

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN: A ROAD MAP TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

DO YOU FEEL AS THOUGH your elected board and planning commission often find themselves reacting to unexpected development proposals that sometimes hit the mark and other times absolutely do not? Or is your community struggling, and you want to spark some infill development and create more jobs and housing options in your community?

An updated comprehensive plan, supported by complementary land use regulations and other implementation tools, will provide the framework you need to guide the development you want that is consistent with your community vision, values, and goals.

What Is a Comprehensive Plan?

A municipality's comprehensive plan, or master plan, is a critical road map to guide decisions about the community's future development. It helps answer many questions, including:

- What are our community assets/opportunities?
- What are our community needs/challenges?
- What is our community vision for the future?
- What goals, policies, objectives, and actions will help us achieve that vision, and address our challenges and opportunities?

A comprehensive plan allows a community to be proactive rather than

reactive. It enables it to plan for the community it wants, and get ahead of critical issues and trends. It is a primary planning framework that other local plans, regulations, and initiatives support and implement.

What Is Required?

State statutes require each municipality to have a master plan (often referred to as comprehensive plan) prepared by its planning commission (C.R.S. § 31-23-206). This plan is meant to be an advisory document that guides land development decisions, but with sufficient detail, it may be made binding by inclusion in adopted land use regulations. The statutes provide a great deal of guidance on how to make a plan comprehensive, but the only required component is a recreation and tourism element.

Municipalities in Colorado also are required to prepare and adopt a three-mile plan prior to annexing property; this plan must be updated annually (C.R.S. § 31-12-105(e)). The three-mile plan is a long-range plan that outlines where municipalities may consider annexing property, how they would provide services to the newly annexed areas, and how they would sustain adequate provision of services throughout the rest of the municipality. Many municipalities incorporate this requirement into their master plans and others develop stand-alone plans.

Elements of a Comprehensive Plan

While there is no “one-size-fits-all” plan, there are some common plan components, including land use, transportation, utilities, housing, natural and cultural resources, public services, and recreation and tourism. Comprehensive plans should be just that — comprehensive — in their approach. New trends and best practices in comprehensive planning include incorporating public health and the built environment; resilience and sustainability; downtown revitalization; aging and at-risk populations; natural and human-induced hazards; and water supply and water quality.

Getting Buy-In

A successful plan requires a thorough and inclusive planning process that engages community residents and stakeholders. Community members who have not been given opportunities to provide input and are not well-informed can present obstacles and even derail the best laid plans. Tap into public and private stakeholders and subject matter experts in the community to help inform the planning process and leverage resources to help tackle community issues.

Regional stakeholders such as counties, special districts, councils of government, or watershed coalitions also may provide valuable information and input into the planning process. Stakeholder interviews and focus



“The process of solving common problems and striving for a vision brings out the best in people and makes our communities better.”

— The Planning Commissioners
Guide, p. 20

groups are effective ways to reach these important players.

Steps to Creating and Implementing a Plan

It can take a year (or more) and plenty of resources to develop a plan. A solid planning framework, first, requires an understanding of community issues, and of population and economic trends that will impact physical development and services. The steps to develop a comprehensive plan are summarized below.

- Gather and analyze information (demographics, research, public and stakeholder input, mapping).
- Identify issues, challenges, and opportunities.
- Develop a community vision for the future.
- Develop goals, objectives, and policies.
- Prepare and evaluate plan options or scenarios.
- Complete and adopt plan.
- Create and follow an implementation plan.

- Monitor and update.

Much work goes into creating a comprehensive plan, but for a plan to be useful, it has to be implemented.

Using the Plan

A good comprehensive plan can be useful in a number of ways, including as a basis for regulatory actions, a guide to community programs and decision making, and as a communication tool.

As a basis for regulatory actions, the plan serves as a foundation and

The six plan principles identified for comprehensive plans include **livable** built environment, **harmony** with nature, **resilient** economy, **interwoven equity**, **healthy** community, and **responsible regionalism**.

guide for zoning regulations, subdivision regulations, land use maps, hazard regulations, annexation decisions, development review, and other community development decisions, including grants.

The plan also provides guidance for the capital improvement program, as well as local initiatives such as water protection, recreation or open space land acquisition, and housing.

Finally, comprehensive plans communicate to citizens, developers, and others what the community will support. Comprehensive plans are also important to the development of regional plans or programs, e.g., a regional trail network or area transit program.

Standards & Best Practices

While each community's plan will be tailored to its particular needs, there are general guidelines for developing quality comprehensive plans. The American Planning Association (APA) has developed standards for comprehensive plans (www.planning.org/sustainingplaces/compplanstandards). The six principles identified for comprehensive plans include livable built environment, harmony with nature, resilient

economy, interwoven equity, healthy community, and responsible regionalism.

The APA standards also identify many best practices or elements of a successful comprehensive plan, such as being comprehensive, integration with other local plans and programs, innovation, being persuasive, being consistent, coordination, compliance with applicable laws, transparency, and making the plan user-friendly.

The Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) is a strong supporter of local government comprehensive plans. DOLA has learned lessons over the years with communities that have updated their plans.

- To ensure consistency and the ability to implement the comprehensive plan, update the land use regulations as soon as possible following the update of a comprehensive plan.
- The planning commission must be actively engaged with planning staff and consultants to involve the whole community in developing the plan.
- Elected officials need to provide guidance and support of the planning process, recognizing the

resulting plan policies will guide development and planning decisions for many years to come.

- Local governments will benefit from integrating hazards information, policies, and actions in the comprehensive plan.
- Since the plan utilizes a community and stakeholder engagement process, use this opportunity to create or update intergovernmental agreements with neighboring jurisdictions and service providers to ensure coordinated future development.

Resources

The Division of Local Government in the Department of Local Affairs offers technical assistance and grants to support planning projects, including comprehensive plans and land use code updates. For more information, visit the Community Development Office page at www.dola.colorado.gov/cdo or contact Anne Miller at anne.miller@state.co.us.

For additional information, refer to *The Planning Commissioners Guide* by C. Gregory Dale, et al., as well as *Sustaining Places: Best Practices for Comprehensive Plans* by David R. Godschalk and David C. Rouse.