

# What is a Comprehensive Plan?

*Adapted from League of Minnesota Cities (www.lmnc.org) "Handbook for Minnesota Cities" and "Planning and Zoning 101"*

City governments provide many important services, but one function stands apart in its impact on future generations—the authority to engage in community planning and zoning. Comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances adopted and enforced by current officials affect the future layout and landscape of a city for many years to come. Whether it is the development or preservation of open space, or the redevelopment and revival of existing properties, what a community will look like dozens of years from now depends on decisions made today.

A comprehensive plan is an expression of the community's vision for the future and a strategic map to reach that vision. Comprehensive planning is an important tool for cities to guide future development of land to ensure a safe, pleasant, and economical environment for residential, commercial, industrial, and public activities. Planning can help:

- Preserve important natural resources, agricultural land, and other open lands
- Create the opportunity for residents to participate in guiding a community's future
- Identify issues, stay ahead of trends, and accommodate change
- Ensure that growth makes the community better, not just bigger
- Foster sustainable economic development
- Ensure more efficient and cost-effective infrastructure and public services
- Provide an opportunity to consider future implications of today's decisions
- Protect property rights and values
- Enable other public and private entities to plan their activities in harmony with the municipality's plans

A comprehensive plan sets forth a vision and goals for a city's future, and provides the overall foundation for all land use regulation in the city. State law encourages all cities to prepare and implement a comprehensive municipal plan. Under state law, a city planning commission or department is tasked with creating the city's comprehensive plan.

*History of US planning and zoning  
City planning and zoning took root in the early 20th century as a way to minimize conflicts between incompatible land uses and to plan more coherent development.*

*People increasingly were living in built-up urbanized areas, and were suffering health impacts, including reduced life span, related to density and industrialization.*

*To promote better health, safety, and welfare, cities began regulating the use, size, and location of structures through zoning ordinances, and developing future plans for harmonious and healthy land use patterns.*

Planning is a professional field that encompasses a broad array of skills and techniques. In developing comprehensive plans, many cities use educated, certified, land use professionals. At its core, planning is a relatively straightforward three-step process:

1. A community takes stock of where it is today.
2. The community generates a shared vision and goals for what the city will be like in the future.
3. The city develops a set of specific strategies and policies to achieve that vision over time.

The comprehensive planning process helps communities identify issues before they arise, stay ahead of trends in land use development and redevelopment, and anticipate and navigate change in populations and land use patterns.

The comprehensive plan includes a land use plan that lays out desired timing, location, design, and density for future development, redevelopment, or preservation. Comprehensive plans typically also include plans for:

- Parks and open space
- Housing
- Natural resources
- Transportation
- Infrastructure
- Public or community facilities

State law determines how comprehensive plans are adopted or amended. When the draft Plan is ready for consideration, a public hearing is scheduled with the City Planning Commission. The Commission considers the Plan, takes public testimony, and then makes a recommendation to the City Council. The City Council then holds another public hearing, and also considers testimony, and evaluates the proposed Plan and recommendation from the Planning Commission. The City Council then takes final action on the Plan.

Once adopted, the city should actively consult the plan, periodically review it for consistency with current policies and practices, and recommend amendments whenever necessary. State law provides that comprehensive plans should be implemented through zoning and subdivision regulations, coordinated public improvements and city services, and a capital improvements program.

*Adopting and amending a comprehensive plan should be a dynamic public process with an eye toward implementation.*

*Public participation ensures broad and ongoing support, brings a variety of information and perspectives, and instills a sense of community ownership in the plan.*