

# This Plan's For You

by Jim Segedy, FAICP, and Lisa Hollingsworth-Segedy, AICP

*Editor's Note: Who is your comprehensive plan designed for? Jim and Lisa examine this critically important question as they continue their series on the role of the local comprehensive plan.*

Lisa was on the city council agenda to present the concept of a new comprehensive plan. The mayor leaned forward after her presentation. "We had a plan written for us ten years ago. It hasn't done us a darn bit of good." Lisa had to agree with the mayor. The consulting firm that had written the old plan had included all the relevant data, pages and pages of census data in tables, statistics in bar graphs, and percentages in pie charts. It was a complete inventory, and looked very impressive, but it really didn't say anything. What did all those charts and tables mean?

They had overlooked two important things: First, the plan contained no interpretation of the data. Second, the public had no meaningful involvement in the plan's creation. The plan simply did not address the very first question in the list of ingredients of a good comprehensive plan. Because of that, its usefulness as a tool to the community was extremely limited.

"Who are we?" It is important to ask and answer that question on several levels throughout the planning process. Part of the planning process is to understand the people in your community. This will help you determine how your community functions and how it should (and shouldn't) change over the next twenty years.

It's also important to remember that this isn't just a bunch of background information – it should be an objective look at who you are and what's going on. It's about where you live, work, play, and do business – and the forces that affect your city or town.

One of the first tools for understanding "Who are we?" is demographic data. Census information breaks down your population by age, gender, ethnic background, home ownership, economic status, and more. You can see how your population has changed over time, but it's only a snapshot of the community.

But "Who are we?" is more than just these statistics and facts compiled into

EVEN A QUESTION AS SIMPLE AS "WHY DO YOU LIVE HERE?" CAN OPEN THE DOOR FOR A CLEARER UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT'S IMPORTANT ABOUT A COMMUNITY AND HOW TO PRESERVE IT OR EXPAND ON IT.

tables and charts. In planning class, Jim tells his students, "You've told me the numbers. Now tell me what they *mean*."

A good comprehensive plan follows the presentation of demographic data with an analysis of who the plan is for. What are the characteristics of your population? Your citizens will be the ones living in your community. They may go to school, own property, raise their families, earn a living, shop, play, retire, and vote there. They are the people who will be benefiting the most from your comprehensive plan. They are the ones you are planning the community for.

What is *your* community's story? Each town or city is unique and your plan should reflect that. A wise person once said: "If you've seen one small town, you've seen one small town."

Comparing the population statistics over time will help you see how your community is changing. The next ques-

tion you'll need to answer is, "What is causing, or caused, change in our community?"

A look at your city or town's history, particularly since the end of World War II, will help you understand the demographic changes. Has your community gained or lost employment? Has there been a natural disaster? What about changes in nearby places that could affect your community? How could these things change the population that you're expecting in the next two decades?

As the population changes, the demand for facilities and services shifts, and the dynamics of local retail evolve. A population of aging residents requires a different level of services than does a population with a greater share of families with school-age children. Employment opportunities will bring new population into your community, and these new employees may require specific housing types. Did these changes happen at once (e.g., when a factory opened or closed), or did they appear over time?

If it is apparent that your town will be gaining population, then it is important to ask, "Does our community have the capacity to grow?" Can your infrastructure handle your anticipated growth? Is there available land for the growth that will meet current and future demand? What is happening around you? Will growth in nearby towns or cities drive changes, either positive or negative, in your community?

Lisa has worked in many small towns surrounding the Metropolitan Atlanta area, communities that were being impacted by growth from the metro area. It was almost a mantra in these small towns, "We don't want to be like Atlanta," yet the plans and local regulations in these communities actually set them up to become just more of the same in the sea of urban sprawl.

In preparing their comprehensive plans, these towns had not dug deeply into the question of, "Who are we?" Because they had not defined their community identity, they were unprepared to embrace the spillover that was inevitable because of their location. They accepted developer-driven land use decisions because their plan didn't provide them with a definable and defensible community identity on which to base their growth.

As your town or city answers the question, "Who are we?" make certain to ask enough follow-up questions to completely understand how the community defines itself so the plan can establish defensible growth priorities.

If your city or town expects to lose population in the coming years, ask yourself, "How can we be the best community we can be, even if we have to do it with fewer people and fewer resources?"

Even places that have lost jobs and population can thrive and be successful. Youngstown, Ohio is a prime example. Once a steel manufacturing mecca of over 200,000 people, the city lost much of its core manufacturing base in the 1990s. Instead of becoming a ghost town, the city asked itself, "How can we be the best smaller community possible?" and set about the task of reinventing itself. Youngstown is well on its way towards becoming a thriving city of 80,000.

As your community develops its comprehensive plan, you, the planning commissioner, must realize that: (1) growth is not always possible; (2) growth is not always avoidable; (3) growth is not always good; and (4) balanced growth is often the only way that your community can sustain itself.

Residential growth is frequently an elected official's panacea, boosting the municipal tax base in the short run, but outstripping the community's ability to provide for the level of public services needed to support it in the long run. As a planning commissioner, you will become the advocate for good planning in your community. You will be asking decision-

makers to consider the long-term costs of growth, and educating community leaders about the importance of following a comprehensive plan that establishes a template for balanced and appropriate growth.

After you've reviewed your community profile and honestly answered, "What does this mean?" you are ready to move to the next level in determining your community's identity and collective personality. Perhaps the most important tool for answering "Who are we?" is to ask the community itself. This will give you the story behind the numbers and tell you what those numbers really mean.

Through a well-run public involvement program, residents can define what is important to them personally as well as to the larger community. They can identify what they like and what they don't. They can capture the essence of their community's spirit by telling stories of things that have happened there. Even a question as simple as "Why do you live here?" can open the door for a clearer understanding of what's important about a community and how to preserve it or expand on it.

As you, the planning commissioner, assist your town or city in developing its comprehensive plan, be prepared for some honest self-evaluation and soul searching at the community level. Focus not on how you wish things would be, but on what's real, to help your community determine "who we are." Gain the perspective of hard data, understand what's causing change, and learn how your citizens feel about where they live.

For many years, when Jim took his students into communities he always taught them to ask the citizens two questions: First, "When Aunt Harriet comes to visit, where do you take her?" and second, "When Aunt Harriet comes to visit, where *don't* you take her?" Honest answers to these two questions will tell you exactly what you need to work on, and sometimes give the community startling insights into what it has overlooked for a long time.

If you ask and answer questions candidly, evaluate your community's options

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to accommodate current conditions while positioning itself for future changes, and are willing to be creative in embracing change, your community will be in position to thrive no matter what.

*In the next issue of PCJ, Lisa and Jim will take on the next question in the list of ingredients for a successful comprehensive plan: "Where are we going?"* ♦



*Jim Segedy is the Director of Community Planning for the Pennsylvania Environmental Council. Lisa Hollingsworth-Segedy is the Managing Partner and Senior Planner for The Community Partnership. Send any questions, comments, or "war stories" you'd like to share to Jim and Lisa at [the\\_community\\_partnership@yahoo.com](mailto:the_community_partnership@yahoo.com). Editor's Note: Sharp-eyed PCJ readers might have noticed that Lisa Hollingsworth is now Lisa Hollingsworth-Segedy. Our congratulations to both Jim and Lisa!*