

## Comprehensive Plans and Your Bottom Line

*"The combination of a plan's well-defined vision for the future and community leadership support is powerful."*

New York State Law offers some prescriptive guidance about the creation of comprehensive plans, but does not actually require a community to formally adopt one. This is unfortunate, since the planning effort is far more valuable to a community's "bottom line" than many realize.

When land use or other local government decisions are challenged, a community's planning efforts can suddenly take center stage. Court decisions have referenced the perceived "interest of the community" when discussing local decision making that's under fire.

In the absence of formal adoption of a planning document, board meeting minutes, published documents, even records of public discussions have been cited as communication of an implicit "comprehensive plan". At precisely the moment when a community's sense of direction is needed most, someone's "out of context" interpretation of a smattering of public documents can ultimately decide a legal case – or worse yet, establish a community's future goals by default.

As a community leader, why would you want anyone else to define who you are -- and what you will become?

### COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING IS VITAL

Not just fluff, comprehensive plans can get to the heart of what matters most to your community residents. When led with fortitude, the process can foster deep and heartfelt discussions about core values, character, and how quality of life is defined.

Fortitude is required because - if you haven't yet noticed - people don't always agree on such fundamental definitions.

The greatest benefit of comprehensive planning is getting through difficult discussions about the character of your community and the direction it should follow – ONCE – and being able



### About the Author:

Diana M. Smith is Director of Business Development for MRB Group.



She is the Former Mayor of Seneca Falls, New York, and a Past President of the New York Conference of Mayors.

As Mayor, she was responsible for municipal budgeting and managing operations – including \$7 million in annual expenditures. She currently advocates for strategic planning, implementation of best practices, and municipal efficiency. She is a frequent speaker and trainer for professional organizations serving local governments.

to utilize the result – FOR YEARS. Board decisions are clearer, and receive far less criticism when there is hard evidence of widespread community support.

Ironically, choosing to confront difficult issues is often the easier path, when compared to the need to hash over – and re-hash – fundamental questions at contentious meetings. People remember things differently, and interpret to their own benefit. A comprehensive plan identifies collaborative goals and direction, once and for all – then puts community residents in a position of “ownership.” To a Board, that can be liberating. There's no longer a need to worry about providing compelling justification and lengthy explanations. Pointing to the plan will suffice, and you can move on to the next topic.

### A COMPETITIVE EDGE

While New York's Consolidated Funding Application process for grant submissions has proven to be an annual traffic jam of workload and anxiety for local grant writers and public officials, one can't help but respect the State's new, more intelligent approach to allocating funding.

Although each agency still coordinates its own funding request within the CFA process, there are consistent requirements for applicants to show how a proposed project aligns with regional strategic planning. Questionnaires many times ask IF a comprehensive plan has been adopted and IF the proposal supports - and is supported by – planning goals at the local, regional and state levels.

This means that as State taxpayers, we're getting more bang for our buck, thanks to cohesiveness – AND PLANNING. It's nice to know, for instance, that next year's grant awards are less likely to have New York State residents pay twice for opposing objectives that cancel each other out.

Locally, this means an adopted comprehensive plan strengthens applications in the competitive process. Demonstrating alignment with planning at all levels positions a community to better compete. It further allows the State to justify a grant approval as a wise investment – one that is consistent with taxpayers' wishes.

It appears that comprehensive planning is finally gaining recognition for its value: improving and justifying decision-making by clarifying the public's best interest -- at all levels of government.

### LOCAL COMMITMENT

Whenever a community leader does point to a comprehensive plan to justify a board action, it demonstrates local government commitment - to listen and make decisions in accordance with residents' wishes. The combination of a plan's well-defined vision for the future and community leadership support is powerful. Together they transform a comprehensive plan into a trustworthy “compass” that can keep a community headed toward its own True North.

The compass is beneficial in keeping community values in focus – for the long term. It ensures that the community's direction and progress are maintained beyond election cycles and terms, even well after originators of the planning are no longer in office. This is important. New, young and attractive voices will emerge in a community at any time. Like victims of “mid-life crisis”, voters can easily forget what's important to them – then regret it later. Especially in times of turmoil, when radical ideas are delivered with fresh enthusiasm, a compass is an important tool that helps a community keep an eye on True North.

## A RETURN ON INVESTMENT

When business owners, locators or start-ups are looking for the best place to invest their financial future, an established and adopted Comprehensive Plan communicates loudly that a community has chosen a destiny of its own making - and is committed to staying on the path toward True North. A comprehensive plan and local government commitment can give a community a tremendous competitive edge in attracting private investment.

Business investors look for indicators that their financial model is sustainable within a geographic area. A community that has documented compatible values will gain notice, and a community that has defined its own future becomes a contender. A community with a good comprehensive plan, AND a demonstrated commitment to achieving its goals – is a winner.

The key is using the comprehensive plan each and every day, and shouting about it.

The commitment to a comprehensive plan must be demonstrated by a local government that reports on its progress regularly; that updates the plan routinely; and that clearly translates plan goals into action items – then acts. Reflection on the accomplishments of a local government should tie each achievement to implementation of the comprehensive plan to further demonstrate commitment. This creates the planning-focused environment, when the document can be used most effectively as a tool to foster economic development.

For community leaders who struggle to understand local government's role in economic development – the comprehensive plan is the answer. Because it's a compass, because it's a decision-justification, because it reduces controversy; and because it defines the vision of the future – it becomes a compelling reason to invest. It can give reasonable assurance to developers that your community is the right place to invest. It tells them your community is going to grow in ways that will support their own plan. It can even help them predict lower start-up costs, if there is a clear path to approvals with less likelihood for the kinds of objections that come from disunity. Finally, if incentives to develop were recommended, and local government has implemented them, that's even better!

Whether the potential investment in question is a \$7 Million dollar hotel, or a \$200 Thousand dollar house – each is a step towards building a win-win relationship, getting everyone a little closer to where they want to be.

## MARKETING THE PLAN

Some potential investors will already know if you have a plan and how well-supported it is. Others may need to be told – and sold. If your plan doesn't have a one-page summary, then create one. Know your plan and be able to communicate its vision. Be ready to share its goals, and what you've done to implement them. Get the story down pat – and refine it - until you can tell it in one minute or less.

Don't assume that business owners can necessarily draw the lines between your vision and theirs. For your story to be compelling, your vision of the future should INCLUDE them. Help them understand how your community vision supports theirs, and that your past demonstration of local government support means they can continue to count on it, in the future.

In your hands, a proactively utilized comprehensive plan can be a very effective marketing tool, and communicate to everyone that your community is “open for business.”

A comprehensive plan can be the self-fulfilling prophecy that leads your community toward its own definition of success. What’s YOUR vision of a thriving community? No matter what you put at the top of the list, success means a better bottom line.