

Bringing the Plan to Life

by Michael Chandler

The excitement that accompanies the adoption of a comprehensive plan is very real. Indeed, it is not uncommon for a planning commission to celebrate once the plan has been officially adopted. After all, a quality comprehensive plan does not materialize overnight. A solid plan is the by-product of study, analysis, and reflection. Accordingly, the decision to adopt a comprehensive plan generates a feeling of closure on the part of the planning commission as well as the community.

The adoption of a comprehensive plan, however, should not be viewed as an act of closure. Instead, the decision to adopt should be viewed as the initial step in the plan implementation process.

It is essential to remember that a comprehensive plan will not effectuate change if it is afforded trophy status and placed on the proverbial office shelf. If a plan is going to make a difference in the life of a community it must be used and followed. The balance of this column will highlight

an eight step process a planning commission can use to bring the comprehensive plan to life.

Step One: Involve the Public – and the Governing Body. Management experts tell us that organizational change is less traumatic if the people affected by the change are involved in planning the change. Because planning involves change, it is crucial that the public be included not just in developing the plan's goals and objectives, but in focusing on how they will be implemented. Members of the public must be challenged to see the connection between the "dreaming" phase of the planning process and the "doing" phase of plan implementation.

As I've stressed in past columns, it is also critically important for the planning commission to keep the governing body informed and involved. A plan simply cannot be implemented without the governing body's continued strong support.

Step Two: Convey a Message. Our plans must convey a message the public will connect with. Products sell because peo-

ple associate value with the purchase. This marketing truism also applies to community planning. To be successful, comprehensive plans must convey, in a clear and direct manner, how the future will be different if they are followed.

Step Three: Commitment to Outcomes. A shortcoming common to many plans is the lack of a focused commitment on producing the outcomes set out in the plan. Too often a planning commission will assume the good things chronicled in the plan will happen simply because they are good. This assumption must be avoided. The "preferred future" described in the plan will not happen without a commitment to plan implementation – including a commitment to provide the staff and financial resources needed to carry out the plan.

Step Four: Develop an Implementation Schedule. It has been said that a journey of 1,000 miles begins with the first step. A similar mindset needs to guide the plan implementation process. For example, if your plan features a twenty year planning horizon and several hundred operational objectives and strategies, the planning commission must prioritize them. A multi-faceted strategy, one that features short as well as long-term action plans, is preferable to a strategy that attempts to do everything at once.

Step Five: Assign Implementation Responsibilities. Knowing when a plan component or objective will come into play implies knowing who will be responsible for implementing it. The best way to accomplish this is by assigning specific implementation responsibilities to particular departments of the town, city, or county government. Each department can then be held accountable for what it is charged with implementing.

Assigning responsibilities has two other benefits. First, departments will be able to see how they fit into the "big picture" – and how their role contributes to the community's future. Second, when



Online Comments:

"A comprehensive plan is a budget, and like any budget must be reviewed and altered as needed. The final step in any comprehensive plan must be a schedule for routine periodic review and triggers for review necessitated by non-routine economic events."

– Neill F. McDonald, MAI, Member, Savannah-Chatham County Metropolitan Planning Commission, Savannah, Georgia

"A good, concise article. I especially liked the timeline idea – to be sure to get things done. As an example, our old master plan is being redone. In it are items that still haven't been accomplished, because no one ever read it (except me and a handful of others). It's amusing to see some of these same requests coming up for the new plan, knowing they were ignored before."

– Christine Mueller, Dearborn County, Indiana

"An important question to consider is whether your Comprehensive plan is capable of being implemented. You would be surprised at the number of statements in many Comprehensive plans that lack clarity or definitiveness and are therefore virtually impossible to implement."

– Ilene Watson, Planner, Regional District of Central Okanagan, Kelowna, British Columbia

In our small community in Maine we do not have any professional staff. Our Comprehensive Plan Review Committee will be disbanded when the plan is approved by the town. We have decided to include an action step that creates a three member oversight committee. That committee will advocate for action on the plan with all town committees and selectmen. The committee will also be a link between the present comp plan committee and the future review committee, which will convene in five years."

– Carol Adams, Dresden, Maine

departments know that they will be called to account for their assigned responsibilities, they will be more inclined to carry them out in a timely manner.

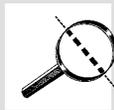
Step Six: Establish a Timeline. This is a logical byproduct of the preceding two steps. A reasonable timeframe needs to be established for each phase of the plan implementation process. A plan featuring hundreds of strategies and policies cannot be implemented in a single year. Instead, a multi-year implementation cycle will be required. By assigning a timeline to each phase of the implementation schedule, the planning commission, governing body, and members of the public, will know when each component of the plan should be completed.

Step Seven: Link the Plan with the Budget. Linking the plan with the multi-year capital program and annual operating budget is another way to assure plan implementation. One way to achieve this outcome is to calculate the costs associated with the various objectives and strategies referenced in the plan. Where appropriate, these costs should be included in either the capital or the operating budget. As management expert Peter Drucker is fond of saying, the real value of a plan can be measured by an organization's willingness to back it with money.

The Capital Improvement Program

Step Eight: Document the Difference. A final step involves documenting the difference the plan is making on behalf of the community. Taking the time to inventory the various impacts the plan is generating, and then sharing this information with the community, puts accountability into the planning process. Most importantly, it also lets the public know that the plan is being used – and that all the time that went into developing the plan was well spent. ♦

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Measuring Performance

by Catherine Avon Hilton

Michael Chandler, in *Step Four*, notes the importance of adopting, alongside the plan, an implementation process committing the community to the plan's orderly enactment. Within that quietly spoken truth is the implication to skillfully devise measurable objectives by which to assess the adopted plan's effectiveness. Planners understand the reasons why. *Step Eight: Document the Difference* is impossible to achieve without first doing the homework.

However daunting the task associated with *Step Four* initially appears to be, professional and citizen planners must provide for comparison of changed conditions over time. The inherent difficulty is in finding appropriate performance measuring sticks that can accurately gauge the plan's usefulness, validity and "common sense."

What is measurability? In its most simplistic form, if the question of achievement of an objective can be answered "yes" or "no," scored "one" or "zero," performance has been measured. Even on that scale, a community can test and evaluate its adopted planning policies. Developing policy is an inexact art. However, by consistently emphasizing quantitative parameters, it will be easier to evaluate the success of the plan at a later time. Countable criteria (i.e., completion date, percent change, size, densities or "benchmarks") are indicators of the achievement of such intangibles as community "livability," "safe" neighborhoods and "good" schools. Quantitative indicators are essential to evaluate plan performance with regard to quality of life issues; whereas descriptive qualitative criteria are better used within the vision statement or as long-range goals.

How much time is required to complete *Step Four* to include a set of performance measures? The answer is, of course, up to the community preparing its new plan. Yet clearly, the painstaking work at the front end of the planning process to establish measurable objectives will be offset by time and cost savings over the life of the plan.

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The Capital Improvement Program

Zoning and subdivision regulations are the most familiar "tools" used to implement the comprehensive plan. Another important implementation tool is the capital improvement program, usually referred to as the CIP.

The CIP is a management and fiscal planning tool communities can use for financing and constructing needed public improvements and facilities. Properly designed, a CIP enables a community to identify its capital needs, rank them by priority, coordinate their scheduling, and determine the best method of paying for them within the community's fiscal capacity.

Baseline requirements for CIPs include that the CIP be based on the comprehensive plan and that it schedule capital improvements over a specific number of years (commonly three, five, or six). Usually, the planning commission annually prepares a recommended CIP, and then forwards it to the local governing body for adoption. ...

Project requests should be based upon a set of guidelines, and be submitted by the various municipal (or county) departments. The engineering, financial, or planning staff is usually responsible for providing assistance to the other municipal departments in completing project request forms. Project requests are examined to see that they are complete, accurate, and in conformance with the community's CIP guidelines. This review also assesses proposed projects as to their feasibility, pricing, and consistency with the comprehensive plan.

Excerpts from Michael Chandler's series "Capital Improvement Programs," in PCJ #25-27.