

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN TECHNICAL BULLETIN

A municipal comprehensive plan (in some areas known as a comprehensive development plan or master plan) is a long-range planning document created by a local government, such as a city or town, to guide the growth and development of the community over a period—typically 10 – 20 years. It provides a general roadmap for the future and serves as a foundational document for specific regulations (like zoning laws) and policies. It serves as a blueprint for land use, infrastructure, housing, transportation, and other community elements to ensure sustainable development that meets the needs of the population, while balancing environmental, social, and economic factors.

Public input and involvement is crucial to the development of a comprehensive plan that reflects the needs and goals of a community. Using input from the public, a comprehensive plan outlines the community's vision and goals, guides zoning and land development policies and identifies strategies for accomplishing the outlined goals.

This technical bulletin summarizes the process and key elements involved in the development and adoption of a comprehensive plan in Pennsylvania. While the purpose and benefits are similar in Delaware, the development and adoption process may be different, due to the differences in local government structure.

PURPOSE

1. **Provides a Vision for the Future:** Articulates a long-term vision for the municipality's development, considering factors like population growth, economic trends, and environmental sustainability. It outlines where and how growth should occur in the coming decades.
2. **Guides Land Use Decisions:** Ensures organized development and zoning alignment with community goals.
3. **Supports Sustainable Development:** Promotes environmentally responsible and balanced development.
4. **Provides a Framework for Infrastructure Planning:** It helps local governments plan for necessary infrastructure, including roads, water systems, sewage, parks, and other public services, ensuring that these services are available to support future growth.
5. **Guides Economic Development:** Targets areas for economic growth, including commercial, industrial, and mixed-use development, supporting local job creation and economic resilience.
6. **Facilitates Public Participation:** The planning process includes public input from residents, business owners, and other stakeholders. It provides an opportunity for the community to express their concerns, needs, and desires for the future of their area.
7. **Provides a Basis for Regulations and Policies:** Informs local zoning ordinances, building codes, and other regulations, ensuring they are consistent with the municipality's long-term goals. It helps planners make informed decisions about where certain types of development should occur.



8. **Ensures Consistency and Coordination:** Helps coordinate efforts among different departments, levels of government and neighboring communities (e.g., local, regional, and state) and ensures that development decisions align with the larger regional goals and policies.
9. **Enhances Quality of Life:** By planning for green spaces, recreational areas, public amenities, and transportation systems, the comprehensive plan aims to improve the overall quality of life for residents, enhancing livability and community cohesion.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Planning Process:

- Involves surveys, data collection, analysis, problem identification, goal setting, option formulation, decision-making, implementation, evaluation, and updates.
- Addresses change due to growth or evolving community needs.

Zoning and Land Use:

- Municipalities are not required to regulate land use, but if zoning is implemented, clear development objectives must be established.
- Objectives must be supported by sufficient analysis to defend land use ordinances against legal challenges.

Public Process and Regional Consideration:

- Planning must be a public process and should consider factors beyond municipal boundaries.

Comprehensive Plan:

- It is a non-legal document that outlines general goals and objectives for future growth.
- Not a land use ordinance but it should be adopted as a guiding framework for decision-making.
- Helps municipal leaders navigate future growth based on past trends and future needs.



Comprehensive Plans often contain recommendations for historic preservation and retaining community character.

ENABLING LEGISLATION

Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code

Article III of the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC) outlines the required elements and process for adopting a comprehensive plan.

Delaware Code

Adoption of land use plans is outlined in 22 Delaware Code Title 22 §702.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS

The Pennsylvania MPC outlines the four criteria that all comprehensive plans must follow:

1. Contain nine (9) basic plan elements set forth in Section 301(a)
 - A statement of community development goals and objectives that charts the location, character and timing of future development.
 - A plan for land use identifying the amount, intensity, character and timing of land use.
 - A plan to meet housing needs of present residents and those families anticipated to live in the municipality as well as accommodating new housing in different dwelling types and at

appropriate densities for households of all income levels.

- A transportation plan evaluating the movement of goods and people through expressways, highways, local streets, pedestrian and bicycle networks, public transit routes, terminals, airfields, railroads, parking facilities and other similar facilities or uses.
- A community facilities plan reviewing utilities and services including, but not limited to, public and private education, recreation, municipal buildings, emergency services, libraries, hospitals, water supply, sewerage and waste treatment, solid waste management, storm drainage, and flood plain management.
- A statement of the interrelationships among the various plan components which estimates the environmental, energy conservation, fiscal, economic development and social consequences on the municipality.
- A discussion of short- and long-range plans implementation strategies.
- A statement indicating that existing and proposed development is compatible with plans and development in contiguous municipalities. This statement should indicate that existing and proposed development is generally consistent with the objectives and plans

of the county comprehensive plan.

- A plan for the protection of natural and historic resources to the extent the municipalities are not limited by other federal or state statutes, these resources include, wetlands, aquifer recharge zones, woodlands, steep slopes, prime agricultural land, flood plain, unique natural areas and historic sites.
2. Contain a plan for the reliable supply of water, considering current and future water resources availability.
 3. Reviewed every 10 years.
 4. Identify those areas where growth and development will occur so that a full range of public infrastructure, including sewer, water, highways, police and fire protection, public schools, parks open space, and other services can be adequately planned and provided as needed to accommodate growth.

Optional element can also include:

- Energy Conservation Plan which reviews each plan component for current and potential energy impacts, with measures for energy conservation and implementation of renewable energy usage throughout the comprehensive plan's goals and objectives, as well as throughout the municipality over the next 10-20 years.



Comprehensive plans evaluate a community's transportation network.

Trail
New Garden Trail System

IMPLEMENTABLE COMPREHENSIVE PLANS

In recent years, municipal and county comprehensive plans have shifted to a more concise and focused plan that prioritizes implementable goals. While comprehensive plans must meet the requirements outlined in the MPC, particularly regarding required topics, municipalities are not strictly bound by traditional planning formats or recommendations. An implementable comprehensive plan should be focused and actionable to achieve results, emphasizing clarity and accessibility, to ensure that the plan is understandable and usable by both government officials and the community. Successful and implementable plans often include the following:

1. **Focused on Real and Relevant Issues:** Focus on the municipality's specific problems, needs, and opportunities, like traffic congestion or promoting walking. Prioritize time and resources on the most pressing issues.
2. **Organize Around Citizen Concerns:** Structure the plan based on how citizens think and speak, addressing issues like neighborhood decay instead of technical terms. Organize by focal issues rather than rigid categories like housing or land use.
3. **Develop Actionable Recommendations:** Provide detailed action plans for priority issues, including cost estimates, funding sources, and implementation strategies. A few concrete action plans are better than many vague recommendations. Organize these implementation strategies in a way that will best serve the implementors.
4. **Ensure Implementation Capacity:** Plan for the capacity to implement by involving relevant agencies and organizations early. Create implementation teams to continue the work after the plan is completed.
5. **Build Community Ownership:** Involve citizens and elected officials throughout the planning process to generate support and commitment and continue to include the community

throughout the implementation. This ensures the plan is embraced and integrated into future municipal actions.

EXAMPLES

- **Unionville Area Regional Comprehensive Plan (2024)**
 - East Marlborough, West Marlborough and Newlin Township
 - Evaluates future land use, open space, historic resources, guiding growth, parks and recreation and community resiliency.
- **Penn Township, Chester County (2024)**
 - Evaluates natural resources, open space and recreation, guiding growth, heritage preservation, multi modal transportation, and resilience preparedness.
- **Malvern Borough, Chester County (2022)**
 - Evaluates future land use, economic vitality, revitalization, and housing, historic resources, natural resources and open space, parks and recreation, community facilities and services, and Multimodal Transportation and Circulation.



Comprehensive Plans take inventory of all community amenities and recommend improvements when needed.

DEVELOPMENT AND ADOPTION

Preliminary Steps

Assess Planning Needs:

- Evaluate the municipality's planning problems, needs, and resources.
- Prioritize these issues and consult with the county planning office for guidance.

Ensure Citizen Input:

- Incorporate public input throughout the process to ensure community values are reflected.
- Use surveys and visioning exercises to gather public preferences for the future.
- Hold public meetings to explain the planning process, costs, and timeline.

Hire Professional Assistance:

- Many municipalities may not afford full-time professional planners; consider hiring consultants or collaborating with county planning staff for support.

Develop Partnerships:

- Partner with neighboring municipalities or universities to pool resources and enhance planning efforts.

Balance Resources with Needs:

- Ensure financial resources are aligned with planning needs for effective, community-driven development.
- Focus the planning process on the most relevant issues.

Identification or establishment of a Plan Task Force

- A task force may be established to oversee the development of the comprehensive plan.
- If a municipality has multiple committees or boards and project task force can ensure each committee and board has representation during the planning process.



Demonstration projects and other park enhancements where recommendations of the Penn Township Comprehensive Plan.

- If a special task force is not formed, typically the planning commission oversees this process.

Development of Goals and Objectives

Community Development Goals and Objectives are critical for guiding policy decisions and can be legally examined in land use challenges.

- They are based on background studies, identifying constraints, problems, opportunities, needs, and future assumptions.
- Goals and objectives should be prioritized due to competition for land use and dwindling resources.
- While sometimes seen as idealistic or meaningless by developers and officials, they are critical for guiding policy decisions and can be legally examined in land use challenges.
- Goals and objectives should be clear, concise, specific, and unique to each community, not copied from other municipalities.
- They form the foundation for regulations, such as zoning and subdivision and land development ordinances, governing a community's growth and development.

Plan Elements

The Comprehensive Plan should outline a strategy for various land uses, including residential, recreational, agricultural, open space, commercial, industrial, resource extraction, and institutional, along with the necessary infrastructure to support these developments.

A Comprehensive Plan consistent with the MPC should consist of three parts:

1. Community goals and objectives
2. Technical background studies
3. Functional plans (detailed plans for specific areas)

Since all communities have different needs, all elements may not be suitable for every community, while others may require more detail.

Public Review and Input

A public meeting must be held by the planning agency before the proposed plan or amendment is forwarded to the governing body.

Act 247 Review Process

- Consistent with the Act 247 review process, the municipality must submit the final plan to the county planning agency for review and comment.
- The plan must also be provided to the contiguous municipalities and local school district for review and comment. During this period, the plan should also be available for public review.



Public and landowner input is essential for an effective Comprehensive Plan.

- Comments from the county, contiguous municipalities, and the school district must be submitted within 45 days.
- The governing body cannot act on the proposed plan until comments are received.
- If no comments are received within 45 days, the governing body may proceed without them.

Public Hearing

- Once the 45-day review period is over and comments are collected, the municipality is required to hold a public hearing prior to adoption.
- If the public hearing does not lead to any changes or only minor corrections to the Plan, the governing body can proceed with adopting the plan, contingent on any minor corrections.
- If significant revisions are proposed, a new Act 247 Review and public hearing should be conducted before adoption.

Adoption

- Following a public hearing the governing body can adopt or amend the comprehensive plan as a whole or in parts.
- The governing body must review the following before adopting the plan:
 - Comments from the county, contiguous municipalities, and the local school district.
 - Comments from the public meeting.
 - Recommendations from the municipal planning agency.
- Resolution by the governing body.
 - The resolution shall refer expressly to the maps, charts, textual matter, and other matters intended to form the whole or part of the plan, and the action shall be recorded on the adopted plan or part.

SAMPLE OUTLINES

Implementable Plan: Key Issues	Traditional Approach: As outlined by DCED
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction/ Background <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Overview • Goals and Objectives • Planning Process • Summary of Public engagement 2. Natural Resources, Open Space, Parks, and Recreation 3. Guiding Growth 4. Heritage Preservation 5. Multi-Modal Transportation 6. Resilience Preparedness 7. Implementation Strategies <p>Appendix</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. MPC Requirements 2. Background Documents and Review 3. Assessment of Community Demographics 4. Community Climate Profile 5. Inventories <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural Resources • Open Space • Housing • Existing Land Use • Community Facilities and Services • Historic Resources • Transportation 6. Mapping 7. Public Participation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Survey Results • Key Stakeholder Interviews Summary • Public Meetings Materials 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Planning Process and the Community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community characteristics; Visioning; Statement of Community Development Objectives and Policies; Citizens Participation; History of the community and region; Regional characteristics; Build out map 2. Physical Environment and Natural Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topography; Natural resources; Water resources; Watershed inventory; Resource Inventory/Analysis maps; Natural Diversity Inventory; Green Infrastructure Inventory; Natural hazard areas; special hazard areas; Inventory of Historic Structures 3. Population Characteristics and Trends <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographic information and projections. 4. Public, Semi-public, and Community Service and Utility Facilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Facilities plan; Utilities; Municipal service operations; Volunteer service operations; School; Technical and other training centers; Recreational areas; Cultural resources; Hospitals; Cemeteries; Communications and media; Solid waste management plan 5. Transportation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inventory of transportation modes and systems; Interstates; expressways; beltways; highways; boulevards; streets; alleys and public ways; Pedestrian; bikeway; equestrian; trails; pathways; Terminals – airport; port; railroad; water; Classification of roads, streets and ways; Traffic patterns; origin and destination; Traffic volumes and capacity analysis; Public transportation; assessment and needs 6. Housing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing characteristics needs, inventory and trends; Age, construction type, specification, manufactured, code standard, company homes; Type, single-family, two-family, manufactured homes and residential parks; range of multifamily dwellings; Housing occupancy and vacancy; Quality value and needs assessment; Housing needs and affordability; Future housing needs; Residential neighborhood patterns; housing densities; housing mobility and shifts; Housing ownership and funding; past, present and projected 7. Economic Conditions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic analysis of the community; Community income; source; distribution; Size and character of labor force, skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled workers; managerial and professional force; Economic stability and versatility; Types of industry, commercial and trade establishments; size; payroll; capitalization; Agricultural resources and production; Mining, quarrying and other extraction and raw materials processing activities; Sources of loan capital; Undeveloped industrial and commercial areas 8. Land Use Plans <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing land use inventory, land characteristics and coverage; Future land use plan; Other future functional plans as appropriate 9. Function and Form of Government <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type of government; Administrative organization; Consistency of plans; Codes and code enforcement: building; housing; electrical; plumbing; fire; property maintenance; MPC land use ordinances; official map; zoning; subdivision and land development; PRD provisions; Designated Growth Areas; Energy conservation plan; Capital improvement plan; Nutrient Management; Historic and natural features preservation ordinances

Implementation

Land use and other ordinances

Municipal comprehensive plans are primarily implemented through municipal land use ordinances, including the subdivision and land development ordinance and the zoning ordinance, or other municipal ordinances authorized by the MPC. The adopted comprehensive plan should serve as the guiding document for revisions to these land use ordinances.

The following ordinance tools and zoning provisions can be implemented to carry out the goals identified in the comprehensive plan:

- Planned Residential Development (PRD) to direct mixed use or higher density development near existing infrastructure and community facilities, such as water, sewer and transportation.
- Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND) to promote pedestrian oriented development.
- Transferable Development Rights (TDR) to allow development rights to be purchased and transferred from an area to be preserved to an area to be developed.
- The Official Map (see Official Map Toolkit for additional information).
- Adoption, administration and enforcement building codes

Regular review and reference

An adopted comprehensive plan is not effective sitting on a shelf, implementation of the plan requires regular review.

- The MPC required Comprehensive plans to be reviewed every 10 years. If the review reveals needed changes the municipality must update the plan.

- Comprehensive plans should be provided to all municipal committee and board members, especially the planning agency and the governing body.
- Municipal staff, board members and committee members should be encouraged to review the relevant sections of the plan to ensure the recommendations are implemented.
 - Many recent plans include an implementation table that outlines recommendations, priorities and the key parties involved in implementation. This table should identify which committee(s) or board(s) are integral to implementation.

Public engagement

Not only is public engagement important throughout the development of the comprehensive plan, but it is also important to engage the public throughout the implementation process. Their involvement is crucial because they form the foundation of the community and contribute to the success of the planning efforts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *PA Department of Community & Economic Development – The Comprehensive Plan in Pennsylvania: Planning Series #3 (September 2020)*
- *PA Municipalities Planning Code (MPC)*
- *Delaware Code Title 22 §702*
- *WeConservePA Library – Comprehensive Plans*

