INDIANA
CITIZEN PLANNER’S GUIDE

Part 7: Comprehensive Plans
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Other parts of the Indiana Citizen Planner’s Guide can be downloaded at www.indianaplanning.org/citizen.htm

This booklet is one in a series of publications of the Indiana Planning Association to be used as training materials for citizen planners: plan commission members, board of zoning appeals members, neighborhood organizations, and citizen committees. These materials are intended to supplement publications such as Planning Made Easy and The Citizen’s Guide to Planning. IPA’s materials contain information specific to Indiana. Users of these guides are strongly encouraged to read other, more general books on planning and zoning.

The information contained in this booklet is intended for informational purposes only and is not to be considered legal advice.
Why Communities Plan

From the earliest settlements, communities in the United States have been laid out according to plans. Towns and villages usually were located on uplands, where there was safety from floodwaters. The buildings were arranged for efficiency in commerce and in the affairs of government. Farms were in the outlying areas, providing a buffer of green space for the town and protecting the town from the dust and odors from animals and cultivation. The settlers tried to select areas with abundant water, and to make the towns easier to defend, these pioneers also sought locations with clear views of the surrounding area.

In Indiana, Jeffersonville was originally laid out in 1802 according to a plan based upon ideas formulated by Thomas Jefferson. This plan called for a checkerboard pattern of undeveloped squares and subdivided squares. The idea was to create areas of permanent open space. The land speculators found the plan inhibiting, and in 1816, the Indiana legislature authorized the replatting of all the land. The original grid pattern is still the fundamental form of Jeffersonville. Indianapolis, as most Hoosiers know, was designed by Alexander Ralston, a land surveyor who established the streets radiating from the circle at the city’s center. Ralston had worked with Pierre L’Enfant on the plan for Washington, D.C., which also is based upon a radial street pattern.

All development is planned to some degree, but there are differences as to who does the planning and as to the goals of the plans. Costs and profits often are motives for the layout and location of new development. Early factories were built adjacent to water bodies which served as sources of electricity as well as disposal areas for industrial waste. County seats were nearly always located in the center of the county, to minimize travel costs for those conducting business there, and city halls and county courthouses were located in the center of town for the same reason. Developers convert flat farmland to building sites, because the cost of grading and site preparation is low. To avoid the cost of building new
streets, property owners subdivide the frontages along existing roads for building sites. For the same reason, some landowners subdivide outlying parcels into house lots with gravel roads or driveways instead of streets for access.

Sometimes choices which lower costs and increase benefits for one person increase the costs for others. The factory on the river pollutes the water and kills the fish, costing the fisherman his livelihood. Houses on farm land remove land from production and create problems for the neighboring farmer when new residents complain of dust and odors. Buildings strung along the existing road frontages increase traffic and accidents as new driveways create points of traffic conflict. There are demands to increase public expenditures for more roads and improvements to existing ones. The ambulance driver has difficulty finding the house on the private gravel road, and the poorly maintained drive damages the ambulance.

One of the reasons communities engage in a planning process is to ensure that the needs of the whole community are considered, not just the benefits to individuals. Community planning is based upon a concept of the public interest. Some flexibility in the use of individual land is given up in exchange for creating a community in which the interests of all are considered. Plan commissioners are trustees of the future, and they have a responsibility to help prevent growth patterns which result in wasteful and inefficient use of public resources.

When communities plan, they establish and implement a public policy for the community. They create a guideline for decisions on development. Plans help a community achieve a character of its own, one that residents of the community recognize and support. If all our communities were the same, one plan would suffice for all. But each community is different, and a plan should enhance the unique characteristics of each place. One town may wish to emphasize its historical importance while another may pride itself on being a community of the future. Many Indiana cities, towns, and counties have a distinct character that makes them different from one another. A plan that works for one will not work for another. Through the planning process, residents decide what their community character should be. Attitudes and values also differ from one place to another, and a good plan will reflect the local culture.
Planning offers many benefits for the community and its residents.

It lowers taxes . . .
- helps local government provide services efficiently
- ensures that developers pay their fair share of improvements such as streets, utilities and parks
- directs development to areas with sufficient capacity to support it (i.e., new subdivisions in locations where there are available classrooms, industries where utilities are available)
- coordinates development and future capital expenditures such as streets, sewage treatment plants, civic buildings, and schools
- saves paying for remedies for poorly planned development, such as purchasing right-of-way or easements to widen streets or extend utilities

It protects property values . . .
- preserves and enhances community character
- improves quality of life
- keeps adjacent uses compatible

It makes communities healthier . . .
- provides for safe streets and sidewalks
- prevents unwise development, such as residences in flood hazard areas or subdivisions without proper sewage disposal
- protects environmental quality

Plan Contents

In Indiana, comprehensive planning is permitted by the 500 Series of Title 36-7-4 of the Indiana Code (see appendix). This law empowers cities, towns, and counties to adopt plans. Any plan adopted in Indiana must contain at least the following three elements:

1. A statement of objectives for the future development of the jurisdiction.
2. A statement of policy for the land use development of the jurisdiction.

In addition, the law provides for a number of optional elements, including parks and recreation, flood control, transit, natural resource protection, conservation, flood control, farmland protection, education, and redevelopment of blighted areas. Most comprehensive plans in Indiana have some of these optional elements.

Indiana’s minimum requirements for a comprehensive plan are much less complex than in most other states. The planners, lawyers, and legislators who drafted the law tried to make it flexible, so that it could
be used by large cities, small towns, and counties. They recognized that many Indiana communities do not employ trained professional planners and cannot afford to hire consultants. At the same time, the law makes it clear that communities cannot regulate land use and development if they have not first engaged in a process of thinking about the future.

Most plans contain maps showing future streets, desired future land use patterns, locations of future police and fire stations, and areas set aside for parks and open space. It is important to note, however, that these maps are not required in Indiana. What is required is that the community establish policies to guide growth. If they are thoughtfully and carefully drafted, these policies can lead to the community’s desired future.

Maps are useful as visual representation of the community’s plan. They can show patterns of land use and locations of proposed future streets. Land uses usually are divided into categories, and different colors or patterns are used to show areas for future residential, commercial, industrial, institutional, and agricultural uses. Normally, locations should not be overly specific. For purposes of the comprehensive plan, it is more important to establish the principle that a school should be located in a certain area than to designate the specific site for the school. The locations should be approximate, not exact.

In Indiana, municipal plan commissions are authorized under certain conditions to exercise planning and zoning jurisdiction over territory outside the corporate boundaries (see Part 1, Plan Commission Basics). If the plan commission has assumed this jurisdiction, the comprehensive plan must include all of the extra-territorial jurisdictional area.

The Planning Process

While each planning process should be custom-designed to meet community needs, nearly all contain the same core elements:

1. Evaluate existing conditions, including strengths and weaknesses, community character, demographics, natural features, etc.
2. Establish goals and objectives for the future
3. Identify alternatives for meeting the goals and objectives
4. Select the most desirable alternative
5. Devise and adopt tools to implement the plan (zoning, subdivision control, capital improvement programming, etc.)
6. Evaluate the success of the plan
7. Revise the plan

These steps are part of a continuing process. Plans must be evaluated, changed and updated as the community changes. These changes can be gradual, as through demographic trends, technological change, or slow
economic growth or decline. Sometimes change is more sudden, such as
the location of a large new industry in a small community, the loss of a
major employer, or a natural disaster (flood, earthquake, etc.).

In Indiana, it is the plan commission’s responsibility to prepare and adopt
a plan and to recommend it to the city or town council or county
commissioners for adoption. In preparing a plan, the commission may
be assisted by staff, by consultants, by volunteers, or by any combination
of the three.

Getting a community consensus is essential to a successful planning
process. A plan that does not have the support of the majority of those
who will be affected by it is doomed to failure. Plan commissioners are
key players in arriving at that consensus. Not only do they share their
own observations and views about the community, they can ensure that
the full range of views is sought and considered.

Elected officials are essential to the planning process. The decisions
they make determine the shape of the community. Their votes on such
things as petitions for rezoning land, where to construct and upgrade
public streets and utilities, where to locate public facilities and when to
build them should be guided by the comprehensive plan. If they don’t
agree with the contents of the plan or don’t understand what is in it,
their decisions won’t further the plan’s objectives. Plan commissioners
are essential to this process. Techniques for effective citizen participation
are discussed in Part 4.

Effective Plans

Plans usually, but not always, consist of a combination of text and maps.
Some plans are heavily oriented toward policy, and these usually consist
primarily of text. Some are oriented toward community design and the
desired physical form of the community, and these may be mostly maps,
photographs and drawings. It is important that the format of the plan
be suited to the community and its goals. Seaside, Florida, planned by a
team of architects, relies on its physical design, and the plan consists
almost entirely of drawings. In order to make the plan understandable
to the public, it is a good idea to have a balance of text and graphic
material (maps, drawings, photographs). Some people quickly grasp ideas
expressed graphically. Others are verbal; they are more likely to absorb
concepts expressed as written text. Most of us learn best with a
combination of the two. Some features are common to most plans.
1. **Emphasis on physical development.**
   Communities are affected by a variety of social and economic factors, and plans should take those into account. Many plans do contain policies concerning these issues. For example, the plan may contain strategies for combating unemployment or underemployment. It may have policies regarding are visual learners; they day care and education. At the same time, the physical development of the city is interrelated with these social and economic factors. For example, concentrating all low-income housing in a specific geographic area often leads to social problems in that neighborhood. The location of commerce and industry affects commuting time and street patterns which in turn affect the cost of building and maintaining roads.

2. **Comprehensive and general.**
   The plan should include all of the physical elements of the community, and it should recognize the social and economic conditions which affect the community. It also should be general in nature; it is a guide to development, not a tool for determining the precise location of each feature.

3. **Realistic and practical.**
   The planning process offers the opportunity to dream, but the plan should recognize what is possible in a given community. It is not useful to plan for the town to become a regional employment center with 15 years if the town has no interstate highway access, no airport, no sewer system, and no public water supply. The plan should be designed to build on strengths and to lessen weaknesses, and it should be developed with implementation mechanisms in mind.

4. **Long-range.**
   While short-range strategic plans are useful for specific objectives, the comprehensive plan should be long-range. Plans are implemented over relatively long time periods. The plan should have a long-range component aimed at shaping the community for 20-25 years.

5. **Easy to understand.**
   There are no extra points for length or weight. The plan should be as simple and as clear as possible. The text should be well written; the format should be inviting to the reader. In Indiana, there is an extra incentive to keep the plan short: Indiana law requires that the plan be recorded in the office of the county recorder, and the community may have to pay for each page that is recorded.

6. **Reproducible.**
   Many communities have failed to take into account the cost of reproduction of the plan in sufficient quantities. Some consulting firms produce plans filled with full-color maps and photographs or use odd-sized paper. These formats are acceptable, as long as the community has the resources to print enough copies. If the plan

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**Plan test:** Before the plan is distributed to the public, give it to several people who are not familiar with planning and ask them to read it. Can they understand it? If so, it’s probably clear. If not, rewrite, reformat — whatever it takes!
commission intends to recover printing costs by charging for copies, the commission should consider whether the cost of a fancy report will be prohibitive for people.

7. Reflects a community consensus.

As noted previously, plans will not be implemented if they do not accurately reflect the community's goals and objectives. It must result from an effective citizen participation process. Elected officials will not be guided by the plan's policies unless these officials know that the plan represents the wishes of their constituents.

As the community works with the plan, and as conditions change, the plan commission will want to make changes. The commission should review the plan regularly and initiate amendments when they are needed.

Adopting the Plan

Indiana law specifies the procedure for adopting a comprehensive plan. The procedures vary somewhat, depending upon the type of plan commission the community has (advisory, area, metropolitan). In all cases, the plan commission has primary responsibility of preparing the plan and recommending it to the legislative body for adoption. The steps are outlined below. The law specifically provides that plans may be adopted as separate elements, such as land use, thoroughfares, parks, and community facilities. These steps apply to an entire plan or to a plan element.

1. Plan Commission prepares the plan.
2. Plan Commission holds a public hearing on the plan.
3. Plan Commission adopts the plan by resolution and recommends it to the legislative body for adoption. (For metropolitan plan commissions, the commission decision is final; the legislative body does not act on the plan.) In a county, the legislative body is the board of county commissioners; in a city, it is the common council; in a town, it is the town council. Because area plan commissions are cooperative efforts between a county and at least one municipality in the county, area plans must be forwarded to more than one legislative body.
4. Legislative body adopts the plan by resolution. For area plan commissions, each participating legislative body adopts the plan.

It should be noted that the plan is not an ordinance; it is adopted by resolution. A resolution is more appropriate than an ordinance, because the plan is a guideline, not a regulation.

After the plan commission recommends a plan for adoption, the legislative body has three options: adopt the plan as recommended, adopt the plan with amendments, or reject the plan. If the plan is amended or rejected,
the law provides for the legislative body to return the plan to the commission with written reasons for the amendment or rejection. The purpose of this procedure (sometimes called the “ping pong™ provision) is to encourage communication between the legislative body and the plan commission. The commission has 60 days to consider the amendment or rejection. If the commission agrees with a legislative body amendment, the plan is adopted, and the legislative body does not need to take further action. If the commission disagrees, the legislative body can amend the plan only if within 60 days it again votes in favor of the amendment. If the commission agrees with the rejection of the plan, it is rejected. Indiana law does not permit the mayor to veto a comprehensive plan.

An effective planning process will provide for participation by elected officials and will ensure regular communication. If the process has been well-designed, legislative rejection of the plan should not be a serious alternative, and any amendments should be relatively minor.

Amendments to an adopted plan may be initiated by the plan commission or by the legislative body. If the legislative body initiates the amendment, it may direct the commission to prepare and submit it. Unless the legislative body grants an extension of time, the commission must prepare and submit the amendment within 60 days. The procedure for adopting an amendment is the same as the procedure for adopting the plan.

Suggested Reading


Indiana Code, 36-7-4, 500 Series


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