Attributes of Effective Plans

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Extension Report 97 - 3
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Interest in land use and growth management issues in Wisconsin has never been greater. At least seven counties are currently preparing county development plans, and dozens of local governments are preparing local land use plans—some for the first time ever. But for plans to be effective they must be *used*. What are the attributes that increase the likelihood that a plan will be relied upon to shape the future?

• **An Effective Plan Tells a Story**

  A good plan tells a story about a community — what the community was like in the past, and what it is like today. By describing current trends, and how the community is changing, the plan also paints a picture of what the community might be like in the future. Because the story is *real*, not fiction, it should actively engage and grip the reader. You might even think of it as a suspense story that creates a sense of anticipation, focused on the pressing question: what will happen to the community in the future?

  Most residents are very concerned about what is happening to the community where they live and work. Thus, the story your plan tells should be of tremendous interest to the people in your community. The plan should be something people *want* to read.

• **An Effective Plan Tells What is Special About a Locality and Region**

  One of the most important things a plan must do is convey an understanding and appreciation of the unique and distinguishing qualities and features of the local context. The plan needs to tell the reader what makes the community—this particular place, this part of Wisconsin—special and unique. In short, the plan needs
to convey a deep and abiding sense of place.

To appreciate what is special and unique about a particular place, it is necessary to be able to view it in a larger context. Therefore, an effective plan needs to describe the relationship between the community that is being planned for and the larger region in which it is located. How does the community compare to other communities in the region? How do changes occurring in this community compare to changes in other communities, in the county, and in the state as a whole?

Plans can be catalysts for positive change, but can also provide the means to preserve valued resources and qualities that might otherwise be lost. Effective plans identify and raise awareness of unique local and regional resources and assets (environmental, economic, historic, architectural and cultural), and outline ways that those unique resources and assets can be preserved. A good plan balances the need for development against the need for conservation and resource protection.

- An Effective Plan Presents Essential Data-- But Not Too Much

The preparation of plans is an opportunity to collect useful information about communities, and their resources and qualities. This baseline information, once collected, can be extremely interesting. However, plans should not be padded with unnecessary data that is largely irrelevant to the substance of the plan. Some plans are so weighed down with so much data, and so many charts, tables and lists that citizens and local officials find them too heavy to take home and read.

A plan needs to present data that communicates important facts and insights about the community and how it has been changing. Data should only be presented in the plan if it is informative and meaningful, and sheds light on important issues addressed in the plan.

The message here is not that you shouldn’t collect data, but rather that the plan should not be cluttered with unnecessary data that gets in the way of understanding what is really important. With careful editing, the thickness and weight of plans can be considerably reduced. Tables, charts and lists that are interesting but not directly referred to in the plan can just as well be placed in a
separate appendix, rather than in the main body of the plan.

• **An Effective Plan Describes Alternative Futures, and the Consequences of Alternative Courses of Action**

  A good plan provides a glimpse of what the future may hold by describing different scenarios and possibilities. How might the community grow and change over time, and what effects might these different outcomes have on quality of life, environmental quality, health and safety, equity and opportunity, etc.? An effective plan also identifies specific policies and actions that are likely to lead to these different future outcomes. In other words, if a community wishes to achieve a certain outcome, or avoid an undesirable outcome, what policies, programs, actions and/or regulations should it put into place?

  The important thing that citizens and local officials come to appreciate by being exposed to these different scenarios is that no single outcome is predetermined or inevitable. Rather the community’s future will be determined in large measure by the actions and choices that citizens and local officials make now and in the coming years.

• **An Effective Plan Inspires and Communicates a Vision of a Desirable Future**

  A good plan is more than a technical report, and more than compilation of facts. A good plan communicates the community’s deepest aspirations, and a clear sense of what the community desires for the future. Moreover, a truly effective plan stirs peoples’ imaginations. It inspired and motivated people to act in ways that helps achieve a better future.

  The future a community desires is typically expressed through a “vision statement”, and a formal listing of goals and objectives. The vision statement and goals and objectives you put forward in your plan provide the foundation for everything that follows. For your plan to be effective, therefore, its goals and objectives and vision statement need to be written clearly enough that they can be meaningfully interpreted and applied in specific situations. It does no good to
articulate goals and objectives that are so general and bland that it is impossible to know what they might mean in specific situations. If your plans’ vision statement and goals and objectives are so “sugar-coated” that no one could possibly take issue with them, they will probably also not provide a useful guide to decision-making and policy formulation. Your vision statement and goals and objectives in your plan need to be capable of providing a useful guide to action.

One final warning: it will be difficult to communicate a clear sense of direction, and to establish priorities, if your plan includes too many goals and objectives. (One plan I came across recently listed over 50 goals and over 140 separate policies. When a community lists that many goals and objectives in a plan, it could well be a sign that it doesn’t have a very clear sense of what it wants to achieve.)

• An Effective Plan Communicates Key Ideas Clearly and Effectively

An effective plan is able to present complicated ideas and concepts in a way that they can be readily understood and remembered. For example, a county plan that won a national award from the American Planning Association in 1991 was titled simply “A Six Point Plan for the Future.” The six main points were then clearly presented in the main body of the plan in six separate chapters on: “Responsible Regionalism”; “Preservation of the Rural West”; “Balanced Growth”; “Working with Nature”; “Community Enhancement”; and “Phased Growth.” Communicating complex ideas in an orderly and discernible way is an art rather than a science. It requires strong writing and editing, and a creative sense of how best to organize and present ideas.

• A Good Plan Offers a Well Thought-Out and Integrated Program of Action

An effective plan provides a community with an integrated program of recommended policies and actions that enables the community to move steadily and deliberately toward the future it desires. Communities that don’t have plans,
on the other hand, react to problems in an ad hoc fashion. The problem with such a "knee-jerk" reaction to problems is that in each instance it encourages a community look for a "magic bullet" solution. The net result is a series of discrete and unrelated actions--the very opposite from a coherent and sustained approach to problem-solving. Responding to crises and problems as they arise gives the appearance of "doing something," but rarely produces satisfactory results in the long run. Given the complexity and inter-relatedness of issues facing communities today, a comprehensive and deliberately formulated strategy offers a much greater likelihood of success.

• An Effective Plan is Realistic and Achieves Positive Results

To be effective, a plan needs to present a compelling case that the strategies and actions it recommends are necessary and desirable. It must also convince citizens and elected officials that the strategies and actions it recommends have a good chance of achieving the desired results. Effective plans are realistic plans. It makes little sense for a plan to call for actions for which there is no political support, and/or that the community can not afford. Likewise, there is considerable downside risk in recommending actions that have a low probability of achieving a successful outcome.

• An Effective Plan Explains the Process Used to Create the Plan

It is extremely important that your plan explain how the views and concerns of major stakeholder groups and persons directly affected by the plan were considered, and how the plan balances competing interests. If the legitimacy, representativeness and fairness of the plan is not clearly established, opponents and critics of the plan could use that as an excuse to undermine its adoption and implementation. Therefore, you need to be sure that your plan includes a brief section that explains how it was prepared, how the goals of the plan were arrived at, and who had input into the plan. It also needs to describe how the views and
concerns of citizens were solicited and obtained (by mail or telephone survey, focus group discussions, open meetings, representative task force or citizen advisory committee, etc.), and the opportunities provided for citizens to review and comment on drafts, findings, and recommendations in the plan.

• An Effective Plan Takes Account of the Interests of Future Generations

As noted above, it is extremely important that ample opportunities be provided for current citizens and residents to be involved in the preparation of the plan. However, it is important to emphasize that the plan must also take account of the needs and interests of future generations of residents, who are not otherwise represented in the planning process. Considering the needs and interests of future generations is central to striking an appropriate balance between development and environmental resource protection, and between the interests of current property owners and the interests of future residents and future property owners. Another way of saying this is that the pattern of land use and pace of development called for in the plan must be economically and environmentally sustainable.

• An Effective Plan Recognizes Diverse Interests and Builds a Sense of Ownership

At the turn of the century in America, one of the most important and influential plans of all time was created. It was the 1909 Plan for Chicago, prepared by Daniel Burnham, probably the most famous architect/planner in the nation at the time. If you have ever seen the futuristic birds’ eye view illustrations of what Burnham hoped Chicago would become, and have flown over Chicago, you will realize that much of what was called for in the Burnham plan has come into being: Grant Park, the depressed railroad tracks leading to Union Station, miles and miles of parks and open space stretching north and south along the shore of Lake Michigan, the Navy Pier, Congress Avenue, etc.

The attractiveness of the pictures and illustrations Burnham provided in the plan certainly helped to capture the imagination of large numbers of people. But another major factor that helped build momentum for the plan was a public
relations manual, prepared by a man by the name of Walter Moody, that convinced large segments of the population that the community as a whole would benefit from the implementation of the plan. Moody’s manual, which was more widely distributed than the plan itself, summarized the key points in the plan and convinced people that everyone had something to gain from the implementation of the plan. It may not be possible to repeat what Moody accomplished with his little manual, but it is certainly possible, and indeed essential, that an “Executive Summary” be prepared to accompany your plan when it is completed, and that it be widely distributed. Most people will not take the time to read the full entire plan, but can and should be expected to at least read a brief summary of the plan. Like Moody’s manual, the summary should highlight the essential aspects of the plan and communicate how it addresses the interests and concerns of different constituencies.

Another way of making people aware of the plan, and of getting people to identify with the plan, is to design a logo that symbolizes the planning process and the plan. This logo can then be placed on everything related to the plan—news stories, meeting announcements, interim progress reports, draft reports, the plan itself, etc.

• **An Effective Plan Includes Provisions for Up-dating the Plan**

   No matter how well thought-out a plan may be, no plan can foresee and anticipate all the changes and events that may occur with the passage of time. Therefore, it is important to make provisions for the periodic review and updating of long-range plans. For example, Waukesha County’s recently prepared long-range plan includes a provision calling for reviewing, up-dating, and revising the plan every 5 years.
• An Effective Plan Provides a Way of Monitoring and Evaluating Community Change

An effective plan does more than articulate goals. It also provides a way of evaluating how well the community is doing in achieving its goals. One of the ways that plans can do this is by specifying appropriate indicators (some people call them benchmarks or "vital signs") that then can be monitored over time. For example, if improved water quality is a goal, the percentage of private wells meeting safe drinking standards, and/or the number of fish caught in local lakes and streams, might be suitable indicators. The number of deaths and injuries from automobile accidents might be an appropriate indicator of safety. The goals and objectives specified in your plan, and the qualities and assets that people value in your community, should ultimately determine the indicators you choose.

Specifying and monitoring change indicators or benchmarks is one way of evaluating the impact and success of your plan. However, it is important to recognize that not all changes that occur in the future can be attributed to the plan you have adopted. Just as it is wrong to give your plan the credit for everything that happens in the future, so too it can be wrong to blame your plan when undesirable changes occur.

Many of us have chosen to live where we do because we like certain things about that community, place and/or location. When we are extremely fond of and attached to a community, it is easy to become resistant to change, and to hope that the features and qualities we appreciate and value will remain largely unchanged forever. Indeed, a major reason for preparing plans is to try to preserve the special qualities and resources of localities, areas and regions throughout the state. Some communities actually prepare plans in an attempt to limit and prevent growth. However, it is probably unrealistic to expect that a plan, even an extremely well-prepared plan, can prevent growth from occurring, and keep the community and area the same.

When changes occur that we view as undesirable, and that threaten the qualities and features we value, and when these changes occur in a community that
has a plan, it is easy to blame the plan, and to conclude that the plan is somehow not working. However, that is an unfair way to judge the effectiveness of a plan.

The best measure of the value and success of your plan is not whether and how much your community has changed, but how your community would have changed had the community not had a plan, or had a different plan. Recognizing this important distinction is essential if citizens and elected officials are to have a fair basis for evaluating the impact and contribution of your plan. Recognizing this distinction also underscores the point made earlier that an important role a plan performs is to communicate in a powerful way what might happen in the future if current trends are allowed to continue in the absence of an adopted plan.
Resource Materials

The following publications and materials contain practical and useful information to guide you in the preparation of a successful comprehensive plan, as well as in structuring and carrying out planning processes leading to the preparation and revision of your comprehensive plan.


