

# Why Comprehensive Plans Gather Dust

by Della Rucker, AICP, CECd

In my last column (PCJ #82, Spring 2011), I welcomed you to the “tightrope act.” I noted that planning commissioners often find themselves at center ring, trying to balance the community’s economy with its physical and functional needs. Since a comprehensive plan is one of your basic tools for keeping that balance, let’s look at some of the issues that prevent them from being useful, and what we can do to make them better.

I regularly encounter clients who avoid comprehensive planning, or try to hybridize it with something more “practical.” Some tell me that the money spent on comprehensive plans should be used instead to “make something happen.”

While planning commissioners know better than anyone else how important comprehensive plans are, we have all seen plans that sit on the proverbial shelf, gathering the proverbial dust. The dust-gatherers typically fit four categories:

- **The Encyclopedia.** This plan covers *everything*, whether it matters or not. By volume, these documents are at least 75 percent a catalog of existing conditions. The actual “plan” – that is, the portion that establishes strategies for the future – is relegated to a few vague pages in the last chapter.

- **The Kum Ba Yah.** This plan’s development is dominated by public meetings, focus groups, surveys, etc. Of course, the problem isn’t that the plan lacked public feedback, but that it simply repeated the public comments. A Kum Ba Yah plan creates a wish list that ignores real-world constraints, like funding. The wish list becomes The Plan.

- **The Laundry List.** This plan presents such a disorganized stream of recommendations that no one knows where to start, or what to do if the first or twentieth recommendation becomes impossible. Result: Welcome to the shelf.

- **The Pretty Picture, or If You Draw It, It Will Come.** This plan features renderings of a Beautiful Place, often preceded by a market analysis that was ignored by the designers and followed by an outline of the zoning that will allow the castle to materialize out of the air. How the Beautiful Place can be constructed in the private market isn’t addressed.

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Each of these plans takes one piece of what a comprehensive plan should contain, and blows it out of proportion. Each fails to account for the complicated nature of the real world, simplifying either the planning process or the act of making recommendations. Adoption of one of these plans indicates that those in charge sidestepped the hard part: the group management, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration needed to help people figure out the best path from a complex present into an unknown future.

Writing an encyclopedia is easy. Getting people to say what they want is easy. Making a laundry list is easy. Drawing a pretty picture is easy. The hard part is balancing a realistic understanding of existing and potential future conditions with the need and the desire for an improved future – and helping the people who have the most at stake to be part of figuring out that future.

To have a successful plan, there are four essential tasks planners and planning commissioners need to accomplish:

1. **Use data to reach a clear understanding of the most impactful issues facing the community.** You don’t need to know everything. You do need to understand fully and think critically about the issues that are likely to have the biggest impact on the future.

2. **Have meaningful public participation.** You need to do more than let the public spout. Give them real-world challenges to grapple with, so that the feedback you get has meaning.

3. **Set priorities.** There’s only so much money available, and not all of our bright ideas can get done right away. Why pretend otherwise? You need to decide what’s most important – and what can wait if it has to.

4. **Address what’s necessary for the plan to become reality.** If you propose some Grand New Thing, you must also answer *why hasn’t it happened already?* and *what evidence is there to suggest that it can happen in the future?* That doesn’t mean you can’t be ambitious. It does mean you need to plan for it to get done.

By halfway through a project, most of the communities I work with can parrot one of my favorite lines: *if it were easy, you would have done it already.* Preparing an effective, useful comprehensive plan takes wisdom and bravery. But it *can* be done! ♦

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*Editor’s Note: I asked Rucker some follow-up questions about her article in an interview posted on our PlannersWeb site: [www.plannersweb.com/rucker83.html](http://www.plannersweb.com/rucker83.html).*