



The Comprehensive Plan

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Would you consider traveling to a new destination without a map or a guide?

Would you embark on an overseas adventure without a plan?

It is not likely! Yet many communities undergo growth and new development without a comprehensive plan. A community needs a comprehensive plan to serve as the compass for its future course. However, the ability and will to prepare and implement the plan is also critical.

This publication describes the “why, what, and how” of a comprehensive plan and focuses on the process and the contents.

Both rural and urban communities continually experience socioeconomic changes. Many rural areas experience declines in their resident populations, primarily due to out-migration of the youth and working-age population. In some cases, natural decrease (or deaths in excess of births) contributes to the declining populations.

Urban areas may experience population growth or shrinkage (as we’ve seen in few Midwestern cities). More often, urban cores and the first-tier of suburbs are in decline as populations move to the outer suburbs. Hudnut (2003) describes first-tier suburbs as “halfway-to-everywhere” and growth in outer suburbs as a manifestation of the “exit-ramp economy” (17).

These demographic and economic changes can have significant implications that cause to some extent spatial and skill mismatches observed in the communities. For example, suitable jobs might not be accessible to some groups (the poor, disabled, elderly, without car ownership, etc.) because appropriate



modes of transportation and the necessary network connections are not available. Similarly, the jobs available nearby may have skill requirements higher than those found in the immediate surrounding populations. These trends cause, in part, a jobs-housing imbalance.

In addition to socioeconomic changes, communities experience physical changes in their infrastructure such as: new roads, highways, and interchanges; broadband service; cell towers; shopping malls; industries; office parks, and more. Deteriorating infrastructure — such as dilapidated roads and bridges and utilities (water supply, waste water, etc.) — presents additional challenges for fiscally constrained communities. The physical changes may be associated with both, growth or decline, and they are experienced by urban and rural communities alike.

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If a community's growth or change is not guided, the results may be haphazard developments that have potentially long-lasting effects on the local or regional economies. While not everyone is a "professional planner," a comprehensive plan can provide the blueprint for a community's future changes and help ensure that development occurs in line with the community's desires and goals.

A successful comprehensive plan is "comprehensive" both because of the amount of effort and information that goes into the plan and because of the number of people who are involved in formulating the plan. A comprehensive plan is a team effort that involves the local plan commission, community leaders, citizens, professional planners, and a wide range of stakeholders — including industries and businesses.

What Is a Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan is a policy document (or series of documents) prepared by the plan commission with input from citizens and decision makers. The comprehensive plan sets forth policies for the community's future development. The planning process might have different names depending on the purpose and geographical scale or administrative boundaries. For example, a

comprehensive plan may sometimes be called a "master plan" or "general plan" (7). Scholars and practitioners emphasize the important role of identifying the appropriate scale for planning and shortlisting plan elements based on that scale (12).

For example, Godschalk and Anderson (2015) identify regional plans, county plans, rural plans, city comprehensive plans, community, master or site plans as different planning scales (12). The plan's scale depends on the jurisdiction (such as an incorporated city, town, or village) or a county or region (such as MPOs or metropolitan planning organizations and COG or council of governments).

A comprehensive plan is the result of thoroughly studying and analyzing existing physical, economic, and social characteristics, and the plan includes projections about future conditions. When a local or regional legislative body adopt a comprehensive plan, the plan guides public decisions related to land use, mobility, amenities, economic and other developments.

If a town, city, or county decides to implement a planning process, there are state statues and enabling laws related to doing so and are described in the Indiana Code 36-7-4-500 Series (Comprehensive Plan).

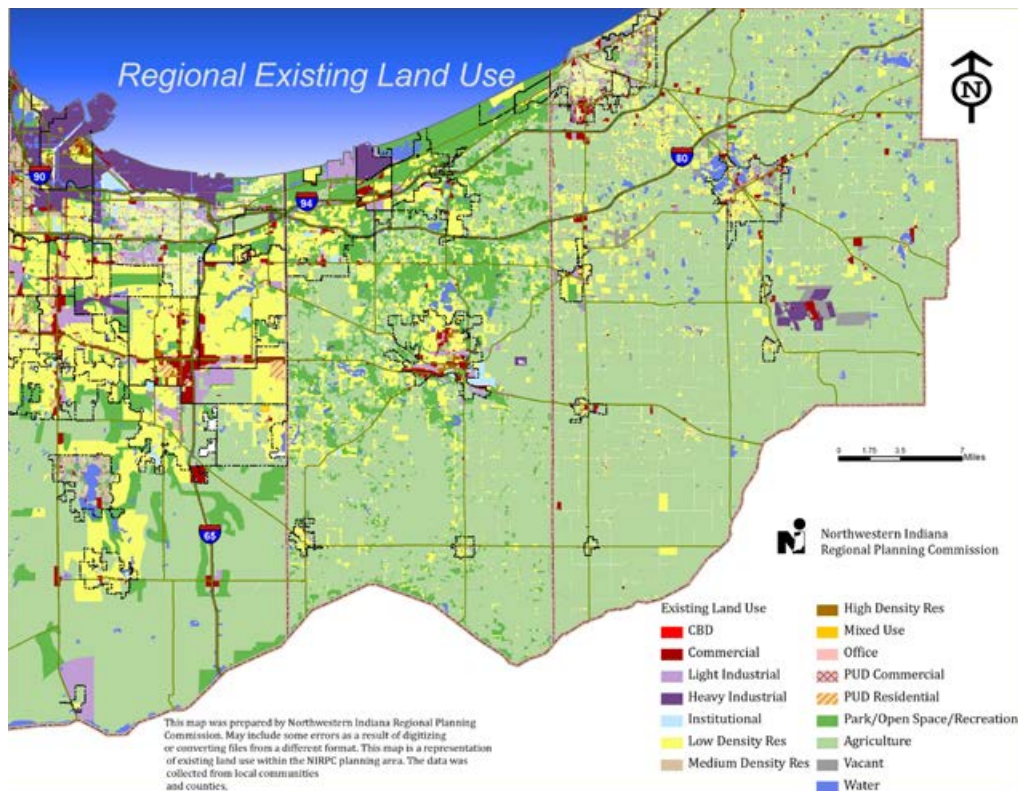


Figure 1. An example of a map that shows existing land use. Source: Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission.

Indiana Code (sec 36-7-4-502) requires a comprehensive plan to include three parts:

1. A statement of objectives for future development
2. A statement of policy for land use development
3. A statement of policy for developing public ways, public places, public lands, public structures, and public utilities

These three requirements reflect the complex network of people, space, facilities, ideas, powers, services, and functions encompassed in a community. A planner must be able to both collect and analyze an adequate body of information that concerns all community aspects, and then use this analysis as a foundation for projecting the future. The typical comprehensive plan predicts or forecasts community needs for up to 20 years. In that respect, it is both long-range and comprehensive.

Indiana Code and Comprehensive Plans

The Indiana Code (sec 36-7-4-503) describes additional elements that may be included in a comprehensive plan. These elements include surveys and studies of existing conditions and future projections, maps, charts, and descriptive analyses of the following:

- History, population, and physical site conditions
- Land use including public versus private structures, specifications for built-up areas, and population densities
- Community centers and neighborhoods
- Redevelopment areas
- Public ways
- All kinds of utilities
- Pollution, flood control, and drainage
- Surface, water, and air transportation facilities (including mass transit)
- Parks and recreation facilities
- Health and educational institutions
- Land utilization or land cover
- Conservation areas
- Other physical, economic, or social situations identified by community (13)

Indiana Code also calls for a short- and long-range public works development and capital improvements program (13). If a community decides to prepare a comprehensive plan, we recommend the community follow the procedures and guidelines under IC 36-7-4-500 regarding plan contents, adoption and approval procedures, and amendments.

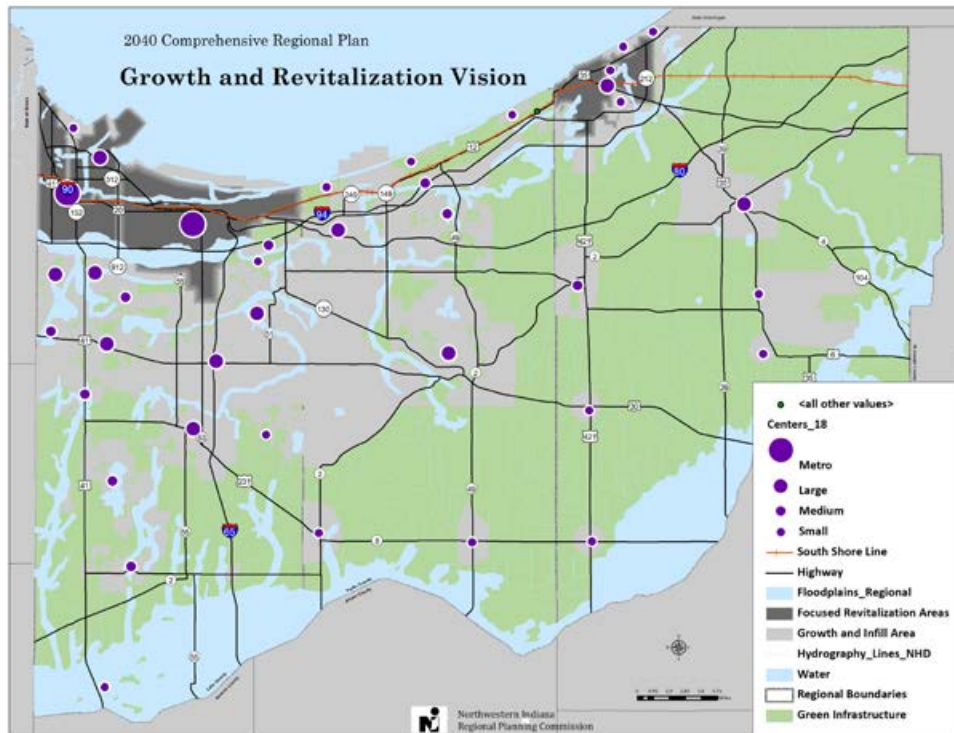


Figure 2. An example of a map that shows a growth and revitalization vision plan. Source: Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission.

Communities can also include aspirational elements in their comprehensive plan that depend on macro-level changes, emerging technologies, and specific needs. For example, comprehensive plans may include language about disaster resiliency (14) or climate change (15).

Specific needs may include:

- Specific types of agriculture or animal-based activities — such as hydroponics, concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and confined feeding operations (CFOs)
- Demand for renewable energy infrastructure (such as wind farms, geothermal generation, biofuel facilities, etc.)
- Transformation of abandoned and empty shopping malls and industry parks
- Historic structures and districts
- Desire for soil and natural resource conservation

Connected and automated vehicles are examples of emerging technologies that can significantly influence land uses and activities and hence, the comprehensive plans.

Recommended Elements of a Comprehensive Plan

Levy (2017) recommends that the goals of a comprehensive plan address issues such as the community's health, public safety, circulation, provision of services and facilities, fiscal health, economic goals, environmental protection, and redistributive goals (19). A comprehensive plan states general goals and objectives, summarizes major trends, and includes projections for populations, housing, transportation, and land use, if necessary (9, 18).

The plan may include a set of recommendations and policies for future development including the future land use map. The team should base the plan on inventory, analysis, and evaluation of the pertinent data. These data may come from varied sources, such as existing land use surveys, demographic studies, analyses of the community's economic base, community facilities studies, housing analyses, natural resources studies, community needs surveys, traffic studies, and maps.

Communities often use GIS (geographic information systems) to map data and attributes. Examples of maps that are useful for assessing existing conditions include: base zoning, land parcels, building footprints, existing land use, aerial photographs, satellite imagery based land cover, topography, soils, transportation,

and infrastructure. Maps are also useful for identifying population demographics and densities, public and semi-public service facilities, local transportation elements, thoroughfares, housing, economic conditions, governmental jurisdictions, and assessed land values.

A successful comprehensive plan is easy to understand, is supported by the community, has financial support, is action oriented, and can adapt to change. A successful plan also has a clear direction and is the result of a team effort. We also recommend that the plan should include strategies for implementing the plan, monitoring progress toward the plan, and evaluating the plan periodically (18).

How Is a Comprehensive Plan Adopted & Changed?

The plan commission recommends the plan to the county or city commissioners for review and consideration after public hearings. Indiana Code 36-7-4-507 provides guidelines for notice and hearings that must occur before a plan can be adopted. If the community's objectives change or if significant physical or economic changes occur, the plan can be amended.

The amendment procedure is similar to that followed for adopting the plan. The plan commission prepares the amendment, holds public hearings, and then recommends the amendment to the county commissioners. Periodic reviews (every three to five years) of the plan can help to ensure it remains consistent with the community goals.

Conclusion

You may have concerns about the cost of doing a study-intensive, all-inclusive comprehensive plan. Community leaders may be tempted to look for a canned comprehensive plan. However, a community's comprehensive plan should be unique and not borrowed from another municipality or county. If a community does not properly develop the background studies, data collection and analysis, and proposed policies, the resulting plan will not be effective. The main objective is for the plan to fit your community's specific needs and help the community reach its long-range goals for growth and change.

Planning can help a community by capturing clearly its values, goals, and objectives, and becoming a policy guide for physical development. Planning provides a strong legal basis for land use decision making, makes it possible to use public resources more efficiently,

prevents many problems before they occur, and guards against decisions that serve only special interests. A comprehensive plan can enhance the community by projecting future land requirements and ensuring that enough developable land is set aside — all while protecting existing and future investments. Even the most carefully crafted comprehensive plan cannot automatically solve all of a community's problems, but a plan can go a long way in preparing for the changes that the future will inevitably bring.

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