



# Assessing Your Comprehensive Plan

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*Consider your community's vision for its downtown environment.*

## A Vision for Land Use and Community

The comprehensive plan guides Indiana communities toward their self-identified goals through policies that shape land use and development decisions. These decisions deeply affect the social, environmental, economic, and public health aspects of a community's quality of life. It is up to plan commissions to develop, update, and administer these comprehensive plans. Plan commissions generally create comprehensive plans with a 20-year future outlook.

State law IC 36-7-4-502 prescribes the basic content of a comprehensive plan, but additional content is permitted in accordance with IC 36-7-4-503. This approach both establishes elements that must be present in all comprehensive plans and provides latitude for communities to address unique challenges and opportunities through local planning.

This publication discusses the process of

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A previous version of this publication was written by Val Slack, Purdue Extension Agricultural and Natural Resources educator.

comprehensive planning in Indiana. It also discusses the content of comprehensive plans and factors to consider during the update or amendment of a comprehensive plan.

## The Process

A well-designed planning process can help planners understand the interests, goals, and visions of stakeholders, and then combine this information with objective analyses. While we describe a typical overall process, remember that one process does not fit all communities. Local officials and planners should tailor their efforts to best engage the populations they serve.

First, planners analyze many aspects of the community, including:

- Existing conditions
- The need for public facilities (infrastructure and capital improvements)
- Future land demand
- Future employment
- Predicted population
- Transportation demand

More than just analyze, planners must offer several methods for public engagement — this allows diverse groups to contribute to the process and have their input documented. Detroit, Michigan, conducted a public input process they called, Detroit Works in collaboration with Detroit: Future City that involved a robust range of public input methods.

*The Purdue Land Use Team provides research-based resources and educational programs for Extension professionals, government officials, and residents on land use issues that affect their communities. Learn more at [www.cdext.purdue.edu/collaborative-projects/land-use](http://www.cdext.purdue.edu/collaborative-projects/land-use).*

They used four key civic engagement strategies to guide their process:

1. Address profound challenges of culture, race, and politics by **building trust**
2. Elevate community expertise by fostering a **sense of ownership** of the process
3. **Blend** technical and community expertise
4. View civic engagement as an **ongoing process** rather than a series of large-scale episodic events (Griffin, Cramer, and Powers 2014)

The Detroit Works Long-Term Planning Project used engagement tactics to support their four strategies. In addition to live engagement events like town hall meetings, their civic engagement effort utilized technology to solicit input. The table below lists several engagement strategies used in the planning effort.

According to the 2012 Detroit Strategic Framework Plan, the engagement effort “garnered 136 news stories either on TV, in print, or in online publications; 119,312,772 unpaid print and online media impressions; and nearly five hours of unpaid TV and radio coverage.” In addition, through the Detroit Stories project, residents were invited to record oral histories about the places where they lived, and the Detroit 24/7 online planning game awarded points for generating comments related to quality of life and the future of the city.

Live Engagement	Technology-based Engagement
Town hall meetings	Detroit Stories video oral history project
Topic-based meetings	Print, radio, television advertisements and news stories
Door-to-door outreach	Website content and social media posts
Presentations at community meetings	Detroit 24/7 Online planning game 59.3

To summarize, the engagement process should be accessible, equitable, and thorough. Furthermore, planners should give due consideration to public feedback and incorporate it into their plan.

It’s important to incorporate feedback for many reasons:

- Residents and business owners and employees are sources of expert information about where they live and operate
- Public engagement demonstrates a transactive process whereby mutual learning occurs between client groups and planners (Friedmann, 2003)



*Comprehensive plans often address urban and rural land uses. Consider how engagement techniques will differ with these audiences.*

- Public feedback helps achieve greater buy-in from elected officials and community members once the plan is ready for the legislative body to adopt

The sum of the process is a set of goals and strategies to guide community decision making toward meeting the community’s vision for its future.

### The Content

If an Indiana community chooses to form a plan commission with the goal of creating a comprehensive plan, then that plan must address land use, transportation, and public facilities. While these areas form the core of planning, a community may choose to address issues beyond those legally required.

A comprehensive plan could address these issues with policies, goals, and strategies that include current best practices for emerging challenges such as changes in technology, new legal conditions, food access, climate change, natural resource management, and community health. Land use elements usually feature a land use map that identifies a broad pattern and layout of future land uses, but planners cannot foresee in detail the development patterns that will occur over time. Their projections are educated guesses. Therefore, the comprehensive plan should be considered as a guiding document that requires periodic adjustment. The plan must adapt to changes while providing a sound foundation for development decisions.

So how can a comprehensive plan be made more effective? **Here are ten suggestions.**

1. Seek input from developers, businesses, professionals, institutions, organizations and the general public to make the planning process as inclusive as possible. Connect with different demographic groups including children, university students, working adults, senior citizens, disabled populations, minority races and ethnic groups, and veterans.
2. Incorporate concerns and community input continuously during the planning process. It helps ensure the plan get adopted if you can demonstrate a bona fide community engagement process.
3. Make sure the plan serves current goals, near-future needs, and long-term community goals. A useful question to consider is whether the adopted policies will address day-to-day problems. If they do not, determine why, then decide whether the policies are needed.
4. Develop cheap, easily reproducible, and accessible formats to share information with stakeholders. Consider downloadable PDF posted on the community's website, or a website specific to the plan or planning effort. Keep the file size to a minimum, and if possible, allow the public to download individual elements or chapters.
5. Promote the planning process and the final plan via traditional and social media
6. Set up study periods to go over the plan immediately after adoption and periodically thereafter. For fast growing communities it may be necessary to review the plan every three years, while slower-growing communities may only need to review their plan every five years.
7. Make sure the local officials who will carry out the plan are adequately trained. The plan director, zoning administrator, plan commission members, and the members of the board of zoning appeals are all people who should have training.
8. Refer to the plan for development approvals and whenever a controversial issue surfaces. Evaluate how well the plan and its policies address each issue.
9. Review the plan for inconsistencies or conflicts between goals and policies for elements such as open space and economic development. Also consider corridor, sub-area, or neighborhood plans and ensure the goals and objectives of these plans

are compatible with the comprehensive plan. Be sure the plan sets out a policy to resolve conflicts.

10. Encourage officials to include the cost of updating the plan in the budgetary process.

### **Amending a Plan**



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After a community has adopted and used the plan for a period of time, new and developing conditions might call for its amendment. Civic groups, individual advocates, business owners, and other stakeholders are “feelers” in the community and will voice their needs to the planning director, plan commissioners, or elected representatives regarding their interests.

The commissioners and planning staff should carefully weigh such input should when they decide to initiate an amendment or update. Indiana statutes provide for amendment; however, this authority should be used with discretion. Frequent or capricious changes can undermine a plan’s purpose.

The procedure to amend a plan is similar to the plan adoption process. The plan commission, the governing body or bodies, or local citizens may propose an amendment. However, any proposal must be referred to the plan commission for consideration. The commission may refer the proposed change to a study committee for examination and a recommendation on whether or not the commission should undertake the amendment. The commission then holds at least one public hearing. Note that multiple hearings at different locations and times of day provide more convenient access to the public.

While evaluating an amendment, the commission should be sure that the change fits the goals and policies of the comprehensive plan and that special interest groups are not receiving preferential treatment.

In addition, commissioners should consider the effects of the amendment as broadly as possible. Effects may include adverse or unintended effects to adjacent landowners, established commerce, existing traffic patterns, public service delivery, and the ability to meet the needs of low-income and minority groups.

After the public hearings have been held and evaluation completed, the plan commission may adopt the proposed amendment and refer it to the appropriate legislative body or bodies for review and adoption. An amendment is not effective until the governing body has approved it.

Finally, the plan commission files the officially adopted amendment with the county recorder, and the amendment becomes part of the revised plan.

### **How Often Should The Plan Be Revised?**

The plan should be reviewed every three to five years. This ensures that the study data and planning maps reflect current status, and that the zoning ordinance is meeting the community's needs. Policies may also have to be updated. A review by a study committee may be simple in communities that have grown little in recent years or quite elaborate in communities that have witnessed rapid growth or change.

The following questions may help you during the review process.

- Can the goals, objectives, and policies be improved?
- Have population characteristics changed? If so, how will these changes affect the jurisdiction in the future?
- Does the plan include current best practices for addressing community issues that came to light during the public engagement process?
- Has the local economy changed? What long-term effect will these changes have?
- Has the natural environment degraded or improved?
- What kind of development has occurred and where? Was the development an intended outcome of the plan, or should the plan's policies be amended? Are unanticipated vacancies occurring in certain types of land use categories or geographic areas?
- How have federal and state regulations and funding affected the plan? Are additional funding sources available, or are certain funds at risk of becoming unavailable?
- Are the transportation, recreation, safety, and other public services needs of residents being met?

The results of the review and revision study could reveal that changes in the policies, zoning ordinance, subdivision control ordinance, or other developmental controls are needed. The study committee can identify these issues and present recommendations to the plan commission.

### **Conclusion**

A comprehensive plan is somewhat like a new car. It needs to be checked, evaluated, fine-tuned, and taken care of in order to last a long time. It also needs to be used to realize its purpose! A successful plan is action-oriented, balanced, community-supported, and adaptable to change.

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