

PREFACE: WHY PLAN?

Nature of a Comprehensive Plan

Generally speaking, a comprehensive plan, which also may be called a master plan, is the most basic public policy guide for a community. All other plans, studies, and land use codes developed or adopted by the community should be prepared in accordance with the comprehensive plan and should promote or advance its goals and objectives. A comprehensive plan consists of several important components, such as:

1. an inventory and assessment of population and economic trends and community resources (such as schools, roads, public buildings, undeveloped lands, and natural resources);
2. a summary of community needs and goals; and
3. a coordinated strategy for the management or improvement of community resources and the future growth and development of the city.

The plan serves two primary purposes: to help local officials better understand growth trends and community problems; and to develop strategies to use available resources effectively when addressing local problems and building capacity for future growth. If the growth and development of a city can be compared to the construction of a house, then the comprehensive plan is the blueprint. It contains a list of building tools and materials (the inventory and assessment component), instructions on how to put the pieces together and in what order (the statement of goals, objectives, and policies and a recommended implementation schedule), and a picture or image of the desired product (the future land use map).

The Benefits of a Comprehensive Plan

A plan can have many benefits to a community. For example, a comprehensive plan can and does:

1. draw attention to important community problems or needs;
2. promote the city to outside development interests;
3. communicate public policies to residents of the community;
4. help prioritize and coordinate investments in public improvements;
5. help minimize wasteful spending of tax dollars;
6. identify sources of funds that can be used to address local needs; and
7. serve as a guide for local zoning ordinances and other development codes.

Although a plan can offer many benefits to a community, it is important to remember that the plan is only as good as the information it contains, and can only benefit the community if it is used by the city and updated regularly to reflect changing needs and conditions.

Legal Authority

Alabama law requires that every municipal Planning Commission prepare and adopt a plan for the community (Title 11, Chapter 52, Section 8 of the Code of Alabama, 1975). Although the comprehensive plan is adopted by the Planning Commission, it should serve as the primary guide for the formulation of local public policy and for coordinating the future growth and development of the community. Therefore, the governing body of the community should be involved in the plan preparation process, or should be afforded an opportunity to review and comment on the draft plan before its adoption by the Planning Commission. In some communities, the City Council also has adopted the plan after its adoption by the Planning Commission. However, Alabama law recognizes only the Planning Commission's action on the plan, so adoption of the plan by a City Council cannot substitute for adoption by the Planning Commission.

According to Title 11, Chapter 52, Section 10 of the Code of Alabama, 1975, the Planning Commission may adopt a comprehensive plan in its entirety, or it may adopt individual sections or chapters of the plan as they are prepared. Before the plan or any section or portion of it may be adopted by the Planning Commission, a public hearing must be conducted. Alabama law does allow the Planning Commission to dispense with the public hearing, if the City Council conducts a public hearing on the plan or plan section prior to its adoption by the Planning Commission. Once the comprehensive plan has been adopted by the Planning Commission, an attested copy of the plan must be certified to the City Council and the Probate Judge.

The law also requires local zoning to be prepared in accordance with the comprehensive plan (Title 11, Chapter 52, Section 72 of the Code of Alabama, 1975). Some communities interpret this provision of law to mean that the zoning map and the future land use map in the comprehensive plan must be identical. However, this interpretation of the relationship between the zoning map and the comprehensive plan only constrains the plan's ability to guide future growth and development. The future land use map contained in the plan should be developed as a general depiction of desired local development patterns at the end of the planning period, which may be ten to twenty years into the future. Therefore, it should identify areas that will be desirable for more intensive development after the supporting infrastructure improvements have been completed to allow such development. On the other hand, the zoning should guide land uses and development to occur in areas that are suitable given existing conditions and limitations. This distinction between the future land use map contained in the comprehensive plan and the zoning map gives the zoning map legal authority to regulate current development, and allows the plan to serve as a guide for future zoning changes to provide for new growth and development.

The adoption of a comprehensive plan also gives the Planning Commission authority to review and approve the construction of public streets and squares, parks, public buildings, and public utilities (Title 11, Chapter 52, Section 11 of the Code of Alabama, 1975). If the Planning Commission determines that a proposal to construct such public facilities is not consistent with the comprehensive

plan, it may disapprove the proposal and provide written notice of its findings to the City Council or the applicable governing authority. The City Council or applicable governing authority can overturn the Planning Commission's disapproval by a two-thirds majority vote of its entire membership.

The Planning Process

Although most people think of a comprehensive plan as a document, it is really part of an ongoing process. The initial development of a comprehensive plan is usually conducted through a process that provides opportunities for concerned citizens and community leaders to identify important community needs and issues that should be addressed in the plan. The process used to prepare the Sylacauga Comprehensive Plan included an initial public hearing conducted before work on the plan was initiated, and a final public hearing prior to adoption of the plan by the Planning Commission. The initial public hearing was conducted to inform residents about the purpose and nature of the plan, to explain the process that would be used to prepare the plan, and to solicit public input on the important issues or problems that should be addressed by the plan. Any additional comments received and additional needs identified by the City during preparation of the plan also were incorporated into the plan.

Once the draft comprehensive plan has been prepared, a final public hearing is conducted to explain the plan's findings and recommendations to the public and to solicit final comments from residents prior to its adoption by the Planning Commission. This final public hearing is required under Title 11, Chapter 52, Section 10 of the Code of Alabama, 1975.

Although a comprehensive plan is designed to address the future needs of the community, periodic review and revision of the plan is necessary. As a community grows and develops, public needs and priorities can change. In some instances, changing needs can arise from unanticipated events, such as natural disasters, a major industry closure, or a sudden change in local government revenues. If the plan is not revised to reflect these changes, some important needs may be overlooked or the plan will become less effective as a public policy guide for the community. Therefore, a comprehensive plan should be revised at least once every ten years, and more frequently whenever major unforeseen changes or events occur in the community.