

Planning the Planning Process

A Survival Guide for New Planners, Staff, and Citizen Volunteers

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The Situation on the Ground

Imagine you are the staff assistant to your county's planning commission. At their last meeting, the County Commissioners tasked the planning commission with developing a new comprehensive plan and provided a \$100,000 budget. Because of changes in state law, the County has 16 months to develop a new plan. The chair of the planning commission asks you to develop a project plan for their next meeting in two weeks. While you have worked for the Planning Commission for a number of years and are familiar with rezonings and special use permits, you have never worked on a comprehensive plan. The question is “how do you get from point A to point B without tearing your hair out?”

What follows is not the definitive guide to planning the planning process. There are nearly as many planning processes as there are comprehensive plans. Some work better than others; some do not work at all. You may choose to follow a process used by another jurisdiction, or you may design a new approach, borrowing from a number of different methods and tweaking them to fit your jurisdiction. You are your own best judge because you already know your citizens. Think about your community, your neighbors, and what will and will not work. A final caveat before we start, always have a “plan B.”

Starting Points

Project Files. Comprehensive plans generate a tremendous amount of paper, so do yourself a favor and set up your project folders and files first. Because all documents created during the planning process are considered “public information” and are subject to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, you need to hang on to everything. If you are not familiar with FOIA / sunshine laws, take a couple of hours and read the FOIA guide for your state.

Traditional Files. You can assume that the plan will eventually consume at least one file drawer. Go ahead and clear a drawer, slap a label on the front, and create your initial files (sample plans, elected board memos, planning commission memos, etc.). Set aside 10 to 15 minutes per day for filing. Papers during the planning process can pile up and get ahead of you.

Project Files (Spreadsheet). Your spreadsheet program (Excel, Open Office, or another program) is probably the most under-utilized tool on your computer and probably one of the best programs for building project files. Spreadsheet programs offer four advantages:

- Easier to create, track, and back up files.
- Shortens response time to FOIA requests;
- Greener and more cost effective, decreasing the amount of ink and paper used during the project.
- Decreases the risk of misplacing documents.

Project Files (Cmap). Cmap provides an alternative to spreadsheets While the

Community Planner Resources:

[Comprehensive Planning Process Worksheet](#)

Tools of the Trade:
[Spreadsheets](#)

[J Questions](#)

[Gantt Charts](#)

[Project File](#)

[Concept Map of the Full Planning Process \(D. Zahm\)](#)

Outside Resources:

[FOIA Reference Guide, US Dept. of Justice, January \(2010\)](#)

[Open Government Guide.](#) The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. 2(006)

program does not provide the calculation tools available in spreadsheet programs, it does allow multiple people to work on project files and provides a greater range of interactive tools. (A guide to CMap will be included in the Winter issue of TCP)

Setting up spreadsheet project files are discussed in greater depth in the “Tools of the Trade” section of this issue.

Comparable Examples. One of the best ways and perhaps fastest ways to get up to speed on the planning process is to look at examples from comparable jurisdictions. Comparable jurisdictions are locales (towns, counties, cities) with similar demographic, economic, and/or environmental traits. Talk to your jurisdiction's financial officer or administrator and find out if they have a list of comparable jurisdictions they use in the budgeting process. Check with the jurisdictions, see if any have reasonably new comprehensive plans (no more than a couple of years old), and request copies. Fortunately, more and more jurisdictions are making their plans available on the web, so collecting copies is far easier now than a few years ago and significantly less expensive. If you are in a state where the comprehensive planning laws underwent significant revision, restrict your request to comprehensive plans after the new laws went into effect. You do not need to read the plans in their entirety--in each plan, start with the chapter describing their process and their time frame. If you have any questions, call the applicable jurisdiction and ask. Also take a look at the table of contents for the plan and look at the overall framework. This should give you an idea of where you need to go in the process.

State Code. Print off a copy of the applicable sections of your state code. Code requirements vary a great deal--some are in a single section, while others are scattered through multiple sections and, in some cases, multiple chapters and titles.

Open your project file (spreadsheet or Cmap) and make a list of the specific requirements. In some cases, this is easier said than done, especially if you live in one of the “patchwork” states. Patchwork states have older codes, originally written in the 1970s, which have been continuously amended but have not undergone a systemic overhaul. In short, they read like a patchwork of amendments. Virginia's comprehensive plan requirements are a good example of a “patchwork code:”

If you are researching the legal basis of planning, look to older plans for a starting spot, but don't assume that the current code is in line with the cited legal basis in the older plan. It probably won't be. Take a look at the provision list or detailed index to your state's code and use the keyword search function to see if additional provisions have been slipped into other locations during the intervening years. If your state code provides linked cross-references to the legislative bills that wrought the changes, it is useful to go back and look at the bills. The order of changes in the legislation may help you determine legislative intent, which may be necessary, especially if you live in a state where your legislature is not inclined to include definitions in their legislation.

If you are uncertain about a specific term or terms included in the code and you are working in a jurisdiction with a resident attorney, check with them. If you don't have access to an attorney with the requisite knowledge, poll neighboring jurisdictions and see if you can create a consensus definition. Other sources for definitions include local or regional universities with planning programs (track down the land use law or the long range planning professor), the local planning district commission if you are in a state with regional planning institutions, or check the internet for possible definitions from other locales. States and local governments tend to take a dim view of the “I'm making up the definitions as I go along” approach, so it is probably a good idea to avoid inventing meaning unless there really is no other option. Fortunately for most planners, “patchwork” states are becoming exceedingly rare as more states shift towards unified statewide and regional approaches.

Listing the Requirements and the Code References

As noted above, the “Tools of the Trade” section of this cd-rom covers developing a project file in far greater detail. A brief overview, however, is necessary here before we discuss how to tackle the code provisions.

Most office programs (e.g. Microsoft Office, Open Office, NeoOffice) have a spreadsheet program built into the software package. However, not all spreadsheet programs are created equal. You need to make sure that your program allows multiple sheets in the same document. If it does not, and some of the older versions of the programs have this particular limitation, download Open Office, if you have a PC, or NeoOffice, if you have a Mac. Both are open source programs and come at no charge (although the developers do ask that you consider a \$5.00 donation). Both programs are completely compatible with most standard office software packages.

While I have a fondness for Cmap, for most people spreadsheet programs are easier to use and more familiar. Open a spreadsheet and save it as “Comprehensive Plan Project Book” in your Comprehensive Plan folder on your computer. Reserve the first sheet in the spreadsheet for your timeline. (Note: constructing a timeline or Gantt chart is covered in “Tools of the Trade.”). Make sure you label each sheet. It will save you time and energy later in the process when you are trying to juggle a lot of information.

Build your code provision reference page on the second sheet. Next to the timeline for the project, the list of state code requirements is the second most important document you will create. Highlight a section of the page (five or six columns and a couple of dozen rows) and select “text wrap” under Format: Cells on the menu at the top of your screen. This will allow you to write as much as you need into each cell and the text will remain visible.

There are a number of ways you can organize the information, however, your code provision chart should have the following information:

- The code reference and the code title;
- A hyperlink, attached to the code reference, or the URL for each provision;
- A brief description of what is included in each section;
- Where applicable, time-line references, and
- A notes column for marginalia (your own observations)

Online

Resources:

Open Source Office Programs:

[OpenOffice](#)

[OpenOffice.org](#)
PC

[NeoOffice](#)

[NeoOffice.org](#)
Mac OS-X

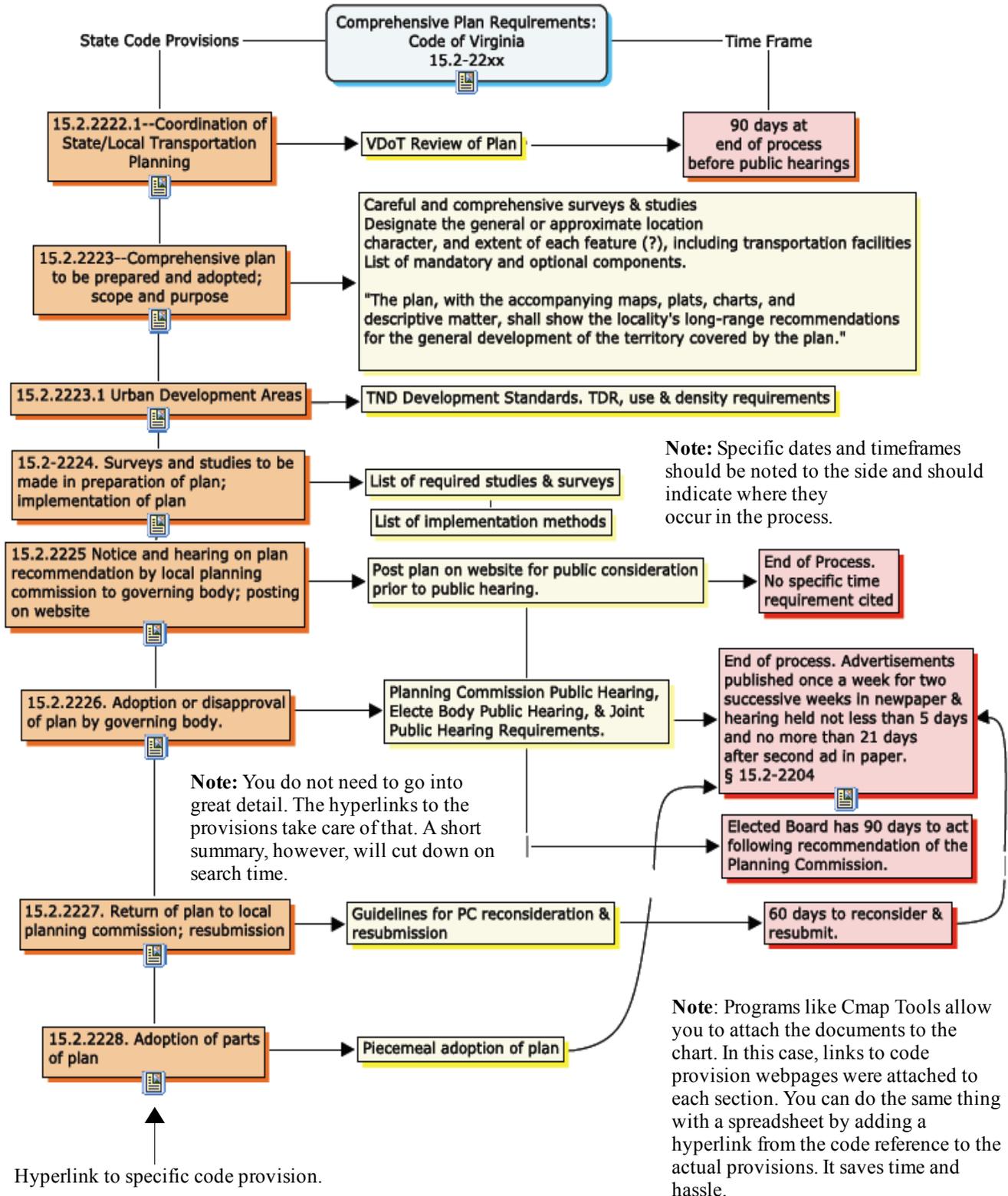
Note: Both programs are completely compatible with Microsoft and other standard office packages. We've used both in the offices of Dorsett Publications and have found a number of distinct advantages:

1. They are free.
2. They very rarely crash..no blue screens.
3. They are compatible across platforms (Mac, PC, Linex) and lack the translation problems found in commercial programs.
4. They have more options, and are easier to use.
5. The help manuals do not assume you are a computer programmer.

Virginia Comprehensive Code Provision Chart, Using a Spreadsheet

Code Reference & Provisions	Description	Time References
15.2-2222.1 Coordination of State/ Local Transportation Planning	VDot Review of Plan	90 days at end of process but before public hearings
15.2-2223.1 Urban Development Areas	TND development standards, TDR, use and density requirements	

Virginia Comprehensive Code Provision Chart, Using Cmap



Marginalia and Documentation

An old friend, who taught in the English Department of Southwest Missouri State (now Missouri State), used to complain bitterly about her students and their penchant for the virgin book syndrome. It was her belief that books attained value-added status due to the notes in the margins of the text, scrawled by endless semesters of students. Her students, despite her best efforts to encourage them to document her lectures, maintained their books in mint condition, in some cases entirely untouched, in order to get a better sell back price from the end of the semester buyers who littered the campus the week of final exams. As one who survived a very dull semester of Milton by reading the professor's lectures in the white spaces of *Paradise Lost*, I can attest to the value of marginalia.

In spreadsheets, the marginalia can be added in "notes" columns. Read through the state code and in a separate column note the major requirements: public hearings, studies, special topics, map requirements, and so forth. Each of these will become part of your timeline and will also be the sheet headings for your project book. To save time and frustration, add your notes while you are reading rather than waiting until the end.

Next, add the requirements that your governing body may have imposed. In the case of our overworked administrative assistant in the opening scenario, the only restriction imposed by the County Commission was the overall cost and the time frame.

Finally, consider the requirements imposed by your community. For reasons of politics, this is an absolute. As noted above, some states still have patchwork codes which have not been significantly updated in living memory. Virginia's comprehensive planning statutes, for example, do not include either public participation or public information requirements, beyond those imposed at the end of the process. If you are following the letter of the law, then the plan would be produced with little or no public input and behind closed doors. While the approach is legal, it is not particularly wise, especially if you want to see the plan implemented and not be used as a political football, batted around during every election cycle. The amount of public input and the amount of public outreach depends on the level of public engagement in your jurisdiction and on the level of knowledge of the broader citizenry.

If your thought process is less linear, as mine is, and you use either a graphics/drawing routine or a program like Cmap, add in text boxes with your notes.

Planning the Process

The first thing to understand is that comprehensive planning, finally, is a creative endeavor. You are creating something, a document, the future, that draws on a broad range of resources for guidance and for inspiration. You will be taking what you hear from your community, what you find in current and historical data, and what you are required to follow from state law and melding the materials into a document that will guide the development of your jurisdiction, often with impacts that extend well beyond the horizon of the plan.

In drawing classes, the first thing the instructor will tell you is draw the overall shape of your subject; draw the outline of the head; the shape of the bowl and the fruit; the large shapes in a landscape. Unfortunately on their first portrait assignment, newly minted art students start by drawing the eyes or the nose and then wonder why they ran out of paper or their subject's heads seem out of proportion. The same pattern is true for new writers, for new planners, and anyone else first tackling an inherently creative project with no set rules. It is important to start with a broad outline, so that you have established the outer parameters of your project, then go back and fill in the detail.

Your planning commission is the final arbiter of the actual process, but their decisions are only as strong and as realistic as the information they are provided. While they may design the process in one meeting, you can expect them to take at least two more meetings to work out the kinks. The easiest way to design a process is to break the project into phases and

**Resources:
Examples of
Planning Processes**

[Hampton, Virginia
Neighborhood
Planning Process](#)

[Crystal Lake,
Illinois, Planning
Update Process](#)

[Cowlitz County,
Washington
Comprehensive
Planning Process](#)

[LaPlata County,
Colorado
Comprehensive
Planning Process](#)

construct a Gantt chart (timeline) that moves from general (a phase) to specific (a task). The advantage of establishing project phases is that it breaks a large, complex process into manageable chunks and makes the entire project seem far more doable and far less overwhelming. (For more information on creating a Gantt chart, see Tools of the Trade: Spreadsheets on this cd.)

Each phase should be punctuated by a deliverable, which means that at the end of each phase there should be a resulting document:

- a report on the result of the public input sessions or the community survey;
- a list of possible goals and objectives based on citizen input;
- a background report or reports on current and historical trends and conditions;
- a draft of the core plan;
- a draft of the final plan.

While there may well be overlap between the phases, having a set of known sub-projects and due dates will help you move through the process and maintain your level of sanity.

Beyond the schedule

In addition to the process steps, phases, and deliverables, there are three other things you need to settle fairly early on in the process: the organization of the plan, the form of the plan, and responsibility. Both decisions are going to drive how you approach later parts of the process, including evaluating survey and public input data, research and writing background reports, and organizing workshops.

Plan Organization. The most common approach is to organize the plan by process steps: public input; background information; the core plan (goals, objectives, and strategies); implementation plan; and so forth. Some jurisdictions organize by process steps and by subject area. In this approach, the introductory materials (public input, background research, etc.) are organized by process step, but the core plan is organized by subject area (land use, transportation, environment, and so on). A third approach organizes all of the information by subject area, so rather than having chapters on public input and background information, one or both sets of materials are included in the subject-specific chapters.

There are arguments to be made for all three approaches, but the decision comes down to comfort level and the purpose of the public input and background research. As a comprehensive planner and a writer, I tend to favor the third approach because it provides the context for and a direct connection to the goals, objectives, and strategies. However, it does tend to bury the core portions of the plan behind introductory material and can make information more difficult to find. One solution is to publish a “comprehensive plan handbook,” sort of a quick reference guide to the core portion of the plan. If your plan is exceptionally large (over 200 pages), a handbook which includes the policies, goal, objectives, and strategies, without all of the introductory materials, will encourage your citizens, planing commissioners and elected officials to actively use the plan in the decision-making process.

As a rule of thumb, it is generally a good idea to leave your implementation steps as either a separate chapter, as an addendum, or as part of an annual review process. The reason for keeping the implementation steps separate is a matter of convenience. You may want to require that your jurisdiction set up an annual work program tied to the implementation of your plan. Government programs come and go based on the priorities of state and federal administrations. One administration may value and fund environmental and arts programs while the next may find both a waste of money.

Plan and Planning Form. Paper plans are rapidly becoming a thing of the past, because of the cost of printing and distribution. In all likelihood, your plan will be set up either in pdf format or in some web-based format. The issue of form revolves now around the use of online formats during the planning process. Traditionally, planning information during the course of the process came in three forms: press releases, photocopied materials, and newsletters. While all three are still important, especially in jurisdictions without broadband or other high speed coverage, two of the three cost money. It is generally assumed that you process will be, at least in part, on the internet. If you are reasonably comfortable with technology or you have a web guru on staff or as a volunteer, you may want to consider going beyond the webpage. Increasingly jurisdictions are making use of new forms of online media (wikis or blogs) and social media, like Facebook. Do not be afraid of trying something different. (We will be covering the use of online media and social media in the winter issue of TCP.)

Resources:

Using the “J Questions” (Journalism Questions) to develop project details.

Responsibility. In many respects, the issue of responsibility is one of the largest, especially in jurisdictions with either no planning staff or limited planning staff. Recognize, up front, what you can do and what you are reluctant to tackle. In short, know and acknowledge your limitations. Statistical analysis, conducting citizen meetings, and writing tend to top the list of tasks. Plan to sit down with your planning commission or your citizen advisory committee and talk about the limitations you have recognized. You may well have someone sitting at the table who can tackle the tasks you can not.

For many jurisdictions, however, consultants are the answer to the skill set gaps. If you go the consultant route rather than keeping the process entirely “in house,” set a clear scope and be realistic in what you are asking them to do. An alternative is to look to the community and see if you can identify others either in the government or in the broader community who have the requisite skills. Start with your local school system.

Rules to survive by...

Documentation: While the issue of marginalia or notes seems minor, at some point in the process, someone is going to ask you how you came up with the planning process. Your notes in the margins will provide you with the answer. As noted elsewhere, comprehensive plans are complex documents and they are labor intensive and all too often stressful. Having to go back and reinvent the wheel only increases the level of stress and the level of work. Get in the habit at the front end of the project to document your own thought process and your sources, including hyperlinks to the information. It will significantly reduce your level of stress as the project moves forward.

Time Constraints: That end date is your first time constraint and is the one that dictates everything else. However, there are some other constraints that you need to consider. First, do not schedule any part of the process for the period between the Friday before Thanksgiving and New Years. That six to seven week period poses a real problem because no one is going to be focusing on planning, no matter how enthusiastic they are about the plan or the process. If you are going to include significant public input and public outreach programs in your process, they need to be either completed before the holiday season or started after the holiday season. Second, look at participation patterns. If your jurisdiction has major annual events (festivals, holidays, rival football games), black those dates out on your calendar. For example, Montgomery County, Virginia surrounds Virginia Tech. Scheduling a

public input session on the same day as a Tech football game was a guarantee of non-participation by nearly the entire county population, including those who had little or not connection to the university. In Greenbrier County, West Virginia, meetings had to be scheduled to avoid TOOTS, the food festival in Lewisburg, and the West Virginia State Fair. Your meetings will fall a distant second to established community events, nearly all holidays involving three day weekends, holidays involving religious rites, and Valentine's Day.