

The Purpose of the Comprehensive Plan

The comprehensive plan, also known as a general plan, master plan or land use plan, is a document designed to guide the future actions of a city or county. The Iowa Supreme Court has stated that the legal purpose of the comprehensive plan is to “direct use and development of property by dividing it into districts according to present and potential uses.” The comprehensive plan also presents a vision for the future with long-range goals and objectives for all activities that affect the local government. This includes guidance on how to make decisions on public and private land development proposals, the expenditure of public funds, and issues of pressing concern (such as farmland preservation for counties, or the rehabilitation of older neighborhoods in cities). Most plans are written to provide direction for ten to twenty years after their adoption. Plans should receive a considered review and possible update every five years.

A city or county comprehensive plan serves the following functions:

- The plan provides continuity. The plan provides continuity across time, and gives successive public bodies a common framework for addressing land use issues.
- It is the means by which a community can balance competing private interests. John Public may want to store oil drums on his property. Jane Citizen, his neighbor, would like to open a restaurant on her property. Planning seeks to strike a balance among the many competing demands on land by creating development patterns that are orderly and rational, and provide the greatest benefits for individuals and the community as a whole.
- It is the means by which a community can protect public investments. Planning is the means by which a community avoids digging up last year's new road to lay this year's new sewer pipe. It is also less expensive for a community to provide public services to well planned, orderly and phased development patterns than to low-density, scattered development.
- It allows communities to plan development in a way that protects its valued resources. Planning can identify environmental features like wetlands, agricultural lands, woods and steep slopes, and suggest strategies for preserving those resources from destruction or degradation by development.
- It provides guidance for shaping the appearance of the community. A plan can set forth policies that foster a distinctive sense of place.
- It promotes economic development. The plan contains valuable information that aids firms in determining where to locate.
- It provides justification for decisions. Plans provide a factual and objective basis to support zoning decisions, and they can be used by communities to defend their decisions if challenged in court.
- Through public dialogue, citizens express a collective vision for the future. Last, but certainly not least, the planning process provides citizens an opportunity to brainstorm, debate and discuss the future of their community. A plan developed through a robust public input process will enjoy strong community support. Subsequent decisions that are consistent with the plan's policies are less likely to become embroiled in public controversy.

