

A Practical Guide to the Comprehensive Plan (Part 3)

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A number of years ago, a member of our local Board of Supervisors, who was up for re-election, walked into my office in the county's planning department and asked what he needed to know about planning in the county. I noted that we were about to start the comprehensive planning process, to which he responded, "no one ever reads that...I want to talk about important stuff."

The Board member's reaction was neither unusual nor particularly surprising. While planning touches every part of the community or county, it is perhaps the least understood aspect of government. Unlike other areas of civic life, planning is not covered in high school government classes or in high school or college history classes beyond the brief mention of the Progressive Era and the Chicago World's Fair. Most people do not learn about planning until they want to do something with their property or their neighbor wants to do something that has an impact on the surrounding area. The problem is one of planning education, and the comprehensive planning process provides the perfect opportunity to bring the broader community up to speed. Indeed, an effective outreach program will make your life, as the comprehensive planner, much easier and it will save you from a lot of headaches over the long run.

Types of Outreach Tools and Programs

Newsletters: The Paper Trail.

Newsletters continue to represent the most common and the most effective public outreach method available, although their form has changed dramatically over the past decade. They can be in print or electronic format, or both. Depending on length, design, and quantity, they can be produced in-house or taken to a printer, and distributed with the water bill, handed out to citizens when they visit the planning department, left on the counter of your local coffee shop or library, sent to citizens on a mailing or email list, or posted on the web.

Each approach, hard copy vs. electronic, has advantages and disadvantages. Hard copy or print versions are universal and do not depend on your citizens having access to a computer in order to have access to the information. However, print newsletters are far more costly (printing, postage, staff time) and distribution can be time-consuming. If you are distributing the newsletter with the local water or sewer bill, which saves on postage, you are limited in size and you still need to factor in staff time for stuffing envelopes. Given local printing budgets, print newsletters are more likely to be produced in black and white or grayscale formats, which lessens the likelihood that citizens will notice them next to the cash register at your local breakfast dive.

Online Resources

Planning
Department
Newsletters:

[Bloomington,
Indiana](#)

[Columbus,
Georgia](#)

[Indian Trail,
North Carolina](#)

[Clearfield
County,
Pennsylvania](#)

[Huntington
Beach, California](#)

[Bonner County,
Idaho](#)

Online Resources

Technical data/
information
sheets:

[Montgomery
County,
Virginia.](#)

[Estes Park,
Colorado](#)

[Minnetonka,
Minnesota](#)

Brochures:

[Brownfields
Program.](#)
Springfield,
Missouri.

[Wood Burning
Appliances.](#)
San Rafael,
California

[Home
Business
Brochure.](#)
Teton County,
Wyoming

If you choose to use an electronic approach, make sure you are using a universal format, like .pdf, that can be read on multiple computer platforms (dos, Mac, Linex, etc.). Avoid publishing your documents in Microsoft formats (.doc or .docx). While your department may have the most up to date version, the chances are the broader public does not. Even newer Microsoft products are not always readable on other computers or on Dos computers with older versions of Word.

Information Sheets and Brochures

Technical information sheets (handouts) and brochures are especially useful in explaining technical information and providing citizens with brief overviews or introductory materials. With a few exceptions, information sheets and brochures are rarely longer than two pages, (one sheet front and back), although the length is dictated by the size and complexity of the subject. A data sheet about the sign ordinance and regulations is likely to be far smaller than an information booklet on how to install a single-wide. A brochure on a new comprehensive planning program may involve a larger format (one 11 x 17 sheet) than a brochure about a brownfield program.

The chief difference between data/information sheets and brochures comes down to graphics and level of information. Brochures tend to have far more bells and whistles (color photographs, bright graphics, and so forth). Information sheets are far more likely to look like a government document: no columns, little or no color, limited graphics. Brochures generally are tied to programs and processes, rather than ordinances, and are introductory in nature. They are designed to generate interest in and support of a new or ongoing project. Information sheets, on the other hand, are generally written to translate existing technical or ordinance information.

Both information sheets and brochures should always be written in plain language. Remember the purpose of materials is to provide accessible information to the public.

If you are developing technical information sheets, start by listing the questions you routinely answer.

- How far from the property line do I need to be to build x?
- What can I do with my property?
- Can I build x?
- Can I raise chickens?

Technical information sheets serve two purposes: 1) to increase citizens' understanding of ordinance provisions and other technical issues, and 2) decrease, over time, the number of phone calls you receive and time you spend answering the same questions over and over. Two caveats. First, make sure that you are not changing the meaning of the ordinance as you write a plain language translation. Sometimes it is all too easy to introduce unintended interpretations by picking the wrong word or a word with multiple meanings. It is a good idea to run your technical information sheets by others in the office before you release them to the general public. Second, always put in a disclaimer; something to the effect that the information sheet is not the ordinance and is being provided as a public service. There is often lag time between ordinance updates and updates to the technical information sheets. The disclaimer will protect you from the few who like to pick fights.

While it is certainly not mandatory, think about the layout of your technical information sheets, especially if you are using them to educate the public. Graphics, even as simple as using two columns rather than one, will make your information sheets more user friendly and feel less like a “government document.” It will also make them easier to read, especially for older citizens. It is easier to track a shorter line of type than type that runs the full width of a standard 8 1/2 x 11 sheet of paper. Your choice of typeface is equally, if not more, important. While Arial seems to be the standard typeface choice for software designers, most graphic designers, especially those who deal primarily with print documents, will tell you to use a serif typeface (Times Roman, Georgia, Baskerville, Palatino) for body text. The small “feet” at the bottom of the letters form a rule (line) that holds the reader's eye to the text.

Sidebar: A Question of Type

Graphic designers have been arguing about typefaces since Gutenberg invented moveable type in 1439. In recent years, with the advent of the internet, the debate over serif vs. sans serif typefaces has become more pronounced. The debate has been fueled, in part, by the software companies insistence on using Arial as the “default” typeface in their programs.

Unless you are a graphic designer by profession and are interested in manipulating typefaces, there are some standard rules of thumb in using typefaces.

1. All Body Text Should be in a Serif Typeface. Your computer should come with a standard list of serif typefaces, including Baskerville, Georgia, Lucida, Palatino, and Times New Roman. Of the available typefaces, you should probably avoid Baskerville. While it is a beautiful typeface, the thin vertical lines can disappear or become faint when printed. For planners, the majority of writing falls under the heading of body text. Find a serif typeface you like and set it as your default typeface for your documents. It is far easier and faster to change the typeface for your headings than the body of your document. (Typeface: Georgia)

2. Headings Can be Either Serif or San Serif. Sans serif headings tend to “pop” more...are more visible, which is why they are more common in advertising materials. However, if your goal is to create a “clean” document rather than an ad for the newest tennis shoe, you should probably stay with the Serif face you are using in the body of your document. (Heading: Lucida Bright Regular Serif and Lucida San Serif)

3. Vertical Spacing of Text. The space between lines of text is called “leading.” As a rule of thumb, your line space should be two points larger than your type size (type size 12 point, line space 14 point). Most of the time this means set your line spacing to regular single space.

Too much leading can be visually difficult to read and wastes paper by making your document longer. Too little and your type will overlap. Whatever you do, do not expand the white space in one paragraph to make your document line up at the bottom of the page. If you need to add in additional space, do it above and below your headings or between paragraphs if you leave a double space. Pick a standard distance and be consistent. One paragraph with expanded leading is visually disruptive.

Resources:

Anatomy of a
Press Release

Getting Beyond
the Legalese:
Planning & the
Press (N. King)

Press Releases and Newspaper Columns

While most folks in government offices are familiar with press releases, press releases and other forms of “press communication” remain underutilized tools, especially in terms of generating interest in planning processes.

Normally, press releases are used to announce events, citizen input and public participation opportunities, grant awards, or the beginning or end of a major initiative. They are not typically used for announcing or flagging the steps along the way. (See the “Tools of the Trade” section in this issue for techniques for writing press releases.)

Planning processes, whether developing a new comprehensive plan or revising your land use ordinances, are successful in part because they have the backing of citizens and the press. While good press relations are no guarantee that a process will be successful, bad press relations will guarantee that your process will go down in flames. Get your local newspaper (if it is still in business) on board. (See Niki King's article for information about working with the press.)

In one respect, planners in small towns and rural areas have a distinct advantage over their counterparts in urban centers: a direct relationship with the press. It is far easier to establish a workable, non-confrontational planning/press relationship when you are likely to run into the newspaper editor or the local government reporter at church or a local dive on a regular basis or in the driveway separating your homes.

If you have a strong writer on staff, there is one planning education tool that is rarely used but works very well. Call you local editor and see if it would be possible to create a planning column, a column that can be used to update citizens on different planning projects, discuss critical planning issues, or answer citizen questions (a planner's version of Dear Abby). Unless you really enjoy writing, you should probably limit the frequency to no more than a couple of times per month. Small, local papers are always looking for material, so a scheduled column will help them out, while helping you establish a stronger bonds with the local paper and citizens.

Some Caveats:

1. If you decide to try this approach, make sure you know and meet the newspaper's deadline. Nothing will sour relations faster than missed deadlines.
2. Newspapers generally measure article length in terms of column inches. You need to practice writing your articles to a specific length. Ask the editor or the reporter about the width of a column and type size (10 pt, 11 pt) and the number of column inches. To make sure you stay within the prescribed length, set up the column width in your document before you begin writing. Presetting the newspaper's format will help you keep track of length.
3. Newspaper articles are generally written on the 8th grade reading level, although the level varies from newspaper to newspaper. If you are writing a column for your local paper, use plain language. Don't jazz it up with fancy phrases, unless they are necessary and you provide a clear definition.

Websites.

Six years ago, the National Association of County Planners published a study of internet use among jurisdictions. At that time, websites were fairly

Online Resources:

[Dreamhost](#).

common in urban and suburban jurisdictions and rare in rural areas. Much has changed since the study was published, although rural jurisdictions continue to lag behind their more populated counterparts.

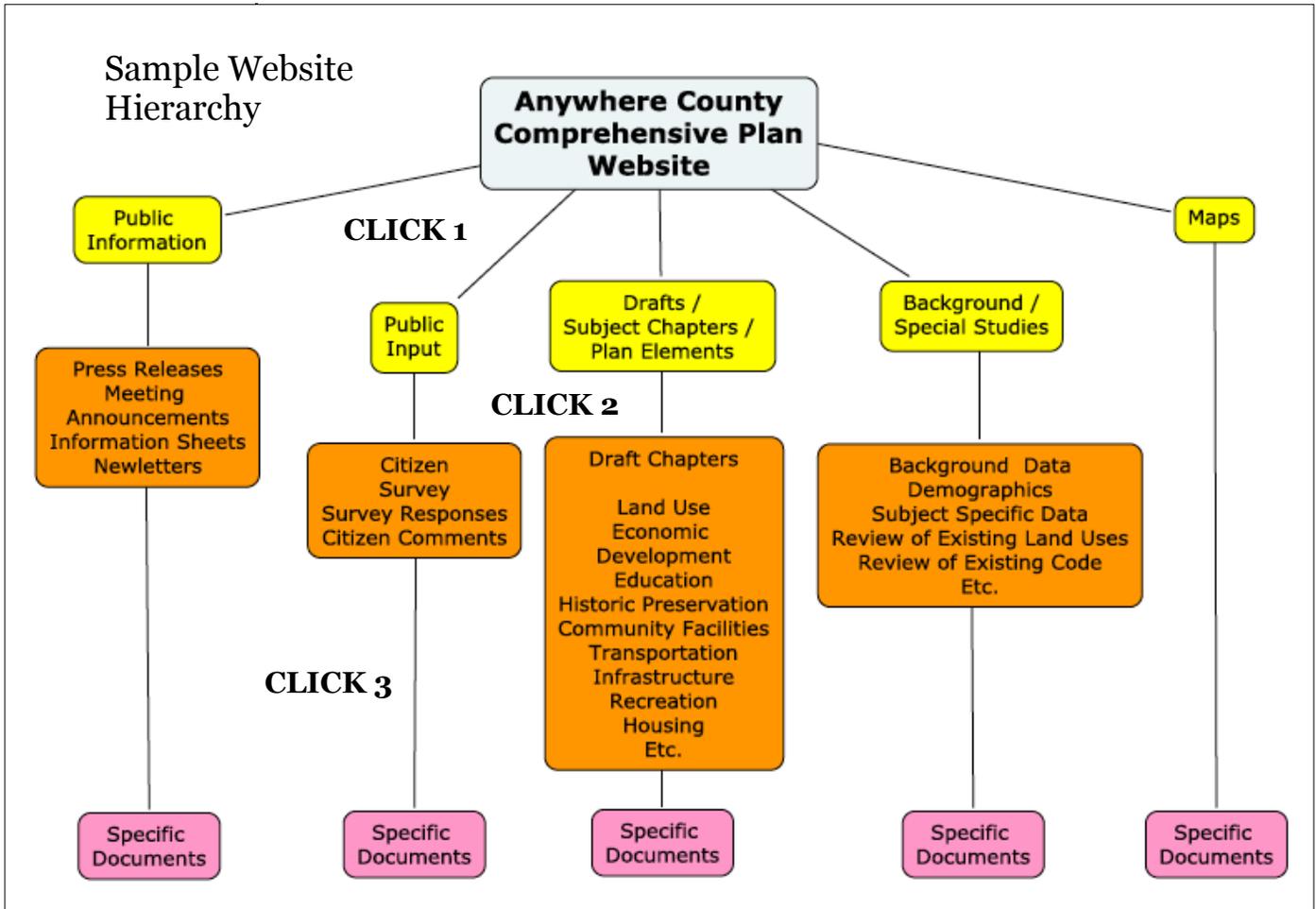
On the whole, websites are the single most cost effective method of providing public information. Nearly anything, from contact information and meeting calendars to documents and videos, can be posted for public perusal. If you are in a jurisdiction that does not currently have a website, there are still options for making public information about your planning process available. Dreamhost provides server space at a minimal charge and at no charge for non-profit agencies. Online blog sites (see below) may also provide you with some options.

If you are with a jurisdiction that buries planning under another heading (land development, environmental services, community development, etc.) , talk to your web administrator about setting up a comprehensive plan page and creating a link on the front page of the website. Frustrated web users are far less likely to actively participate, so it is in your best interest to make the information easily accessible.

There are a few rules of thumb you should pay attention to while developing your plan's website:

- *Develop a clear, concise web policy.* Take a couple of hours and develop an official policy governing what is released on the web and what is not. Remember that not everything you work on for the plan needs to be on the website (although all of it is public information and is subject to FOIA).
- *Keep it Simple.* The more complex the organization, the harder it is to manage and the hard it is to find things. If you have an IT person on staff, sit down and talk to them before you start the process.
- *3 Click Rule.* Common wisdom suggests the website users get frustrated with a site if it takes more than three clicks to find the required information. While some of your information may, in fact, require a mouse click or two more, the rule is a useful one and suggests that you think about the hierarchy (organization) of your site before you start uploading materials.
- *Designs "r" Us.* While we would all like to win design awards, focus on function and substance rather than form. Because citizens are likely to be printing the materials, don't use color backgrounds or excessive graphics that eat printer ink. Citizens tend not to be too happy when documents cost them a small fortune to print. If you can't live without the visual bells and whistles, make sure you have print-friendly copies of all of the documents.
- *Plain Language.* The same rules that govern print documents hold true for those on the web. Where possible, use plain language. If you are using technical terms, make sure that you have a glossary your readers can reference. Better yet, build in hyperlinks between your online documents and your online glossary. It will make everyone's lives, including yours, easier.

Sample Website Hierarchy



Social Media.

Social media is both blessing and burden. While social media outlets, like Facebook and Twitter, provide planning departments with an instant connections with citizens, they are also far less forgiving of error. Both Facebook and Twitter are terrific tools for announcing meetings and releasing documents, but they should be avoided as tools for citizen input unless you have developed adequate security and have a way of moderating and managing comments. It can be very difficult to take things back once they have been said (or typed). Unfortunately, in an age where civility has taken a back seat to instant and often ill-considered comments, not everybody who may comment on a page will stick to the topic, will treat others' comments with respect, or will choose language that meets locally-acceptable, public standards.

In addition, entries are extremely limited in terms of the length of comments. It is difficult to develop an in-depth view of an issue or of people's reactions when the comments are limited to 420 characters (Facebook) or less (Twitter). Unless you want a conversation that sounds like a list of platitudes and bumper sticker slogans, do not use Tweet and Facebook for two- or more-way exchanges.

Perhaps the biggest unresolved issue involving Facebook and Twitter is connected to FOIA (Freedom of Information Act). All documents created during a comprehensive planning process, an ordinance revision process, or even a simple rezoning are public documents and are subject to FOIA. Facebook and Twitter conversations can not be downloaded into a document

Online Resources:

[City Planner's Blog](#). Mont Belvieu, Texas.

[City Planner Blog](#). Burbank, California.

[Cuyahoga County Planning Commission Weblog](#). Pennsylvania

[Florence County Planning Blog](#). South Carolina.

Blog Program Sites:

[Wordpress](#)

[Google: Blogger](#)

file and presented as part of a FOIA response. Until the issue of document retention and access is solved, Facebook and Twitter present problems as public input tools.

As a rule of thumb, use Facebook as a public announcement and document access location, but disable the public comment feature.

Blogs

If you want to use technology to encourage the exchange of ideas, create a blog. Blogs are especially useful in garnering public comment on draft documents, providing citizens with updated information on a project, and providing access to background information and data. For jurisdictions with limited web resources, a blog can also function as the project website.

Blogs do not pose the same FOIA problems that are associated with other forms of social media. The comments are generally going to be located on one page rather than scattered throughout. In order to meet FOIA requirements, you may have to periodically print a hard copy to add to your document files, but file retention is, on the whole, fairly simple and straight forward.

Blogs offer a cost effective method of distributing information and garnering citizen feedback, but there are some significant issues you will need to address before you establish a blog. The most significant issue is time. Blogs are time consuming, especially in terms of management and maintenance. Presumably, you would be spending the same amount of time generating new materials for a newsletter or for other print materials as you would a blog, so the time spent is a trade off and does not add time you wouldn't have already spent.

Blogs allow you to establish security measures, including screening messages before they are posted. Again, because of the failure of civility, you need to make sure that you control the comments. Sit down and establish a "posting" policy before you establish your blog and make sure that it is available on the blog so that participants know the ground rules. Typical posting policies include:

- definitions of acceptable speech (no profanity, no slamming individuals, etc.)
- subject restrictions (a plea to stick to the topic).

It is equally important, however, to establish policies that provide checks and balances. Respondents need to know, up front, that critical comments will not be either ignored or edited. There is one hard and fast rule: Never edit citizen comments. Doing so is the fastest way to undermine the credibility of the process. As long as the comments abide by the posting policies, they should be posted. If you decide to use a blog, assume that maintenance and management are going to cost you about an hour per day.

There are a number of free online blog sites that allow you to create a free blog using existing templates, including WordPress and Blogger, available through Google. WordPress does not require a separate account; Blogger, on the other hand, requires that you have a Google account. While they take some time to set up, the instructions for both sites are fairly straight forward and both have ample templates to get you started. Of the two, WordPress does require that the user have some knowledge of program language in order to troubleshoot. Google's Blogger is somewhat easier for the less tech savvy.

Time Frame

Anytime is the right time to start a community outreach program. Creating an ongoing planning education program, one that is not tied to a single project, will help smooth the relationship between your planning department and the broader community. If citizens understand planning, even the most controversial cell tower proposal will be easier to navigate and the resulting debate will be far less contentious. If you are in a jurisdiction that has traditionally been less than forthcoming and there is a high level of distrust within the community, an outreach program will help you rebuild bridges before you need them during the comprehensive planning process.

Planning Education and the Comprehensive Plan. If you don't have a planning education program in place, you should start one at least six months (preferably a year) before you begin your actual citizen input process for your comprehensive plan. This gives you time to help citizens understand the comprehensive plan, its role in their community, and their role in developing the plan. Starting early also gives you a chance to define unfamiliar terms (sustainability, e-government, multi-modal transportation, etc.) and address potential thorns (issues you know may create problems or dissent): loss of agricultural lands, property rights, placement of cell towers, suburbanization, traffic, and others. Rather than avoiding issues, a planning education program will help you frame the debate.

You do not have to wait for the comprehensive planning process to begin to start a public outreach program. Actively look for opportunities to reach out to the community and provide them with materials that help them understand planning issues in your jurisdiction. A rezoning request for a large agricultural tract to accommodate a new subdivision may provide you with the opportunity to educate your citizens on the rezoning process, on different types of subdivisions, on the loss of agricultural land, or the impact of increased impervious surface on the local watershed.

Starting Points

Identifying your comfort zone. If you enjoy writing, newsletters, a monthly planning column in your local paper, websites, and blogs are a good fit. If you are comfortable with public speaking, develop a project powerpoint and other presentation materials, contact local organizations (public Schools, VFW, Rotary, Ruritan, Moose, etc.), and ask to be scheduled as a speaker. Talk to the members of your local planning commission or the plan's steering committee, if one has been appointed, to see if any of them would be willing to help with the public presentations. If you are uncomfortable creating materials and are planning on working with a consultant, add development of public outreach materials to your list of requirements.

Identify key target groups. As with all other planning projects, you need to identify your audience. Who will be using the public information? Are there multiple audiences? Do any of the audiences require different language or different levels of information. For example, a public speaker approach to citizen education means that you may be talking to the members of AARP one week and a high school civics class the next. Each group will have a different understanding of the issues and discuss them in vastly different terms, so a "one size fits all" approach won't work. Make sure that you leave enough latitude in your presentation materials so you can tailor them for individual audiences.

Avoid Preconceptions. The first time I worked on a comprehensive plan, my boss had me write down a list of the top ten issues I thought needed to be addressed and then put the list in a drawer. Next, he had me go through the local paper, write down

the issues that appeared in the letters to the editor, and put the second list with the first in the drawer. We had scheduled an initial series of public input sessions around the county and used a modified SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis which asked participants to identify the key issues facing the county. At all four meetings, I diligently wrote down everything citizens suggested on a flip chart. It didn't take very long for me to realize that the issues they were suggesting appeared nowhere on the list in my office drawer. It did, however, match the list from the "letters to the editor." Moral of the story: as a planner, do not bet that you necessarily know what people are thinking. Set aside any preconceived notions and any preconceived biases you might have. If you are developing "issue-based" information sheets for the comprehensive plan, make sure you develop them so that they address multiple sides of an issue rather than a single angle. Do not assume that any issue has one "right" side. If your educational materials establish a "right-not right" dynamic, you effectively remove the common ground where long range planning thrives and make compromise impossible. In short, don't bias the debate before it starts.

The What? Defining the Comprehensive Plan

As an experiment, walk out on the street or go to your local mall, stop twenty people, and ask them to explain or define "comprehensive plan." If you are lucky, and it is a good day, you may find one person who knows what you are asking about. One out of twenty. Far more are likely to be familiar with the tools used to implement your local plan (the capital budget and capital improvement program, the zoning ordinance, or the subdivision ordinance). Of those who do recognize that there are planning documents beyond the zoning ordinance, most, if not all, will point to the future land use map and assume that it is the equivalent to the plan or the plan itself.

Oddly enough, planners, planning commissioners, and elected officials have no one to blame but themselves for the problem. Take a few minutes and go peruse planning commission decisions and planning staff analysis reports. Somewhere in the documents, generally in the first couple of paragraphs you will find the following statement: "x proposal is consistent with the future land use map." If you are a planner, at some point, you have probably written that or a similar sentence.

Comprehensive plans may be the most important document in a jurisdiction; they are also the least known and certainly the least understood. In a nutshell, a comprehensive plan is a policy document and establishes legislative intent for the jurisdiction. It provides the policy basis for a whole host of ordinances, from zoning and subdivisions to stormwater and signage. They also provide political and legal cover for decisions. If a decision aligns with the policies articulated in your comprehensive plan, then the decision can not be deemed arbitrary and capricious.

When someone asks if a proposal is consistent with the comprehensive plan, what they are actually asking is "is this proposal consistent with the established policies for the jurisdiction." The future land use map will not provide an answer to that question. Future land use maps are color-coded guides to the different planning policy areas, but not to the policies. They are, in essence, the planning equivalent to Cliff Notes.

When the only mention of the comprehensive plan is a reference to the future land use map, we effectively ignore the broader policies, especially those dealing with environmental and community concerns, and we minimize the importance of the larger plan. Is it any wonder, then, that the response to the question of the comprehensive plan is a collective shrug of the shoulders or a blank look?