Understanding the Comprehensive Planning Process

M.H. Dorsett, AICP

Comprehensive plans are the result of a combination of lateral and linear processes rather than the strictly linear processes encompassed in the "rational model." They are recursive in nature, requiring the weaving of multiple strands, actions, sub-processes, into a coherent whole. The process often runs counter to the "scientific model" or "rational model" approach taught in most schools of planning and may explain why few planners specialize in creating comprehensive plans. In the 1970s, when comprehensive planning began to take hold even in the most rural of jurisdictions, the model for the plan called for the creation of a document based on data and the careful study of local conditions. After 1980, the model began to change as citizens demanded a voice in the process . Jurisdictions, from the local level to the state, began to recognize that local voices and perspectives, beyond those of the most obvious stakeholders and the planning experts, had value. In the past decade, comprehensive planning found a balance between the local voices and the data, discovering that each had a significant role in the final product, and the balance shows in the state codes adopted since 2000 (see West Virginia for an example).

The shift away from the straight data or social science approach to comprehensive planning signaled the development or co-option of invention techniques (clustering, brainstorming, concept mapping, and so forth) from the humanities and other creative fields. Concept maps replaced more traditional flow charts; charrettes, memory maps and clustering augmented more traditional forms of public input, such as surveys. On surveys, SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity, threat) questions and qualitative information took on greater importance: Qualitative data, although still included, diminished in importance as citizen defined weaknesses or opportunities took the place of average scores from a Likert scale. The shift also meant that citizens became the experts. Anecdotal data, the stories told and the observations made by residents often told more about a situation than did the numeric data from the Census Bureau or the Environmental Protection Agency. While the increased emphasis on public input and involvement has increased the cost of planning. as consultants spend more time in the communities, the shift has had a net-positive impact on comprehensive planning and has resulted in plans that are less generic, more closely tied to the broader community, and far more likely to gain and retain public support. Running parallel to the changing attitudes towards public inclusion are the changes in technology. Government data that used to take weeks to accumulate can be downloaded in seconds. Census-based thematic maps, charts, and graphs can be generated in a matter of minutes with a click of the mouse. Not only have the computer and the internet made data more accessible and far more in depth, it has also, through Geographic Information Systems (GIS), changed the way citizens see and define the places in which they live. They have a stronger sense of their own geographies, no longer limited to random snapshots. How they see place and understand place, and the tools they use to study their geographies, represents the second major shift in comprehensive planning. Government data, mapping tools, and statistical packages are available to anyone with a computer and access to the internet, diminishing the role of statisticians and increasing the role of mappers in the planning process. At the same time, changes in technology have given local governments cheaper and more effective ways of reaching out to citizens, publishing information, and generating documents. The net result of changing technologies, for smaller jurisdictions, is that planning has become both more accessible and, in some respects, less expensive.

The Level of Control, Politics, and Citizen Participation.

Most state enabling acts include public participation provisions; however, the mandated levels of public participation vary significantly from state to state. For example, Virginia only requires public hearings at the end of the process and has no provisions for public input during the process; West Virginia mandates citizen participation throughout the process, requiring jurisdictions to partner with the public in developing their comprehensive plans. The differences in code provisions are tied, in part, to the age of the particular codes. Virginia's code provisions governing comprehensive planning were initially created in 1975, and while they have had piecemeal updates, there has been no comprehensive revision since the code provisions were first adopted; West Virginia's code provisions were adopted in 2004. The differences between the two codes reflects changes in the planning profession, in planning and governance practices and standards at the state and local levels, and in the shifting perception of the "centrality" or importance of comprehensive plans, including the expansion of the comprehensive plan's role beyond simply a land use advisory document.

In short, significant public participation in planning and governance is a relatively recent phenomena and the growth of its importance is reflected in the state codes over time. State code requirements written since 1990 are far more likely to include provisions for citizen input. A recently released "short course" document from the Washington State Department of Commerce, "Comprehensive Planning: Context and Basics" (McGuire 2010) illustrates this very point. According to Edward McGuire, planning in the State of Washington, prior to 1990 and the adoption of the Growth Management Act, treated the comprehensive plan as optional, functioning as an advisory-only document, while the zoning ordinance was considered the governing document. As a result, approaches to planning and growth in Washington were piecemeal rather than comprehensive and led to "sprawl, congestion, and the loss of open space, critical areas, and resource lands." The adoption of the Growth Management Act shifted the perception of the comprehensive plan from an advisory document to a governing document and introduced the requirement for citizen participation throughout all stages of the planning process.

A brief note about the comprehensive plan and politics. Planners are counseled, early in their training, to avoid politics. While it is a sound bit of advice on both the personal and professional level, the advice often translates to "avoid understanding politics." Because comprehensive plans are policy documents with budget implications, they and the process by which they are developed are politically charged. With few exceptions, most notably the need for public safety facilities, the majority of subjects included in comprehensive plans can be politically contentious and the policies chosen can have political consequences. In large swaths of the country, planning and property rights frame local elections. Know the political lay of the land and identify political outliers early in the process. It will save you from planning headaches later in the process. We have included two case studies later in this issue which deal with politics and the political realities of planning.

There is an inverse relationship between the level of control exerted by governmental entities (elected officials, appointed officials, and staff) over the planning process and the level of citizen participation included in the planning process. The greater the citizen participation, the less control. Elected bodies are typically ambivalent about public participation. While elected officials would like to be able to say that they provided substantial opportunities for public input, a claim that plays well during election season, public input can lead to a perceived loss of control and can result in programs and approaches which may run counter to their positions. In jurisdictions where political power is closely held, public participation in the planning process can be seen as a threat.

It is useful to think about control and public participation as a continuum. On one extreme, the governmental entities maintain total control (top-down planning) and citizen participation is limited only to those requirements mandated by the state. On the opposite extreme, citizens maintain control (bottom-up or grassroots planning) to the exclusion of
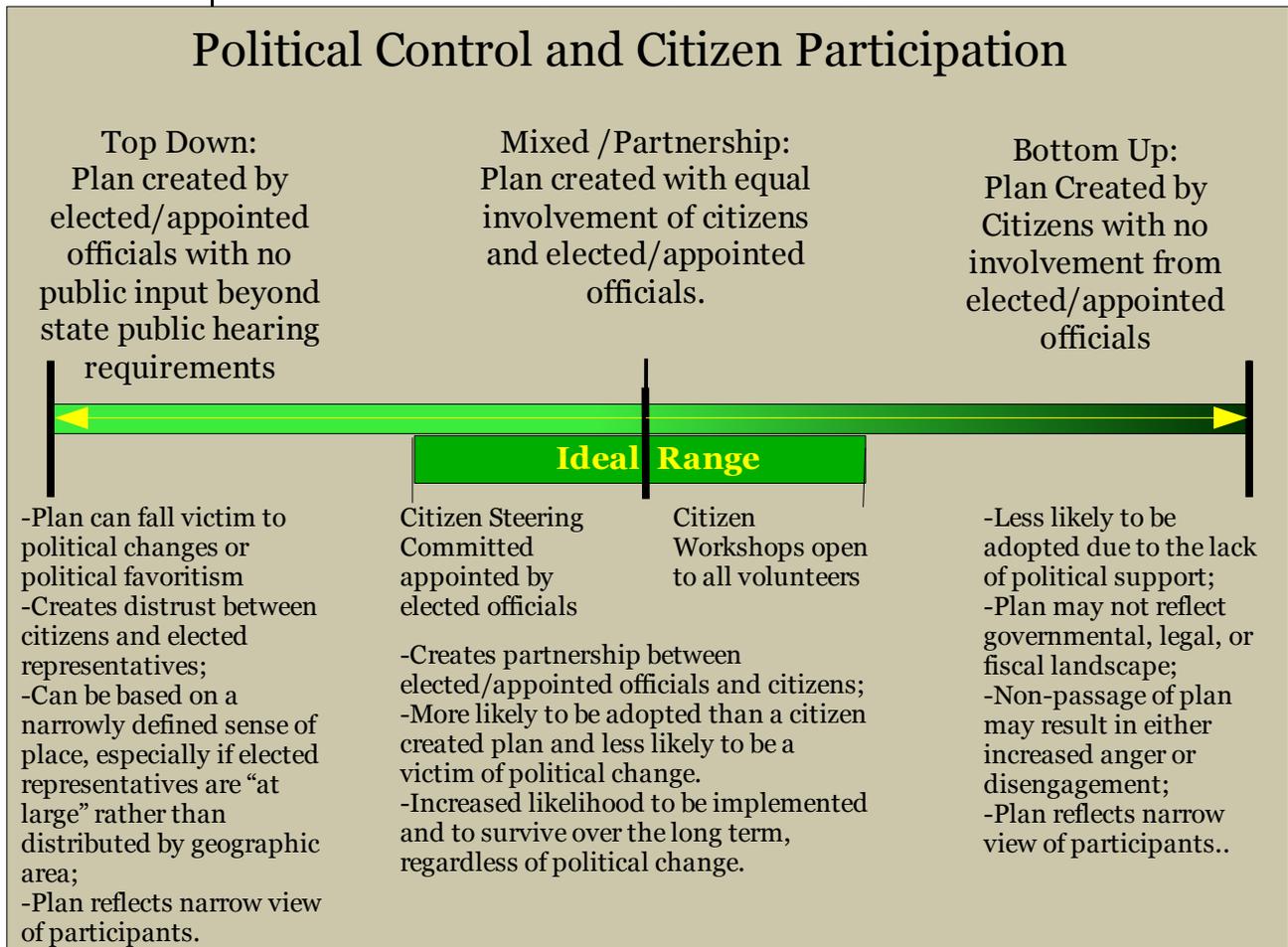
governmental agencies and appointed and elected officials. Plans created at either extreme do not work for similar reasons. By denying participation, the approaches at the extremes result in political opposition. When citizens or governmental officials are left out of the planning process or do not have a vested interest in the final results, the process and the plan create distrust of the government or potentially disenfranchisement or anger.

The middle ground between top-down and bottom-up planning creates a partnership between the local government and citizens results in greater "buy-in" and increases the likelihood the plan will survive over time and be implemented, rather than be relegated to a file box or the back of a shelf.

The form the partnership takes is a function of political control, but it is still designed to "vest" the larger community in the plan. There are two primary partnership approaches: 1) steering committees or citizen advisory/action committees, which are appointed by the local elected body; and 2) citizen working groups, where the chair of the committee may be an appointed or an elected official but membership is open to all citizens with an interest. While the elected officials still retain some control, it is not absolute. It is important to recognize that neither of the two approaches precludes additional public input, especially in terms of community meetings or a community survey.

Timeframes and Time Constraints

Under ideal circumstances, planners, planning commissioners, and citizens have all the time they want or need to create a new comprehensive plan. Unfortunately, most jurisdictions do not set aside "all the time in the world," so time constraints play a major role in the development of local plans. It is not unusual for a elected body to wait until the year before or the year of required adoption to begin the planning process. Time constraints often

Political Control and Citizen Participation

Top Down:
Plan created by elected/appointed officials with no public input beyond state public hearing requirements

Mixed /Partnership:
Plan created with equal involvement of citizens and elected/appointed officials.

Bottom Up:
Plan Created by Citizens with no involvement from elected/appointed officials

Ideal Range

-Plan can fall victim to political changes or political favoritism
-Creates distrust between citizens and elected representatives;
-Can be based on a narrowly defined sense of place, especially if elected representatives are "at large" rather than distributed by geographic area;
-Plan reflects narrow view of participants.

Citizen Steering Committed appointed by elected officials

-Creates partnership between elected/appointed officials and citizens;
-More likely to be adopted than a citizen created plan and less likely to be a victim of political change.
-Increased likelihood to be implemented and to survive over the long term, regardless of political change.

Citizen Workshops open to all volunteers

-Less likely to be adopted due to the lack of political support;
-Plan may not reflect governmental, legal, or fiscal landscape;
-Non-passage of plan may result in either increased anger or disengagement;
-Plan reflects narrow view of participants..

result from an elected body's lack of understanding of the complexity of the project , lack of staff resources, or lack of familiarity with time requirements for different planning processes. This is especially true for smaller and for rural jurisdictions where local planning experiences may be limited to occasional subdivision or rezoning requests and where there has been little call for more complex projects.

While there is a longer discussion of the nuts and bolts of developing time frames in the "Tools of the Trade" section of this issue of *The Community Planner*, there are some issues you need to be aware of. First, with rare exceptions, comprehensive planning processes take more than a year to complete, especially if your jurisdiction is considering hiring an outside consultant. On average, the request for qualifications/request for proposals process takes three to eight months to complete. If you have less than twelve months to complete the plan, time constraints may preclude using outside consultants or will put your consultant in a position of having to rely on "cut and paste" approaches and limited citizen involvement to complete the work in a timely fashion.

Second, unless you have provided your planning commission, your elected officials, and your citizens ample time to vet the project or they have been intimately involved in the planning process, you may run into problems during the approval portion of your time frame. State enabling legislation typically includes provisions for public hearings and the length of time a plan must be made public prior to the required public hearings. To make sure you have ample time for the public hearing requirements and approval process, develop your time frame from the end of the process and work backwards. Do not assume that the plan is going to sail through. It probably will not, so be sure to build in review and revision time.

The Cost of Planning

Plans cost money to produce. How much you budget for the plan is going to depend on whether the work is done in-house or is jobbed out to a consulting firm or another outside agency. While this article does not directly deal with the costs of planning, knowing and understanding the parts and processes of creating a plan will help you determine how much you may need to set aside.

For small towns and rural jurisdictions, as a rule of thumb, plans typically cost in the neighborhood of $100,000. Jurisdictions can lower the overall price tag by keeping all or some of the process in-house and/or working with volunteers from the community or county, while employing outside agencies only on those parts of the process which can not easily be handled locally, which may need a greater level of expertise, or which may need an outside moderator. As you are creating a more detailed budget for your planning process, remember to include the "hidden" costs: staff time devoted to a plan means staff time diverted from other projects; advertising costs; office supplies, especially duplication costs; and other miscellaneous costs that may be counted against your overall planning budget. One jurisdiction I worked in had an annual "copier" budget. When they started their planning process, with a steering committee, they didn't increase the department's budget for photocopies. Within the first two months of the comprehensive planning process, the department had spent the monies set aside for copies and ended up diverting funds from other parts of the department's operating budget.

Staffing

For most jurisdictions, staffing is one of the core issues and one of the deciding factors in whether a comprehensive plan is done in-house or is farmed out to an outside agency. Is there someone, on staff, with the necessary background and skills to develop a comprehensive plan? Is there someone who can do the required data collection and number crunching? Do they have the time, given their other responsibilities? Are their writing skills strong enough to create a document as complex as a comprehensive plan? For rural and small jurisdictions,

the answer all too often is "no."

Developing a comprehensive plan requires a minimum of a one year commitment and more often than not a two to three years. Asking your staff to take on this type of project, given their other responsibilities, means that either other projects are not going to be completed, or they are going to be putting in far more than their normal 40 hours per week.

You can augment your staff with citizen volunteers, including members of your planning commission. Using volunteers can raise additional issues, especially in terms of predictability. While most volunteers will try hard to live up to their commitments, one or two volunteers who do not can throw off the process.

However you decide to staff your process, make sure you have appointed a "project manager," one person who is tasked with seeing the process thru to the end and managing the different elements or steps. Projects managed by committee, at least at the nuts and bolts level tend to be less manageable, are more prone to mishap, and result in scattershot communication. While a committee may be making larger, collective, decisions, you need to have one individual who is assigned as the point person for the project, who can communicate decisions to applicable agencies and individuals. and is the "go-to" person for questions and concerns.

Parts of the Process

Public Participation and Citizen Input. Public participation comes in a wide range of scales, from limited participation, where the public is involved only at the end, to a broad participation, where the public is involved throughout the process,. The majority of planning processes, however, are located somewhere between the two extremes and often include the use of steering committees or citizen action/advisory committees to guide the development of the local plan, citizen surveys, and community meetings.

While you may not have a clear idea of the specifics approaches you want to use in the comprehensive planning process, you will need to determine the level of public participation you want to achieve based on the mandated requirements for participation in your particular state enabling acts, your planning timeframe, the available staffing and fiscal resources to devote to public participation, and, perhaps most important, public and political sentiment.

Public Information, Citizen Education, and Outreach. Public information is perhaps the most overlooked part of the comprehensive planning process, especially in terms of citizen information before the process begins and during the opening stages of the process. If your jurisdiction has not placed an emphasis on planning in the past, pre-planning education may be necessary to guarantee public participation in the process. Even with jurisdictions that actively plan, public information and outreach is key to the success of the process.

You are likely to get more and better public participation if citizens know what is at stake and understand the key issues, so make use of newsletters, your local paper, and any online opportunities to provide educational materials, as well as detailed planning updates throughout the process. If your jurisdiction has a website, make use of it. If it doesn't, there are plenty of online web hosting companies, including Dreamhost, which will provide non-profit and government agencies free websites. Compared to the cost of printing, online information sites are cheap and require little or no knowledge of computers to create and maintain.

Research and Background Studies Most state enabling acts require jurisdictions to do detailed studies on current and historical trends and conditions. Some of the required data comes from the state and from the federal government; more of the data, however, comes from local agencies, and this is where problems often arise. Local governments and governmental agencies do not often collect the range and depth of data required for in depth studies. While they may have the information scattered through files, it is not often readily accessible. If your government is understaffed, not atypical for smaller and for rural jurisdictions,

you are going to need to give them plenty of lead time to collect the necessary information or you may need to collect the information yourself. Although it will not help much in the first round, but instituting a local indicators program, based on your plan's objectives, will make collecting data for future plans much easier and decrease the short term stress on your staff and volunteers.

Knowing what to research is half the battle. If you are not sure what kinds of data should be included, take a look at other plans adopted in your state. That will give you an initial indication of what you should be collecting. Keep in mind, however, that the task of research extends the length of the planning process and that the information you collect will be dictated, at least in part, by the issues raised by citizens. For example, say your citizens mention that they would like to see more recreational opportunities and facilities. You will need to create an inventory of current offerings before you determine what to add in the future. Your citizens committee may decide that there needs to be a separate chapter on recreation and they want to know if there are state requirements or guidelines and how the jurisdiction currently compares to established standards. Again, their request is going to require research time. You will need to recognize where and when research is going to be necessary and build in ample time to find and provide the information required by your participants and by the process.

The Core Plan

Most state codes have a phrase somewhere in the comprehensive planning statutes that state that ordinances shall be consistent with the comprehensive plans. The statutes are referring to the core plan. At its heart, the comprehensive plan is a set of policies duly adopted by a jurisdiction, that establish the legislative intent for subsequent ordinances, including zoning and subdivision ordinances, and for subsequent actions like creating a new park or widening a road. Jurisdictions can run into legal difficulties when they fail to follow their plan, precisely because their actions are not supported by their stated policies. Without the established relationship between the policies and the ordinances, subsequent actions on the part of the jurisdiction can be seen as arbitrary and capricious.

There are two distinct parts to the core portion of your comprehensive plan: the vision statement, a relatively new phenomena, and the traditional goals, objectives, and strategies for each of your subject areas (land use, environment, transportation, and so forth).

> *Vision Statements.* Vision statements establish a descriptive framework for your comprehensive plan. Typically one to three pages in length, vision statements are a clear statement of the plan's destination or preferred future, specifically **where** your citizens want their jurisdiction to be in "x" number of years and core values they would like to see developed or maintained. Vision statements are fairly general in nature and cover the full range of subjects included in the plan.

The core plan is the actual planning portion of the comprehensive plan, the end result of the public input and the background studies. You will notice in the explanation of the elements of the core plan, below, that specific words are highlighted in bold. These are the "J" or journalism questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how (see the Tools of the Trade section for a longer discussion of the use of the "J" questions and spreadsheets). A good core plan and the implementation matrix or strategic plan will answer the questions.

> *Goals:* A goal is, essentially, a desired outcome (example: Maintain and enhance the quality of groundwater and surface water). As with vision statements, goals are general in nature. The specifics are added as you develop your objectives and strategies.

Policies: Guiding principles to guide implementation of a specific goal or goals and provides a brief explanation of **why** something is being done. Example: groundwater goal: Discourage development that could significantly impair groundwater resources; or Encourage development in areas where there would be a reduced impact on groundwater resources. Policy statements help guide elected and appointed bodies in the decision-making process. The policies are generally developed in the same step as the goals.

Objectives: An objective is a more specific statement, related to a goal, that is 1) measurable, and 2) tells **what** is going to be done. Example: Decrease the impact of stormwater runoff in karst areas, or decrease agricultural runoff in to ground and surface water sources. The objective, in this case, is measurable because water quality can be tested and changes in quality can be tracked over a period of time.

Strategies: A strategy is a specific statement, related to an objective, that tells **how** something is going to be accomplished and **who** is responsible for the project. Example: Work with the Agricultural Extension agents to develop a ground and surface water education program for farmers, or develop stormwater management guidelines or ordinances to reduce the impact of development in karst areas.

Implementation Steps: Implementation steps are a list of the strategies for each goal in order of priority and gives an idea of **when** and where something is going to be done. Example: Education program for landowners (high priority-Year 1); develop a county wide water monitoring program through the schools as an ongoing service learning project for students (high priority Year 1); develop and adopt water quality overlay districts (medium to high priority- Year 2), etc.

Financing: **Who** pays for what and **how** is the cost covered. This section looks at funding options (capital improvement programs and capital budgets, public expenditures, public-private partnerships, regional grants, etc.). Example: Develop a water quality maintenance program with farmers, funded through West Virginia and USDA grant and incentive programs, that encourages them to keep livestock out of sensitive areas.

Check your state enabling acts. While all comprehensive plans include, at a minimum, goals, objectives, and strategies, others have requirements which go beyond the minimum. West Virginia, for example, requires both implementation steps and financing recommendations.

Developing the core plan takes time. While goals do not necessarily require research, developing objectives and strategies do. You may find, in the process, that the data required to measure progress does not exist and a data strategy may need to be added to your list. Strategies may require significant research time because they need to be doable and they must be allowable. We can't stress this latter point enough, especially if you are living in a Dillon Rule state. The Dillon Rule essentially says that you can only do, at the local level, what the state grants you the right to do. If they prohibit it or do not mention it, then it is not allowed. For example, you are reading an article about Transfer of Development Rights (TDRs) and realize that it would solve a major problem in your County. Great idea; unfortunately, you live in a Dillon Rule state that does not sanction the use of TDRs. No matter how good the idea is or how effective you might think the strategy might be, with out the state's okay, you can't use it. Other approaches might be allowed by state law but are politically unpalatable for your area. For a lot of jurisdictions, the easiest way to find out what is allowed and what works is to survey other jurisdictions in the same state to see how they handled an issue. Again, this takes time, and you will need to make sure your process design allows for ample research and development time.

It is also important to remember that the more complex the plan and the greater the number of elements (subject areas) being covered, the more research time your staff, volunteers, or consultant will need to find appropriate strategies, find answers to any questions raised during the meeting, provide additional applicable data, and write definitions for terms. Plans, generally, will include a glossary of terms in the appendix. It should be written as the core plan is being developed. Do not wait until later to create any required definitions, because your memory of the context of the definition is likely to diminish over time. Finally, build in time between meetings to give your researchers time to do the necessary work.

Review and Revision

The review and revision process may take a month or longer, depending on the length and complexity of the plan and your steering committee, citizens' committee, or planning commission's willingness to meet more than a couple of times during a month.

Review and revision means more than simply editing the language or looking for the stray spelling error or misplaced comma; the big task is making sure that your goals, policies, objectives, and strategies do not conflict. Experience suggests that the conflicts are most likely going to occur between you environmental provisions and your land use, community development, housing, and economic development provisions. All of the elements in your plan need to work together. It is far better to take the additional time to find common ground between opposing goals than to have the problems show up during the public hearing and public approval process.

Public Hearings and Public Approval

Rule number one: do not cut the public hearing and approval time close. Make sure you build in enough time in the process to allow people to have their say and to allow your public officials to mull over the plan. While you do not want to stretch it out, which risks disengagement on the part of the public, you do need to allow for "fix-it" time. As a rule of thumb, give yourself an extra month per elected or appointed body. Most state codes provide for a specific adoption timeframe, including public notice/advertising requirements, so familiarize yourself with these requirements before you begin planning you overall comprehensive planning process.

Enjoy the Process

While comprehensive plans can be overwhelming, they can also be a lot of fun. Keep in mind that you are creating the future of your jurisdiction, a future you are handing off to the next generation. Plans are usually created with a 20 to 40 year (one to two generations) in mind, although most state laws require a major revision every ten years. It is fairly rare for the generation that created the comprehensive plan to be in office when the end date of the plan, twenty, thirty, or forty years hence, is finally reached. It is easier on everyone in the process if you don't approach your plan with the idea that it is forever written in stone.

Priorities change; conditions change. While you may look at the data and guess at the trends, change often occurs because of outside influences which may not be predictable. Plans are not static, or shouldn't be. They are living documents, documents that should be revised and revisioned every few years. New approaches, new programs and new techniques may well be developed after you adopt a your plan, so take a deep breath and approach the process as you would a trip. Define your destination, pick your routes, decide on stops you want to make along the way, and understand that you will hand the driving off to someone else during the trip.