To Produce an Effective Plan
You Need a Plan for Planning

Gene Bunnell, Ph.D.

Department of Urban and Regional Planning

University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Given the time and effort required to prepare a plan, it is easy to think of completing and officially adopting a plan as an end in itself. However, a plan is really a means to an end. The only reason for having a plan is to use it as a guide to decision-making, and to produce a better community than otherwise would have resulted. If a plan is not referred to when zoning changes are requested, when capital improvement priorities are being established, and when other actions are being considered that will affect patterns of land use and development, then there is probably little value in having a plan.

Unfortunately, citizens and local officials often overlook the fact that preparing a plan does not assure that that plan will subsequently be used. All too often, local citizens and plan commissioners will work hard to see that a plan is prepared, and then see that plan be ignored and fall into disuse. Moreover, it is not simply old plans that fall into disuse. Indeed, having a recently prepared plan is no assurance that a plan will be implemented. Without naming specific communities, I can say with confidence that I know of a number of communities in Wisconsin that prepared plans as recently as three to five years ago that are unhappy with their plans and are not now making use of them. To spend one to three years, and a substantial amount of money, preparing a plan that does not meet your community's needs, and that is not implemented, is the worst of all possible outcomes—worse than having no plan at all.

One reason that communities are often disappointed in the plans they
produce is that they often rush into planning a plan, without spending adequate
time thinking about why they need a plan, what the plan should consist of, who
should be involved in the planning process, what process to follow in preparing the
plan, etc. In short, the best way to assure that your plan is useful and effective is to
first develop "A Plan for Planning." The following are some common sense tips to
developing a sound Plan for Planning.

• Think About Who is Going To Use the Plan, and How

  How do you hope and expect the plan to be used? Are local officials generally
  committed to referring to the comprehensive plan when decisions are made related
to local zoning and subdivision regulations, transportation and highway
  investments, public and community facilities improvements, park and open space
  acquisition and improvements?

  Who, if anyone, will be responsible for being thoroughly knowledgeable of
  the plan, and for seeing to it that policies and actions called for in the plan are
carried out? This is an especially important issue to consider in small communities
  that do not have full-time paid professional staff.

• Build Agreement on Goals

  The goals you adopt, and that are put forward in your plan, should provide
the basis and justification for everything else in the plan. But arriving at a
statement of goals that reflects the values and preferences of the majority of citizens
can take a good deal of time and effort. Not everyone is in agreement about what
the goals of your community are and should be. Therefore, the earlier you being
working on formulating goals and objectives for the plan the better.

  How should the goals of the plan be arrived at? Responsibility for producing
a list of goals could be delegated to your local plan commission, or to the consultant
or agency responsible for preparing the plan. But since goals are statements of
community values, preferences and aspirations, the formulation of goals need not, and probably should not, be left solely to a small circle of planners. Ideally the goals of the plan should come from, and be ratified by, a representative cross-section of community. (In some states, local plans are required to be consistent with officially adopted state goals for land use. If Wisconsin were to eventually adopt a set of state goals for land use, the formulation of local goals might be less open-ended than is currently the case. But even then there will still be considerable scope for variation and tailoring of goals to individual communities and settings.)

One way to build consensus within the community on the formulation of goals is by undertaking a visioning process, possibly with the assistance of UW-Extension. Engaging in a visioning process provides citizens an opportunity to think about what they would like their community to be like 10, 20, 30 or more years from now.

- Take Stock of Local Resources and Qualities

In working to formulate community goals, and a vision of the future, it is important not only to consider how people might like the community to change, but also to identify qualities and resources that people feel are important to preserve. Articles and books on planning often call for an inventory and analysis of local resources and assets to be conducted as one of the first steps in the planning process. But taking stock local resources and assets be also be thought of as an important step to take before getting too immersed in planning and plan-making.

What, resources and qualities make your community and area a good place to live? What resources and qualities make your community or area different from other communities and other areas of the state? Are there particular qualities and features that contribute to a distinctive local character and sense of place? What resources and qualities create a positive image for the community and engender community pride? Are that any particular scenic views or visual qualities that people value? The qualities and resources you identify may be in the natural
environment, or in the man-made environment (distinctive buildings and/or groups of buildings, historically significant landmarks, etc.), or they may be social and cultural resources that derive from the distinctive origins and heritage of peoples who lived and settled in the area over time.

When you generate lists of the qualities and resources you value, and compare lists with other people, you will probably find that many of the qualities and resources you value are also appreciated by others in the community. Achieving such a shared understanding of the qualities, resources and features that people appreciate and value, and want to preserve, provides a solid basis for beginning to the process of preparing a plan.

- **Consider Whether You Need an Altogether New Plan**

  Plans can become out-of-date. When citizens and local officials discover that their plan has inadequacies and shortcomings, they often assume that they need to start all over and develop an altogether *new* plan. I call this falling prey to the “new plan syndrome.”

  One problem with preparing an altogether new plan is that it can distract a community from addressing pressing problems and issues, and provide an excuse for not implementing policies and programs recommended in previously prepared plans. Elected officials who would like to put off having to make difficult and controversial decisions, and who prefer doing nothing, can find it very appealing to call for a lengthy planning process, or for doing a study, as a substitute to action. From a political standpoint, calling for the preparation of a new plan is easier, and less controversial than revising and implementing a current plan.

  Some parts of the community’s current or old plan may be as valid today as when the plan was first prepared. All that may be needed may be to update certain portions of the old plan. Perhaps, instead of spending money on preparing a new plan, a better use of limited resources might be to hire a planner who could then be made responsible for administering and gradually updating the plan.
There is an added reason for trying, if at all possible, to make use of elements of previously prepared plans, which leads to the importance of recognizing the positive contributions of past planning. People who have invested time and effort in preparing a plan are unlikely to be willing to work on developing another plan if the old plan was not made use of by local decision-makers. Building on past plans is essential to maintaining support for future planning efforts.

- **Motivate and Encourage People to Plan by Celebrating Successes and Giving Recognition**

As noted above, people are more likely to be willing to invest time and effort in planning if they know that past plans have been used and that past planning efforts have produced positive results. For that reason, if you want to build and maintain public support for the preparation of future plans it is important to make a conscious effort to celebrate successes due to past planning efforts (however small), and honor citizens and public officials who supported the preparation of past plans and put their reputations on the line in attempting to implement key provisions in those plans.

It is easy to overlook the positive effects plans have on communities. Successes due to planning often go unrecognized, because the success of a plan is often measured in the things that don’t happen, and in problems that don’t get worse. Successes also go unrecognized because the benefits of having a plan are often reflected in small and steady improvements, rather than in dramatic leaps forward.

Once you have a plan, don’t assume that everyone recognizes its value. The value of having a plan needs to be continually communicated. Make people aware of how development has been made better by planning, and of how land use has been improved by having zoning and subdivision regulations that are consistent with the plan. Also, be sure to publicly recognize and praise developers who produce developments that meet local planning goals and standards, and are indicative of what your plan considers to be good development.
• Think About the Process You Will Follow When Preparing the Plan

One of the most important issues that must be addressed in a “plan for planning” is the process that will be followed in preparing the plan. How much citizen participation there will be? Will a Steering Committee be formed to oversee the planning process, and if so how large, and what persons and interests will be represented on it? How many and what types of opportunities will there be for citizens to have input during the planning process?

It is important to confront the issue of citizen participation and involvement early on for two main reasons. First, providing numerous opportunities for citizen involvement in the planning process is essential if the plan is to gain widespread public support. Second, providing ample opportunities for citizen input can add to the cost and length of the planning process, and therefore needs to be taken into account before entering into a contract for planning services.

Providing opportunities for citizen involvement and comments is important at all stages of the planning process— not just at the end when preliminary and final plans and recommendations are being presented. For example, at the very beginning of Jefferson County’s planning process, at the “issue identification” phase, a survey was conducted of over 7000 households, and a number of “focus group” discussions were also held. The contract for planning services in Jefferson County also requires the planning consultant to prepare a “visioning packet” -- consisting of visual preference imaging, design assessment tools and bird’s eye renderings-- designed to solicit reactions and opinions from citizens. The scope of services also calls for a series of Town Hall meetings and “quadrant meetings” in the four quarters of the county.

There are ways that counties and local governments can limit the costs associated with citizen participation-- such as by asking county-based UW- Extension faculty to facilitate and assist the citizen participation process, by making use of donated in-kind services, and/or by seeking the assistance of volunteers.
• Think About The Geographic Area Planning Should Cover

If you thumb through the pages of a local plan, you will often find a map that seems to suggest that the community that is being planned for is a world unto its own, unconnected to other communities. Only that one community is shown, and everything beyond its borders of that community is blank. Of course the vast majority of local governments in Wisconsin are not islands in a physical or literal sense. In fact, developments and land use changes beyond a community’s boundaries can have a significant effect on what happens within that community. Therefore, it is important that local governments not feel compelled to limit the scope of planning to rigidly defined local government boundaries.

Many cities and villages have extra-territorial zoning powers over land within 1 1/2 or 3 miles of their boundaries. Thus, when cities and villages development plans they often plan for areas beyond their boundaries. However, because town governments do not generally possess similar extra-territorial zoning powers, town planning is typically limited to the area within town boundaries— a fact that is a severe handicap to developing meaningful land use plans at the town level.

When counties embark on preparing land use plans, they often focus most of their planning attention on unincorporated areas, because county authority to zone and regulate land use is limited to unincorporated areas. However, meaningful and unified county plans cannot be prepared without taking account of development trends and policies within and on the fringe of incorporated areas. In fact, state statutes in Wisconsin require that county development plans incorporate the plans of cities and villages.
• Explore the Possibility of Cooperative Planning

As the recent report prepared by the State Interagency Land Use Task Force report states, land use planning in Wisconsin cannot be improved without some improvement in inter-governmental cooperation. There are 1848 general purpose local governments in Wisconsin--189 cities, 394 villages and 1266 towns. Most local governments in Wisconsin are extremely small, both in terms of population and land area. Two-thirds of all villages and towns in Wisconsin had populations of less than 1000 in 1990 -- including twelve which had populations of less than 100. When communities are that small, individual local governments have a difficult time coming up with the resources to support a comprehensive planning process.

Even if it were possible for all 1848 local governments in Wisconsin to prepare their own plans, it is questionable whether that in itself would improve land use or growth management. What would improve land use planning and growth management in Wisconsin is if local governments would somehow agree to cooperate with one another when preparing plans, so as to produce plans which are more consistent and compatible with one another.

The fact that a large proportion of new development is happening on the urban and rural fringe has greatly increased the potential for inter-governmental conflict over land use and development. When development occurs along the boundaries of communities, the effects of development are inevitably felt in adjoining communities. Moreover, when development occurs on the fringe of communities, it is often not wholly under the control of any single local government unit. Inter-governmental conflict has been further aggravated by the fact that cities and villages have often prepared plans for urban expansion, and undertaken piecemeal annexations of land at the request of landowners, without communicating with or involving citizens and elected officials in affected unincorporated areas.

A more neighborly and possibly more effective approach might be for incorporated municipalities (cities and villages) and adjoining towns to cooperate
with one another in land use planning. Varying degrees of inter-governmental cooperation in land use planning are possible. A town and village or city might agree to undertake parallel planning processes -- to share information, findings and proposed recommendations with one another, and to solicit comments from one another prior to taking any formal actions. At the other end of the spectrum, a town and village or city might hire the same planning consultant, and/or combine their planning processes into a single process so as to produce a unified plan for the "land in-between." The implementation of such a jointly prepared plans could be assured by signing an intergovernmental agreement defining a ten-year and/or twenty-year growth boundary for the urban area.

The idea of jointly hiring a consultant to prepare a plan or compatible plans for two or more adjoining communities runs counter to normal practice, and may require additional effort. To succeed, communities will need to rise above their petty concerns and selfish interests, and consider the interests and concerns of people in neighboring communities. The advantage of a cooperative planning process is that it may enable adjoining local governments to avoid costly litigation arising from land use disputes. Cooperative land use planning may also cost less than if each local government were to hire its own consultant to prepare its own separate plan. Joint planning can achieve economies because once the consultant is in the area (to collect information, coordinate meetings, etc.) it costs relatively little to serve another nearby community as well. Moreover, the data collected for one community may be equally informative to an adjacent community, because the growth and market pressures affecting adjacent communities are often quite similar.

Cooperative planning makes particularly good sense in cases where an incorporated village or city is completely surrounded by a single town. Cooperative planning can also make sense for groups of towns. For example, in Shawano County a number of towns are working together to address land use and development issues of mutual concern, with the assistance the County Planning Department and UW-Extension.
Think About the Form, Content and Appearance of the Plan

It is often assumed that there is such a thing as a standard plan, and that everyone knows and agrees what it will look like and consist of. However, plans come in all sizes and shapes. Plans can be attractive, appealing to the eye and easy to read. Or they can be dull and take a great deal of effort to read. One particularly well known plan was made to make it look like an issue of Time Magazine and included paid advertisements that helped defray the cost of printing the plan. (Time Magazine was not happy with this imitation of their magazine and threatened to file suit, so don't copy that idea. The reason I mention that novel plan is simply to suggest that communities should try to be creative in producing a eye-catching document that makes citizens want to read the plan.)

One thing you might consider is preparing a colorful and eye-catching "poster plan" to accompany your plan. A "poster plan" is not a substitute for a full plan, or the plan itself, but summarizes and communicates the key elements of the plan, and is prepared for wide distribution. The City of Eau Claire prepared a two-sided poster to accompany its comprehensive plan. On one side of the poster one finds a statement of Eau Claire's Vision for the future. plus a list of Key Policies related to issues such as neighborhood development, historic preservation, downtown revitalization, intergovernmental relations, transportation, etc. On the other side of the poster, one finds a colorful map of existing and proposed land uses, with the goals and objectives of the plan listed beneath the map related to land use, transportation, utilities, parks and open space and community image. Poster plans have also been prepared for the City of Oshkosh, City of Platteville, Sauk Prairie, and the Fox River Corridor in Waukesha.

Plans can have different emphases and can be organized in different ways. Comprehensive plans have traditionally been composed of a number of basic elements, covering: Land Use; Housing; Transportation and Circulation; Community Facilities; Utilities and Infrastructure; Natural Environmental Resources and Conservation; Historic and Cultural Resources; Economic
Development; Natural Hazard Mitigation; Growth Management Policies; Design Policies and Guidelines; etc.

Perhaps one or two of these elements address issues that are of particular importance in your community right now. Or perhaps there are some particular parts of your community that are in need of special attention -- such as areas likely to be affected by a proposed bypass highway, or a major highway widening project. The content of your plan, and the relative weight given to various issues and elements, can and should reflect the issues and concerns that are most important to your community. Because issues and problems vary in relative importance among communities, the content of plans, and the weight given to particular topics and issues, will inevitably vary.

If the resources you can devote to planning are limited, you might want to choose to work on developing one or two elements of the plan at a time. It is not absolutely necessary to produce all elements of your community's plan all at once—although doing so certainly has certain advantages. Particularly in communities with no prior experience in developing plans, and where people are somewhat skeptical about the value of planning, there is something to be said for beginning to plan by focusing on a single issue that everyone agrees is a problem and needs to be addressed. In this way, the community will have a good chance of developing a track record of success in planning that then allows it to tackle more complex and comprehensive planning problems later on.

You might want to think of your comprehensive plan, not as a handsomely bound book that can never be taken apart, but rather as a loose-leaf notebook containing various elements that have been added and revised over time. The advantage of thinking of the plan in this way is that it suggests that the plan is a living document that is continuously kept up to date. Indeed, there are some outstanding examples of comprehensive plans that have followed that mold.
• Consider Who Should Prepare the Plan

Some communities may find that they are capable of preparing a useful and effective plan on their own, using the knowledge and expertise of members of the local plan commission and interested citizens. Small communities in areas experiencing very little development pressure may be in an especially good position to prepare fairly straightforward and adequate land use plans, possibly with just a little outside help from the county planning department, UW-Extension, etc. (There is an excellent guide to preparing small town plans, called the Small Town Planning Handbook (second edition) by Daniels, Keller and Lapping that can take a community step by step through the process.)

If your municipality has a planning department, the municipality’s own planning staff may be able to prepare part or all of the plan. Existing planning staff can certainly be called upon to organize and oversee the overall planning process, etc. However, municipal planning staff are also responsible for administering and enforcing existing land use regulations, and it can be difficult to wear that hat and at the same time propose a different set of land use regulations.

Most communities find that they need or want to have professional assistance in preparing their plan. One reason for hiring outside assistance is that an outside consultant is likely to see things and reach conclusions that might not occur to local residents and staff. People who have lived in a community most of their lives do not see their community the way outsiders see and experience their community. An outside consultant will also be in a position to offer recommendations that local officials and residents might not feel comfortable suggesting. When the City of Eau Claire prepared its comprehensive plan, much of the plan was prepared by the city’s Planning Department, but an out-of-town private consultant was hired to analyze local conditions and trends.

If you decide to seek outside assistance in developing your plan, you still have a number of choices. If your county has a county planning department, you might obtain technical assistance from that agency. If you are in a region served by a
regional planning commission, you may be able contract with it. Or you can hire any of a number of private consulting firms with qualifications in land use and comprehensive planning. Remember: if involving citizens is an important part of the planning process, it is important to select a planning consultant, firm or agency with demonstrated abilities and experience in facilitating meaningful citizen participation.

- Prepare a Request for Proposals

The suggestions offered above underscore the importance of having a plan for planning. There is one other key element that can help assure that the plan that you prepare is effective and successful. If you intend to hire outside professional assistance to prepare your plan, before hiring someone first issue a Request for Proposals (R.F.P.), advertise it prominently, and give consultants an adequate amount of time to prepare their submissions. Once you have received the proposals and reviewed them, interview a handful of finalists, and then make your choice.

Needless to say, if you undertake an R.F.P. process it is essential that it be a completely open process, and that there not be any bias in favor of a particular firm or applicant going into the selection process. To minimize favoritism, the R.F.P. should clearly describe the process whereby the consultant will be selected, who will make the selection, the criteria for making the selection, and the time-line for making a decision.

One advantage of preparing an R.F.P. is that it forces a community to explain clearly to everyone (including citizens and local officials) why it wants a plan, what it wants the plan to achieve, and the process it intends to follow in preparing the plan. A second advantage is that submissions in response to the R.F.P. provide insights, observations and suggested approaches that enable the community to better understand its problems. As a result, a community that goes through an R.F.P. process becomes smarter and wiser, and better prepared to write a scope of services that meets its objectives, and avoids problems and pitfalls along the way.
Preparing a Request for Proposals is a good idea even if in the end you contract with your regional planning commission or county planning department. Public planning agencies as well as private consulting firms can be asked to submit a formal response to an R.F.P. — and going through such a process can be equally beneficial to a public agency by forcing it to explain its ideas and recommended approach before embarking on a lengthy planning process.