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THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

SUSTAINABLE, RESILIENT,
AND EQUITABLE
COMMUNITIES FOR
THE 21ST CENTURY

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APA PLANNING ESSENTIALS



The Comprehensive Plan

The practice of comprehensive planning is changing dramatically in the 21st century to address the pressing need for more sustainable, resilient, and equitable communities. Drawing on the latest research and best practice examples, *The Comprehensive Plan: Sustainable, Resilient, and Equitable Communities for the 21st Century* provides an in-depth resource for planning practitioners, elected officials, citizens, and others seeking to develop effective, impactful, comprehensive plans, grounded in authentic community engagement, as a pathway to sustainability. Based on standards developed by the American Planning Association to provide a national benchmark for sustainable comprehensive planning, this book provides detailed guidance on the substance, process, and implementation of comprehensive plans that address the critical challenges facing communities in the 21st century.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The 21st century is a time of unparalleled progress and unprecedented challenges for humankind. People around the globe enjoy a standard of living unimaginable to those who came before us, made possible by rapid technological change that promises to help solve many of civilization's most intractable problems. But technological advancements have come at a heavy price: a changing climate driven by fossil fuel emissions; degradation of natural resources caused by population growth and development; and the growing divide between rich and poor. The effects of climate change are evident in the increasing frequency and severity of floods, droughts, wildfires, heat waves, and other natural disasters, which disproportionately impact poor and vulnerable populations.

According to a global assessment of biodiversity and ecosystem services, the rate of change in nature during the last 50 years is unprecedented: up to 1 million of the estimated 8 million plant and animal species on Earth are at risk of extinction, many of them within decades (IPBES 2019). Technological innovations such as automation and artificial intelligence threaten to disrupt the workforce and displace workers, compounding the effects of globalization and other macroeconomic trends on local communities. While globalization has raised living standards for over a half a billion people and reduced inequality between the developing and developed world, inequality within the United States and nations around the globe is increasing (Bourguignon 2015). Socioeconomic inequality is reflected in stark differences in life expectancies between nearby zip codes, as chronic illnesses associated with lifestyle-related conditions like obesity and stress have replaced infectious diseases as the leading cause of death in most industrialized and many developing countries.

The comprehensive plan is the leading policy document guiding the long-range development of counties, cities, towns, and other local jurisdictions across the United States.¹ Just as communities need to adapt to the forces of environmental, economic,

social, and technological change, comprehensive planning practice needs to evolve to help communities navigate those changes in an increasingly uncertain world.

In the 20th century, comprehensive plans focused on land use and the physical development of communities. The typical plan consisted of elements such as land use, transportation, and housing, each with its own goals, objectives, and policies. While this model persists today, a new approach has emerged over the past several decades. Contemporary plans engage community members and articulate their shared values through a collaborative process; organize plan content around cross-cutting themes; connect values and vision for the future to a defined action agenda; address issues that transcend jurisdictional boundaries; and use alternatives to paper documents to communicate the plan to different audiences (Rouse, Chandler, and Arason 1999). In doing so, they go beyond the roots of comprehensive planning in physical development to address social dimensions of community, such as equity, public health, and human investment.

As planning practice continues to evolve, how can the comprehensive plan – an invention of the first half of the 20th century, with a mixed track record of implementation – position communities to deal with the magnitude of challenges confronting them in a world of accelerating change? How can its outcomes improve community health, livability, and sustainability while addressing global problems like climate change? To help answer these questions, this book provides a resource and guide to comprehensive planning practice for professional planners, elected officials, citizens, and others seeking to create sustainable, resilient, and equitable 21st-century communities. Drawing on research and best practice examples of plans from across the United States, it covers the comprehensive planning process, the content and attributes of the plan, and plan implementation with the overarching goal of creating sustainable, resilient, and equitable communities. While geared toward comprehensive planning as it is practiced by local jurisdictions in the United States, the principles and practices it elucidates can be adapted for use at different scales (for example, neighborhood, region, and megaregion) and by communities worldwide.

While the authors were writing this book in 2020, the United States absorbed two major shocks that brought the magnitude of the challenges that communities face to the forefront. The first was the loss of life and economic impacts caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic. The second was the deaths of George Floyd and other Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement officers, which sparked anger and protests across the nation. Both were symptomatic of deep-seated structural disparities in the nation's society and economy. COVID-19 disproportionately affected minority communities and people with underlying conditions, such as obesity and diabetes, that relate to the social determinants of health. Its economic effects were experienced most severely by workers in the service economy, many of whom live from paycheck to paycheck, rather than by those who could work remotely using digital technology. Violence against Blacks is a manifestation of institutionalized racism to which planning practice has contributed. Although reversing systemic inequality requires a sustained, broad-based societal commitment, the authors believe that the comprehensive plan can and must be part of the solution.

Sustainability, Resilience, and Equity

Sustainability, resilience, and equity – the overarching themes of this book – are distinct but interrelated concepts. The Brundtland Report defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). Building on that definition, the Institute for Sustainable Communities defines a sustainable community as one that “manages its human, natural, and financial capital to meet current needs while ensuring that adequate resources are available for future generations” (Institute for Sustainable Communities n.d.).

The Rockefeller Foundation’s *100 Resilient Cities* initiative defines resilience as “the capacity of individuals, communities, and systems to adapt, survive, and grow in the face of stresses and shocks, and even transform when conditions require it” (Arup n.d.). Stresses are chronic challenges to natural and human systems such as the long-term effects of climate change and entrenched poverty. Shocks are acute natural and human-caused disasters such as extreme weather events and severe economic disruptions.

The American Planning Association (APA) defines equity as “just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. Unlocking the promise of the nation by unleashing the promise in us all” (American Planning Association 2019). According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, equitable development is “an approach for meeting the needs of underserved communities through policies and programs that reduce disparities while fostering places that are healthy and vibrant. It is increasingly considered an effective place-based action for creating strong and livable communities” (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency n.d.).

The American Institute of Certified Planners *Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct* implicitly charges professional planners with the ethical responsibility to help the communities they serve become more sustainable, resilient, and equitable (American Institute of Certified Planners 2016). The aspirational principles (ideals to which they are committed) contained in the Code call for certified planners to:

- Have special concern for the long-range consequences of present actions.
- Pay special attention to the interrelatedness of decisions.
- Give people the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the development of plans and programs that may affect them.
- Seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration.

Systems Approach

A fundamental premise of this book is that a systems approach is necessary for the comprehensive plan to yield truly sustainable, resilient, and equitable outcomes. A system can be defined as an interconnected set of elements that are coherently

organized in a way that achieves something; in other words, it has a function or purpose (Meadows 2008). A system is part of (nested within) a larger system and, in turn, comprises smaller subsystems (a concept referred to as system hierarchy). From this perspective, a community such as a city or town is a complex system that is both part of a larger system (the region) and an aggregate of smaller subsystems. Community subsystems include geographic subareas (for example, neighborhoods) and functional components such as land use, transportation, and housing, which themselves are systems comprising subsystems. For example, transportation is a multimodal system whose subsystems accommodate vehicles, bicyclists, pedestrians, public transit, and other ways that people and goods move through a community. In contrast to the traditional comprehensive planning model, which addressed functional systems like transportation and land use as siloed elements, a systems approach accounts for interactions between them in the plan and its implementation.

Systems demonstrate characteristic behaviors that reveal themselves over time. From a systems perspective, the real-world impacts of the comprehensive plan result from altering the behavior of multiple systems to create desired change.² The following are examples of how a systems approach can help a community become more sustainable, resilient, and equitable:

- Land use and transportation system behavior can be changed to increase energy efficiency and reduce fossil fuel consumption (sustainability).
- An enhanced urban forest as a subsystem of a community-wide green infrastructure system can ameliorate the urban heat island effect while absorbing and reducing stormwater runoff (resilience).
- All such interventions can be designed to increase access and opportunity for poor and underserved populations (equity).

A Brief History of the Comprehensive Plan

The origins of comprehensive planning date back to the City Beautiful movement, embodied by the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the 1902 McMillan Commission's plan for the monumental core of Washington, DC (Kelly 2010). In 1912, the American Society of Landscape Architects published *A Brief Survey of Recent City Planning Reports in the United States*, which identified 28 planning reports published during the prior two years, by cities such as Baltimore, New Haven, and St. Louis and authors such as Daniel Burnham, John Nolen, and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (Kimball 1912). Reflecting the influence of the City Beautiful movement (Burnham led the Columbian Exposition and both Burnham and Olmsted served on the McMillan Commission), these reports emphasized the physical development of the city, for example through park and boulevard systems.

The formal foundation for urban planning as it is practiced today was established by *A Standard State Zoning Enabling Act (SZE)*, published by the U.S. Department of Commerce in 1926, and *A Standard City Planning Enabling Act (SCPEA)*, published in 1928. The SZE called for zoning regulations to “be made in accordance with a comprehensive plan” in order to, among other purposes, “facilitate the adequate provision of transportation, water, sewerage, parks, and other public requirements.” Intended to complement the SZE, the SCPEA directed the planning commission to “make and adopt a master plan for the physical development of the municipality” and elaborated on the purpose, contents, and legal status of the plan (also referred to as the comprehensive or official plan). All 50 states adopted versions of the SZE and many have adopted elements of the SCPEA (Meck 1996).

The post-World War II era was a time of rapid growth and development for the United States following the Great Depression and World War II. Section 701 of the *Housing Act of 1954* provided a major boost to comprehensive planning practice by making funding available to smaller communities that lacked resources for planning. Federal appropriations from 1955 to 1981 (when the 701 program was rescinded) totaled over \$1 billion, enabling thousands of local jurisdictions to prepare comprehensive plans (Feiss 1985). The program contributed to widespread acceptance of planning as a local governmental function and of comprehensive planning as a core planning activity.

First published in 1964, *The Urban General Plan* by T.J. Kent provided a guide to comprehensive planning practice in the post-World War II era. Kent defined the general plan as:

...the official statement of a municipal legislative body which sets forth its major policies concerning desirable future physical development; the published general-plan document must include a single, unified general physical design for the community, and it must attempt to clarify the relationships between physical-development policies and social and economic goals.

(Kent 1990)

Kent asserted that the general plan should be long-range, comprehensive, and general in nature; should focus on physical development; and should provide a policy guide for decision-making rather than a detailed implementation program. He identified the city council (the elected representatives of the people) as the client of the general plan. While Kent referred to the role of the general plan in “providing an opportunity for citizen participation,” he did not specify such participation as part of the plan preparation process.

Throughout much of the 20th century, comprehensive plans were prepared using a top-down process referred to as the *rational model*. Public participation in shaping the plan was limited. In the latter part of the century, this model began to change,

influenced by societal trends such as the civil rights and environmental movements of the 1960s and trends in planning practice, such as advocacy planning and community visioning.

Two plans – *Toward a Sustainable Seattle* and *FOCUS Kansas City* – illustrate how comprehensive planning practice was changing at the dawn of the new millennium. *Toward a Sustainable Seattle* was one of the first comprehensive plans that identified sustainability as a fundamental goal (Godschalk and Anderson 2012). While organized into elements as required by Washington’s *Growth Management Act*, the plan identified four overarching values (themes) based on citizen engagement in the planning process: community, environmental stewardship, economic opportunity and security, and social equity. Recognizing climate change as a global challenge, the plan set targets for greenhouse gas emission reductions with the goal of making Seattle carbon neutral by 2050.

FOCUS Kansas City was prepared using a values-driven planning process with extensive citizen and stakeholder participation (Rouse 1998; Figure 1.1).³ The process was led by a steering committee and included 12 perspective groups representing different interests and viewpoints, as well as work teams for seven interrelated component plans (alternatives to traditional elements). The component plans addressed physical development (for example, the *Citywide Physical Framework* and *Urban Core Plans*), and topics not previously addressed by comprehensive plans (governance and human investment). Plan implementation was structured around 12 *Building Blocks*, such as Citizen Access and Communication, FOCUS Centers, and Moving About the City, that form “the foundation for building the new model for a connected city.”

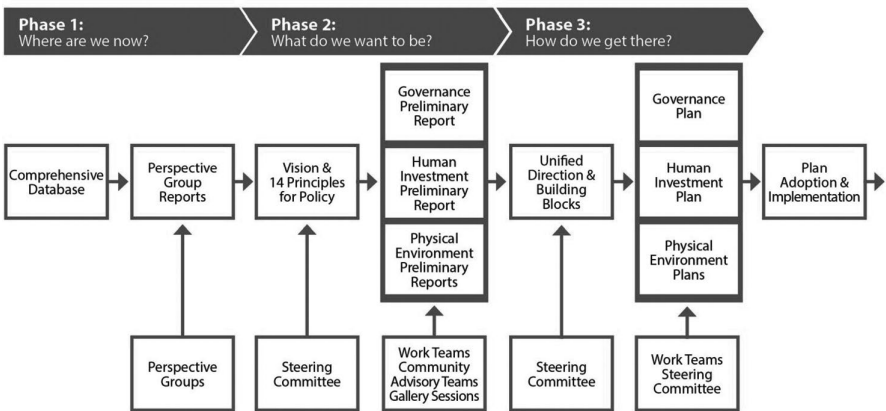


Figure 1.1 FOCUS Kansas City Planning Process

Source: Rouse (1998).

Comprehensive Plan Standards for Sustaining Places

The *Comprehensive Plan Standards for Sustaining Places* (Standards) are widely recognized as a benchmark for excellence in comprehensive planning practice. The Standards are a product of the *Sustaining Places Initiative*, launched by the American Planning Association (APA) in 2010 to define the role of planning in addressing the sustainability of human settlement. As part of this initiative, APA established the Sustaining Places Task Force to explore how the comprehensive plan can help local communities achieve sustainable outcomes. The task force's work culminated in publication of the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Report *Sustaining Places: The Role of the Comprehensive Plan* (Godschalk and Anderson 2012).

Following publication of the PAS Report, APA formed a working group to develop a framework (the Standards) that local communities can use in creating new comprehensive plans and to evaluate existing plans against a national benchmark. The framework consists of six principles, two processes, and two attributes (Table 1.1). Best practices that communities should incorporate into their plans are identified for each of these ten components. The Standards are presented in a second PAS Report, *Sustaining Places: Best Practices for Comprehensive Plans* (Godschalk and Rouse 2015).⁴

Organization of this Book

The Comprehensive Plan Standards for Sustaining Places were based on research of best practices found in leading comprehensive plans and the planning literature. As such, they encapsulate the changes in comprehensive planning practice as it has evolved from its 20th-century antecedents to the present day. This book uses the Standards as a foundation and departure point to provide a guide to comprehensive planning in the 21st century, with the goal of creating more sustainable, resilient, and equitable communities. Examples from contemporary plans of local jurisdictions across the United States are provided throughout (see Appendix B for a complete list of the comprehensive plans cited). The book is organized into three major sections:

Part I: The Planning Process. This section covers the methodology to create a comprehensive plan that leads to sustainable, resilient, and equitable outcomes. Its chapters address how to design the comprehensive planning process; assess current conditions, trends, and issues; articulate a community vision and goals for the future; and develop policies and actions to achieve the vision and goals.

Part II: The Substance of the Plan. This section covers the substantive contents of the comprehensive plan that results from the process described in Part I, based on the six principles defined by the Comprehensive Plan Standards for Sustaining Places. It explores the

Table 1.1 Comprehensive Plan Standards for Sustaining Places: Principles, Processes, and Attributes

Principles	
Livable Built Environment	Ensure that all elements of the built environment, including land use, transportation, housing, energy, and infrastructure, work together to provide sustainable, green places for living, working, and recreation, with a high quality of life.
Harmony with Nature	Ensure that the contributions of natural resources to human well-being are explicitly recognized and valued and that maintaining their health is a primary objective.
Resilient Economy	Ensure that the community is prepared to deal with both positive and negative changes to its economic health and to initiate sustainable urban development and redevelopment strategies that foster green business growth and build reliance on local assets.
Interwoven Equity	Ensure fairness and equity in providing for the housing, services, health, safety, and livelihood needs of all citizens and groups.
Healthy Community	Ensure that public health needs are recognized and addressed through provisions for healthy foods, physical activity, access to recreation, health care, environmental justice, and safe neighborhoods.
Responsible Regionalism	Ensure that all local proposals account for, connect with, and support the plans of adjacent jurisdictions and the surrounding region.
Processes	
Authentic Participation	Ensure that the planning process actively involves all segments of the community in analyzing issues, generating visions, developing plans, and monitoring outcomes.
Accountable Implementation	Ensure that responsibilities for carrying out the plan are clearly stated, along with metrics for evaluating progress in achieving desired outcomes.
Attributes	
Consistent Content	Ensure that the plan contains a consistent set of visions, goals, policies, objectives, and actions that are based on evidence about community conditions, major issues, and impacts.
Coordinated Characteristics	Ensure that the plan includes creative and innovative strategies and recommendations and coordinates them internally with each other, vertically with federal and state requirements, and horizontally with plans of adjacent jurisdictions.

Source: Godschalk and Rouse (2015).

range of topics covered by a robust comprehensive plan, organized into natural, built environment, social, and economic systems. The last two chapters address community health and regional connections in the comprehensive plan, respectively.

Part III: Forward to Implementation. This section addresses how process and substance come together in a final comprehensive plan that is successfully implemented. It covers the components of a successful implementation program; the attributes of a final plan that can be effectively communicated to the public; and the ongoing process of using and updating the plan following its adoption.

The concluding chapter in Part III provides the authors' speculations on what the future of the comprehensive plan may be, given accelerating change and the major challenges facing communities in the 21st century. We believe that a new generation of comprehensive plans is needed to address these challenges, and we hope that this book helps point the way forward.

Notes

- 1 Some jurisdictions refer to the comprehensive plan as the general plan (for example, in California) or the community master plan (for example, in New Jersey).
- 2 Donella Meadows identified 12 leverage points, or places to intervene in a system, ranked in order of their relative effect on system behavior (Meadows 2008, pp. 145–165). For example, changing numbers (constants and parameters such as taxes, subsidies, and standards) ranked the lowest in terms of its potential impact while changing paradigms (the mindset out of which the system arises) ranked the second highest, after transcending paradigms. An example of the former might be to change level-of-service standards for a transportation system that prioritizes efficient movement of vehicles. An example of the latter might be to change the system priority to providing mobility and accessibility for people.
- 3 Values-driven planning was developed in the 1990s by the firm Wallace Roberts & Todd as a methodology to understand and articulate community values through the planning process as the basis for the goals, policies, and implementation strategies of the plan (Rouse 1998).
- 4 The complete set of principles, processes, attributes, and best practices is provided in Appendix A.

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