



Understanding Sustainability: The Importance of Sustainable Development and Comprehensive Plans—Goals, Objectives, Policies¹

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This paper is part of the Understanding Sustainability series, a series of discussions on sustainable development that includes specialized papers on sustainability, local planning, and comprehensive plans.

In 1985, the State of Florida mandated that each local government be required to adopt a comprehensive plan. Comprehensive plans serve as the bedrock or framework of all Florida local governments in that they describe the vision for a community's long- and short-term growth and provide policy direction in keeping with that vision. They are the basis for your local government to develop all of the zoning codes, regulations, building codes, etc. Comprehensive plans are largely a product of the community, developed through a series of stakeholder and public meetings. In the process of developing a comprehensive plan, a local government may solicit the input of many community groups and hold dozens of public hearings to determine the issues most important to the community. The purpose of comprehensive plans ("comp plans") varies slightly, but generally, they are the long-term

plan designed to protect and ensure the health, safety, and welfare of the people.

Goals, Objectives, and Policies

Comprehensive plans lay out broad and general goals in a logical order from general to more specific. Within the very first few pages of most comprehensive plans, the overall Goal of the community is clearly stated. The overall Goal is unique to each community, but generally, the aim is to protect and enhance the health, safety, and welfare of the citizens and of the natural resources.

Closely following the goal of the plan is the 'Objective.' The Objective more specifically expresses how to achieve the Goal. A common overall Objective for a comprehensive plan would be to *"improve the economy while retaining its cultural and natural resources."* Policies represent the methods by which the community plans to meet the Goal described; they label specific agencies with duties aimed toward this purpose. For example, *"Establish code enforcement on a city/county-wide*

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basis with proactive efforts to ensure the health of the community." This policy determines that there will be code enforcement officers, tasked not only with enforcing existing code violations, but moreover to do so proactively.

When reading a comprehensive plan, note that the plan is comprised of 'Chapters' or 'Elements.' Each element focuses on a particular topic, offering a descriptive analysis of the existing condition. As an example, because traffic is usually major community concern, most comprehensive plans will have a 'Transportation Element,' a section that may begin with a variety of different facts describing the status of the city/county transportation system. Typical analysis would include a variety of tables and charts illustrating the current data (or as recent as possible) for public transit routes and ridership numbers, local roadway patterns, traffic count surveys, etc.

After these facts, more goals, objectives, and policies for any given element follow. However, just as the overall Goal may have seemed vague and lacking in specifics, so too may the goals for each element—they represent generalized targets that a city or county hopes to achieve. For example, the goal to "*establish an integrated transportation system consistent with future development of the county*" represents a future goal a local government may hope to achieve. This is typical comprehensive plan language in a goals section, very broad with little detail.

Again, objectives will closely follow the goals. Here one may see language similar to the following stated objective:

Coordinate the transportation system with the future land-use map and ensure existing and proposed population densities, housing and employment patterns, and land uses are consistent with the transportation modes and services proposed to serve these areas.

As mentioned previously, the goal of the Transportation Element was to "*establish an integrated transportation system consistent with future development of the city/county.*" The objective, or strategy to meet that goal, is to coordinate the future land-use map to ensure future population

densities are consistent with available transportation options.

The objective section is followed by the actual policy of how the objective will be met:

Include, within the Land Development Regulations, provisions for requiring an adequate number of motorized and bicycle on-site parking spaces for each new site development and provide for safe and efficient movement of vehicles and pedestrians within the site in conjunction with plan review and permitting.

This is an actionable item. In this example, the city/county will ensure that specific regulations or provisions to provide on-site parking for vehicles and safe movement for pedestrians, thus the implementation of the objective to achieve the goal of this element.

Evaluation, Appraisal, Report

To determine if local governments are meeting the goals of their comprehensive plans, the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) requires each local government to review and report on how well it has implemented its own comprehensive plan every seven years. (Florida's Department of Community Affairs is the final reviewer—they endeavor to ensure that the goals set out in comprehensive plans are adequate and achieved).

Further, and pursuant to Section 163.3191, Florida Statutes, "each local government shall adopt an *evaluation and appraisal report (EAR)* once every seven years assessing the progress in implementing the local government's comprehensive plan."* To accomplish this, a local government sends a self-evaluation report to DCA for review. DCA provides commentary as to suggestion plan revisions in order to address more effectively community objectives, changing conditions and trends affecting the community, and changes in state requirements. During the EAR process, the city or county will have compiled a lot of information for this report to the DCA, summarizing, for example, the local regulations that provide the

*[emphasis added (see <http://www.dca.state.fl.us/fdcp/dcp/EAR/index.cfm> for the full text of this legislation)]

required parking and safe areas for pedestrians in new developments. If in fact our example City/County did not do this and failed to make space for the parking areas, DCA may find the result unsatisfactory and require the government to develop those regulations. If local governments do not follow their own comp plan, the EAR process can have serious implications.

To gain a better understanding of possible standard outcomes, however, the 'Goals, Objectives, and Policies' sections of the comprehensive plan for our example City/County may resemble the following at the conclusion of the EAR process, with the underlined portions representing insertions recommended by the DCA:

Goal: *Establish an integrated transportation system consistent with future development of the county.*

Objective: *Coordinate the transportation system with the future land-use map to ensure that existing and proposed population densities, housing and employment patterns, and land uses are consistent with the transportation modes and services proposed to serve these areas.*

Policy: *Include, within the Land Development Regulations, provisions for requiring an adequate number of motorized vehicle and bicycle on-site parking spaces for each new site development and provide for safe and efficient movement of vehicles and pedestrians within the site in conjunction with plan review and permitting.*

The previous article of this series introduced the concept of community sustainability. Comprehensive plans are by definition the community's plan for long-term sustainability. Unfortunately, few communities have formally recognized the importance of balancing and integrating the economic, social, and environmental demands in their comp plans. With the fluctuations in fuel prices, unprecedented droughts, tightening budgets, and the increasingly urgent call for awareness of climate change, many community leaders have begun to question if there is a better way to create a truly sustainable community.

Conclusion

Sustainability is not contradictory to growth, profit, and development. Sustainability means that we plan to our limits; sustainable community development draws from and gives back to local strengths, resources, and uniqueness. Local development can become more sustainable by having a better social, environmental, and economical balance. Forthcoming articles in this series will discuss and provide sample sustainable comprehensive plan language in the following areas:

- Educate, engage, and support the public with green building and reduced resource consumption
- Work with development community to advance the practice of green building
- Review and improve internal operations and guidelines
- Encourage Smart Growth and Smart Life principles

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