies performed on various aspects of the community, community development goals and objectives, and plans for future land uses. It is officially adopted by the governing body of a municipality and is implemented to a large extent by zoning and by subdivision and land development ordinances. The plan must be periodically reviewed and updated and must have the understanding and cooperation of the citizenry, the planning commission, and the governing body.

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Chapter 1 Purpose of Plan

A comprehensive plan is not a legal document nor is it a land use ordinance. However, like a land use regulation, it can and should be adopted. It is an overall plan embracing general goals and objectives with which a governing body agrees, based on input from its constituents, to observe in making day-to-day decisions.

Components of a Plan

The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code Section 301 (a) requires each municipal, multi-municipal, and county comprehensive plan to have nine elements. Collectively, these basic elements should present a composite vision of private and public development for the future based on a statement of community development goals and objectives. Each and every basic element is linked, interrelated, or connected. For example, resident population data equates to housing needs, demographics such as age cohorts can relate to housing types and educational needs, both present and future. There are a multitude of interrelationships among and between the required comprehensive plan elements.

County comprehensive plans have an additional set of requirements which include identifying land uses as they relate to important natural resources and appropriate utilization of existing minerals and identifying current and proposed land uses which have a regional impact and significance, such as large shopping centers, major industrial parks, mines and related activities, office parks, storage.

Importance and Purpose of Plan

A comprehensive plan is more than just a document disclosing past and present land use trends with a proposed course of action. It is a process of organizing for the future. It creates a blueprint for our land use patterns of tomorrow. Even to not plan is a strategy for dealing with what lies ahead. Community planning is an organized way or process of thinking about tomorrow. By thinking about how a community changed in the past can help predict what changes might be in store for the future. When this type of thinking translates into action, it needs to be done in an orderly fashion and made part of a routine administrative process.

Sound planning provides an equitable balance of protecting both private property rights and the overall well being of a community. Planning and resultant implementation ordinances are sometimes construed as "anti-growth" sentiment, but in reality it is "pro-growth". Sound planning or smart growth, as it is often referred to, assures that developments enhance the community's overall quality of life. Successful communities are those that understand the value of planning and have taken the steps necessary to assure growth positively affects the community instead of being detrimental.

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Chapter 1 Implementation Tools & Techniques

How to Use Plan

A comprehensive plan is a tool to be used by both community and business leaders to assist them with their day to day decision making. Plans can provide them with guidance as to the issues affecting the County, an overview of the community supported goals and objectives of the County, and can provide supporting documentation for those seeking financial or technical assistance.

The Table of Contents is the best place to get started. Specific topics of interest such as transportation, housing, or economic development can be accessed separately. Each chapter will first outline past trends and then address future actions that should be taken to accomplish the goals and objectives established for that topic.

If users desire to access simply all the community goals and objectives for the entire plan, they are located in their own separate chapter entitled "Community Goals and Objectives".

Maps, tables, graphs, and charts are located within the appropriate sections of the plan, however, a comprehensive list, with brief descriptions and locations, can also be found in the table of contents.

A bibliography of data used to create this comprehensive plan is located in the Appendix for those seeking additional information.

Plan Implementation Tools and Techniques

A comprehensive plan cannot be implemented entirely by codes and ordinances. Some recommendations made within the plan require other types of actions that only a governing body can take. Examples of these types of actions are: developing capital improvements programs; promoting redevelopment or in fill development, and fostering good public relations, perhaps the keystone and the catalyst of most plan implementation techniques. Obviously, there can be many other similar actions that can aid in implementing the comprehensive plan, none of which require codes and ordinances to be put into effect but which, nevertheless, are equally as important to assist with plan implementation.

After a municipality adopts a comprehensive plan and any implementing codes and ordinances, there is a tendency to put the plan away and to consider the planning task complete. This is not and should not be the case. A community is seldom a stagnant place; some type of change is almost always occurring. Planning is an organized process of dealing with change. Therefore, all change must be examined to see what effects they may have upon the community.

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Chapter 1 Inventory of Planning Tools Utilized

To be effective, planning must have the support and understanding of the citizens of the community. Its citizens, who may also be developers, need to be informed about the planning process being undertaken and given an opportunity to participate in the process. Citizens comprise the backbone of a community and are the crucial ingredient for a successful planning program. The planning agency acts as an advisor to the governing body on all matters of community growth and development. A planning commission should be viewed as a peer group or citizens group of unpaid volunteers. It is not some cold, distant, bureaucratic agency to be feared or avoided.

There are four main tools that communities in Pennsylvania can use to control land use. These include having a planning commission, adopting a comprehensive plan, having a subdivision and land development ordinance, and adopting a zoning ordinance. In Clearfield County, these tools are only sporadically used.

Inventory of Planning Tools Utilized by County Municipalities

In Clearfield County, fifteen (15) of the County's fifty-one (51) municipalities have their own planning commissions. Two of these municipalities—Bell Township and Mahaffey Borough—have a joint planning commission.

Eighteen (18) municipalities (or 35%) have adopted their own comprehensive plan or a joint municipal comprehensive plan with another municipality. Those communities that do have comprehensive plans often rely on plans that are so old as to have little usefulness. Eleven (11) municipal comprehensive plans (or 61%) are more than 10 years old. Several municipalities have developed comprehensive plans in the past, but never formally adopted them.

Currently, nineteen (19) municipalities have adopted a subdivision and land development ordinance. The other thirty-two (32) municipalities fall under the jurisdiction of the County's subdivision and land development ordinance. Decatur Township formerly had its own subdivision and land development ordinance, but this document is in the process of being updated. Until it is complete, Decatur Township is covered under the County's ordinance. Zoning is by far the least used planning tool in Clearfield County. Only seven (or less than 14%) of the County's municipalities have zoning ordinances.

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**Chapter 1
Inventory of Planning Tools Used in County**

Municipal Land Use Tool Inventory

Municipalities w/ Planning Commissions	Municipalities w/ Comprehensive Plans	Municipalities w/ Zoning Ordinances
Bell Township	Bell Township	Clearfield Borough
Bradford Township	Brady Township	Curwensville Borough
Brady Township	Brisbin Borough	DuBois City
Clearfield Borough	Clearfield Borough	Falls Creek Borough
Cooper Township	Cooper Township	Lawrence Township
Curwensville Borough	Curwensville Borough	Sandy Township
Decatur Township	Decatur Township	Woodward Township
DuBois City	DuBois City	
Falls Creek Borough	Falls Creek Borough	
Lawrence Township	Girard Township	
Mahaffey Borough	Graham Township	
Morris Township	Houtzdale Borough	
Sandy Township	Lawrence Township	
Wallaceton Borough	Mahaffey Borough	
Woodward Township	Osceola Mills	
	Sandy Township	
	Troutville Borough	
	Woodward Township	

Secrets of Successful Communities

1. *Create a shared vision for the future*
2. *Identify key natural, cultural, scenic, and economic assets*
3. *Build all local plans around the preservation and enhancement of key assets*
4. *Use education, incentives, and voluntary initiatives, not just regulations*
5. *Pick and choose among development proposals*
6. *Meet the needs of landowners, business interests, and the community*
7. *Pay attention to community appearance as well as economics and ecology*
8. *Assess the impact of land use policies*
9. *Recognize the link between land use and transportation*
10. *Make Quality of Life a key organizing element of the community vision*

Source: DCNR's "Better Models for Development in Pennsylvania", April 2005