



“The beginning is the most important part of the work.”

— Plato, *The Republic*

Preparing for the Comprehensive Planning Process

Mike Koles

Local governments across Wisconsin are beginning to use the comprehensive plan as a tool to guide their community’s future. The Wisconsin legislature supports these efforts as evidenced by the new comprehensive planning law and associated grant program (see *Key Points about Wisconsin’s New Comprehensive Planning and “Smart Growth” Law* (G3750)). The comprehensive plan is often looked upon as a road map that can foster the achievement of community goals. The process of developing and then implementing a plan is however, complex, and involves many different actors, as well as using community resources and creating discussion on potentially divisive issues. To undertake a well-organized, efficient and civil planning process that produces an effective, consensus-based comprehensive plan, many communities address planning by first

“planning for the plan.” This publication introduces the concept of pre-planning and includes a worksheet with common questions that a community can use as a tool to prepare for planning.

Why should communities “prepare to plan”?

One purpose of preparing to plan is to develop initial agreement among key stakeholders about the overall planning effort. This includes defining the purpose of the effort, the main steps in the process, and designing a system to involve citizens and develop community ownership of the effort. The support and commitment of stakeholders are critical if comprehensive planning is to succeed.

In addition to developing support from key leaders, preparing to plan helps a community clearly agree upon several critical decision points from the beginning of the process including:

- Why the community needs to plan
- General topics the plan should address
- Who should be involved in the effort
- Issues the community needs to learn more about
- Planning process steps and timeline



Properly preparing helps assure that planning is the correct tool for the community to use and that the tool is used effectively and efficiently. Without preparation, a community might be trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Not only does this waste time, but the community will be unsuccessful in achieving its goals.

Additionally, agreeing on the reasons for developing a comprehensive plan helps build community support for the planning effort from the beginning. Without a broad consensus, citizens might look on the planning effort as something that happened in a smoke-filled room in the back of the courthouse.

Often the first step in developing a public participation plan is to agree upon the entity that will guide the planning process. This could be one body or a mixture of the local government, planning commission, planning department, citizen's advisory committee or private planning consultants. In addition to identifying the planning entity, the roles of other stakeholders can be defined. For example, a citizen's advisory committee might direct the process, while the planning department or professional planner collects and analyzes data. Also, a chair and secretary of the process are often identified.

“The governing body of a local governmental unit shall adopt written procedures that are designed to foster public participation...”

—*Wisconsin's Comprehensive Planning Law, Wisconsin Act 9*

Preparing to plan components

Preparing for the planning process can be achieved by having a group of community leaders address a series of questions. The questions can be broken into four primary categories:

1. Purpose of planning
2. Stakeholder analysis
3. Educational need
4. Planning process

Purpose of planning

Communities often first identify why they want to develop a comprehensive plan and the topics that need to be addressed in the process. By addressing these points, the community can identify whether or not it really needs planning. Often a community will find that it does not need to develop a full-blown comprehensive plan, but instead can simply adjust an existing one (possibly to meet legal requirements) or develop a specific approach to address an issue. For example, if algae blooms are the problem, maybe an educational program rather than a comprehensive plan is the cure.

Questions to ask when identifying the purpose:

- What is our comprehensive planning history?
- What is the purpose of the planning effort?
- What are some broad topics that should be addressed in the plan?
- Will a plan help us address our needs?

Stakeholder analysis

Another initial discussion should revolve around identifying who to involve in the planning effort and how and when they should be involved. These individuals, groups or organizations are often referred to as stakeholders or, anyone who can be affected by or can affect the comprehensive plan or its implementation. Without broad participation, it is difficult to develop a quality plan that is relevant to and supported by the community and its leaders. Wisconsin's comprehensive planning law recognizes the importance of stakeholder involvement and requires that communities adopt written procedures designed to foster public participation.

Questions to ask about stakeholders

- Who are the stakeholders that should be involved in the planning process?
- How will we involve stakeholders in the planning process?
- Who will lead the planning process?
- Who will post meeting notices, take meeting minutes, attendance, etc.?
- When do certain stakeholders need to be involved?
- How do we go about choosing and hiring a planning consultant?

Educational need

An integral portion of the planning process involves educating the community. A community cannot effectively plan without knowing where it has been, how it got there and where it could be heading. Comprehensive planning involves deciphering the integrated mix of ingredients that make up a community; for example, the relationship between transportation and local development trends, or forest cover and wildlife health. These are just a few of the myriad of connections that must be thoroughly understood to develop and implement an effective plan. As a community prepares, it should identify topics it needs to learn about and better understand in order to develop the most effective comprehensive plan.

Questions to ask about educational needs

- What do we need to learn about each topic that will be addressed in the plan?
- What are some citizen participation tools that we can use to involve the public?

Coordinating the planning process

Planning process logistics are often charted during the preparation step. This might include constructing a timeline that identifies what will be accomplished when, essentially serving as a road map to success. It involves ironing out some details. For example, a citizen's advisory or other local planning committee will have to make difficult decisions. During the pre-planning process, the committee might ask some of the following questions:

- How will the committee make decisions? (Consensus? Voting?)
- Will all members vote? Who can vote?
- On what will decisions be based (data, personal values, politics, etc.)?
- Are there any rules of conduct the committee should follow?
- Do members have to attend a certain number of meetings to be eligible to vote?
- How often does the committee want to meet? When? How long?

Identifying these simple details will make the process much smoother and more efficient.

Three steps to preparation

Preparing to plan is typically a three-step process.

1. The first step involves developing, a rudimentary understanding of comprehensive planning, Wisconsin's Comprehensive Planning Law and the preparation phase itself. Local planning agencies, regional planning commissions and University of Wisconsin-Extension educators can assist communities throughout the initial learning phase.
2. The second step involves actually developing a "plan to plan." This is normally accomplished with a small group of people who will provide leadership to the planning process. Plan commissions, town, county and village boards, city councils, or even a group of interested citizens often perform this task.
3. The final step involves presenting a draft "plan to plan" to stakeholders who will be involved in the planning process. This helps develop buy-in and allows for any needed amendments to be made. For example, dates or times are often changed to accommodate certain stakeholders or participants may volunteer to perform specified roles, such as committee secretary or newsletter editor.



Pre-planning process

Step 1 ➡

Basic understanding of comprehensive planning

Step 2 ➡

Developing a pre-plan

Step 3

Present draft "plan-to-plan" to stakeholders

Summary

Comprehensive planning is complex, involves many actors, uses community resources, involves discussion regarding potentially divisive issues, and may take place over the course of several years. Entering into such a process is not being taken lightly by many Wisconsin communities, and as a result they are beginning the process by planning to plan. Without a map of the planning process, the road to success may be inordinately long and bumpy.

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Pre-planning worksheet

1. What is the purpose of the planning effort?

2. What are some broad topics that should be addressed in the plan?¹

3. Will a plan help us address our needs?

4. Who are the stakeholders that should be involved in the process?

5. How will we involve stakeholders?²

6. What will be the role of each stakeholder? When will each be involved?

¹ Wisconsin's Comprehensive Planning Law clearly identifies some general topics that need to be addressed by the comprehensive plan. These are commonly referred to as the "nine elements." The nine elements provide an effective guide for discussion regarding this question.

² Wisconsin's Comprehensive Planning Law requires that: "The governing body of a local governmental unit shall adopt written procedures that are designed to foster public participation..." This essentially means that a public participation plan must be adopted. When discussing this issue, it is important that the significance of citizen participation and the variety of tools available to foster participation is clearly understood. A separate educational session on public participation may be necessary.

7. Who will provide technical assistance to develop the comprehensive plan? Does the community have the skills or will it need to hire a planning consultant?³

8. Who will chair the planning process, perform secretarial duties, etc.?

9. What policies will we use to make decisions?

10. What are committee conduct rules?

11. How often do we want to meet? How long? Do we want to have set dates? Times?

12. What are the community's educational needs with regard to comprehensive planning (information on plan topics, data, trends)?

³ If the community intends to hire a planning consultant, an additional topic that should be addressed is how the consultant will be hired (e.g., request for qualifications, request for proposal).