

GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY AFFAIRS  
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SERIES

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# WHY DO WE PLAN?

A GUIDEBOOK FOR CITIZENS  
AND LOCAL PLANNERS

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# HOW TO USE THIS SERIES

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## WHO SHOULD USE THIS?

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Anyone involved in preparing, implementing, or using comprehensive plans in Georgia can benefit from this guidebook. However, the guidebook is designed to be most useful to citizen planners, local government staff and officials with little specific training in comprehensive planning, and planners in small cities and towns or rural counties. Larger local governments will more likely have several professional planners to provide planning services that meet local needs for administering programs on a daily basis, conducting studies, and preparing comprehensive plans. It is the first situation where more help is needed. Many of Georgia's local governments are small and depend on a city or county clerk, city or county manager, building official, or citizen volunteers to prepare comprehensive plans.

In these smaller local governments, the staff person responsible for the comprehensive plan faces two situations that make it very difficult to meet planning needs. First, the staff person is typically "multi-purpose," providing a wide variety of local government services, with the result that preparing a plan is just one of many tasks to perform. In larger jurisdictions, there may be many specially trained staff members assigned to provide this service. Second is the fact that the "multi-purpose" staff person most likely does not have specific training in the planning process, particularly ways to include citizens in preparing an effective plan.

Many smaller local governments depend on the citizen planners to provide comprehensive planning services. Members of a planning commission are often providing many of the planning services that staff planners provide in larger jurisdictions. Similar to the situation that the small jurisdiction staff person faces, the citizen planner may have little specific training in the planning process.

Elected officials will benefit because they deal with planning issues when adopting the comprehensive plan in the first place, amending the comprehensive plan, and implementing the plan through day-to-day decisions. As pointed out throughout this guidebook, effective planning must include the citizens of the community in the planning process. This guidebook will help elected officials determine the best way to include their citizens in making a great community through planning.

Finally, smaller jurisdictions often rely on consultants or the Regional Development Center for planning services and the preparation of comprehensive plans. Even so, the elected officials, local staff, and citizen planners must know what makes a comprehensive

plan effective, how to involve citizens in the process, and what tools and techniques are available for the planning process.

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#### WHAT KIND OF INFORMATION IS PRESENTED?

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Why Do We Plan? covers basic topics about planning. It provides an overview of planning, what it is, and why we do it. This part explains the importance of a “plan to plan,” or development of a work program to decide what will be included in the local planning process and who will do the work. The planning process itself is explained to help the reader understand it before embarking on a planning program. It is essential that the planning process lead to a comprehensive plan that is effective. The criteria of an effective plan are described, providing further guidance on the development of a work program.

# WHY DO WE PLAN?

Among material resources, the greatest, unquestionably, is the land. Study how a society uses its land, and you can come to pretty reliable conclusions as to what its future will be.

E.F. Schumacher

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## WHAT IS PLANNING?

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Planning for land use and the future growth and development is an important activity for local governments. This section describes the ways that planning is a benefit to the community, along with some key information to consider before beginning the planning process.

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### PLANNING IS A BENEFIT TO THE COMMUNITY

One of the fundamental responsibilities of local government is planning and the preparation of plans. Planning is the word we use to describe how a community shapes and guides growth and development. Some people call this process “city planning,” “urban planning,” or sometimes “land use planning.” The results of planning are contained in documents we call “comprehensive plans” or “growth management plans.”

Effective planning ensures that future development will occur where, when, and how the community and local government wants. There are several important benefits to the entire community that result from the planning process:

- ④ Quality of life is maintained and improved.
- ④ There is a vision, clearly stated and shared by all, that describes the future of the community.
- ④ Private property rights are protected.
- ④ Economic development is encouraged and supported.
- ④ There is more certainty about where development will occur, what it will be like, when it will happen, and how the costs of development will be met.

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## PLANNING IS BOTH “ART” AND “SCIENCE.”

Planning may be considered “science” because of our reliance on technical data, and the use of scientific information in such fields as environmental sciences, demography, and geography. We rely on technical data regarding transportation systems, utility systems, and even human behavior. Forecasts describe expected future conditions based on past trends and conditions.

On the other hand, planning may be considered “art” as we focus on the design of cities, neighborhoods, and buildings. Citizens gather to think about and envision the possible futures, apply creativity to the design of their community, and strike a balance to meet the needs of all who live, work, play, and visit their community.

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## A PLAN BELONGS TO THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

Planning is all about balance among competing interests and almost always involves difficult trade-offs. An effective plan reflects those trade-off decisions. The challenge for the local government is to capture in words, maps, and illustrations the future envisioned by the community’s citizens, as well as to make those difficult trade-off decisions along the way. This often-overwhelming challenge is made simpler when the local government systematically organizes the process.

The importance of the plan rests partially on the process of preparing the plan. A plan belongs to the whole community, and the members of the community should be part of the process to create the plan. Part 3 of this guidebook is devoted to explaining the ways that all members of the community – everyday citizens, elected and appointed officials, and the people involved in designing and building developments – can be a meaningful part of the planning process.

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## THREE QUESTIONS GUIDE THE PLANNING PROCESS.

While there is no universally accepted method for developing a plan, the planning process can be described as the response to these three questions:

- 1) What do you have?
- 2) What do you want?
- 3) How will you get it?

There are technical, political, legal, and managerial issues that will vary from one jurisdiction to the next. It is important to remember also that effective planning is actually more of a continuous loop than a single project to write a plan. Once the plan is prepared,

the lessons learned as the plan is implemented will result in changes to the plan, still using the framework of the three questions. However, before embarking on the process, there is an essential preliminary step. Before you plan, you should “plan to plan.”

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BEFORE YOU START, PLAN TO PLAN.

Key factors associated with this step include the allocation of time, human resources, money, and energy to the effort. This step is too often overlooked or shortchanged. Do not assume that these factors will somehow manage themselves, or that your professional staff or consultant will handle everything. There are several questions that you should consider before initiating the planning process. The answers will guide the development of a process that will result in a plan for your community. Think about and discuss these issues:

1) Who will prepare the plan?

You have many choices – professional staff from your jurisdiction; professional staff from the regional development center; volunteers from the community; consultants hired to assist in preparing the plan; or, some combination of these individuals.

2) How long will the planning process last?

In some part, this will depend on the number of people available to prepare the plan. It will also depend on the complexity of the situations you face in your community. Thirdly, it will depend on how much you involve the citizens of your community. The process may last from several months to two years. It is best to think about this in the beginning.

3) What subject matter will be included in the plan?

There are minimum standards set by the State on the subject matter of the plan, but you may wish to include other subject matter that is particularly important to your jurisdiction. (The Local Planning Requirements are contained in Appendix A.)

4) How much money will be earmarked for the planning process?

A budget should include all of the costs of preparing the plan: printing, photographs, maps, graphics, mail, advertising, materials, and supplies for community meetings, renting meeting places, refreshments for meetings, and fees for consultants if you plan to hire consultants.

5) How will you involve all of the community’s citizens?

This crucial part of the process is described in [Planning for Community Involvement](#).

The decisions you make regarding these issues will guide you in outlining the planning process – a plan to plan. If you choose to meet the minimum requirements and no more, you may need fewer people and less money. If you choose a planning process that includes a higher degree of interaction with the local citizens and addresses a wider range of subject matter than required, you may need a larger team and possibly more funding. However, a more interactive process and a wider range of subject matter do not necessarily mean a bigger budget. The composition of the planning team has the greatest impact on the budget. You might consider using professional planners where their expertise is the most benefit to the planning process and seeking volunteers to supplement the work effort. In any case, the preparation you do in this “plan to plan” step will pay off in a more effective planning process.



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## THE PLANNING PROCESS

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Good plans shape good decisions. That's why good planning helps to make elusive dreams come true.

Lester Robert Bittel

Now that you have a “plan to plan,” also called a scope of work, you are ready to embark on the planning process. The three questions that guide the process are described below.

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### WHAT DO YOU HAVE?

It is essential to have accurate, current information on the community as it is now. You will not be able to plan to maintain or change the current situation if you do not know the current situation. This information, often called “background reports” or “data and analysis,” is a crucial first step in the process.

Citizens and local officials alike are often impatient to move beyond this step into “real” planning and making decisions about the future. However, you should recognize the importance of having a firm foundation of information about the community – and convey the importance of this information to the citizens who participate. It’s also important to convey this information to the citizens who participate in easily understandable form and format, such as an Executive Summary. Planning for the future requires an understanding of the past and present. Collecting information and analyzing trends provides one important basis for conclusions about the community.

The local planning requirements that guide the preparation and development of comprehensive plans in Georgia are available for download on the DCA Website. In addition, DCA makes a lot of data available through webbased tools (For more information, go to the [Georgia Planning and Website](#).)

While this foundation of data and information about the community is being prepared, you can look at the second question.

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### WHAT DO YOU WANT?

It has been said that if you do not know where you are going, any road will get you there. This is never truer than in the preparation of a plan. The contents of the plan must reflect the vision of the community, along with the strategies to achieve the vision, and the policies to direct daily decision-making leading to that vision. Who decides what you want? Everyone does.

What you want for the future of your community may be expressed as a vision, a theme, overall goals, but should express in words and illustrations of the desired future. The expression of what you want can be developed through the use of many techniques; visioning, design charrettes, brainstorming, community forums, workshops, or focus groups are just some techniques that may work for you. The point is to provide ample opportunity for the citizens of the community to express their wishes, hopes, dreams, and expectations. Part 3 of this guidebook describes these techniques – and many more – to help you answer this important question.

As you might expect, the wishes, hopes, and dreams of the citizens will vary from group to group within the community. It is the job of the planning team to balance the competing interests that are presented, to weigh the various proposals, to evaluate what is possible, to determine what is desirable, and finally to prepare a road map that will guide the remainder of the process. This road map should encompass the preservation of what is held dear as well as the change needed to achieve an improved quality of life.

There are many ways to develop a vision for your community. In Georgia, the part of the plan that contains the community vision is called the Community Goals. See [Planning for Community Involvement](#) for tools and techniques to help you, in eliciting participation in developing this vital and essential part of the plan.

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#### HOW WILL YOU GET IT?

The plan will be of little value if it is not implemented. How does this happen? It begins with the vision. The vision contains the description of the future direction and the longterm goals that the citizens of your community seek to achieve. Likely, there will be maps to illustrate the vision in terms of types and locations of land uses, transportation and utility systems, and areas protected because they are fragile or important for historic or cultural reasons. Your comprehensive plan is akin to having a plan for a new house. But the house won't just happen. You need construction drawings, a budget, money to fund the budget, a construction program, permits, contractors and subcontractors, landscapers, decorators, and materials.

Likewise, your community plan will need more detailed plans for systems, such as streets and sidewalks, water, wastewater, and other utilities and services. A capital budget is needed to outline when facilities will be built, where they will be built, and how they will be financed. The plan for land use will be implemented through one or several types of land development regulations, often zoning and subdivision regulations. You will need a variety of programs, such as housing rehabilitation, beautification, economic development, historic preservation, purchase of environmental lands, and others, based on the specifics of your comprehensive plan.

In Georgia, an important component of the comprehensive plan is the preparation of a five year Community Work Program (CWP) to describe actions to make the community vision a reality – to implement the plan. The CWP and other components of the

implementation program are described in the local planning requirements available on DCA's website.

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## THE PLAN MUST BE EFFECTIVE

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The truth about planning:  
You cannot be forced, even by law, to do good planning.

The plan should be clear, easy to read, and able to be understood by everyday citizens. But it must also be effective; that is, it must produce the desired results. During the preparation of your plan and the ongoing evaluation of your plan, consider whether it is effective as measured by the following criteria.

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### SIX CRITERIA OF AN EFFECTIVE PLAN

What makes a plan effective? Certainly, you want your plan to comply with the standards from the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. However, it takes more than a plan that complies with the standards to have an effective plan. These six criteria will help you determine whether your plan is effective. Your plan should be:

- ④ Based on a vision;
- ④ Meaningful, in terms of citizen involvement.
- ④ Consistent;
- ④ Realistic;
- ④ Financially feasible; and
- ④ Appropriate, in terms of objectives, policies, and strategies.

### *Is your plan based on a vision?*

Visioning refers to a process where citizens gather to consider how they want the community to be in the future. It describes the future condition or state of the community. A vision is similar to a goal in that it describes an end result, but it is typically more specific than a goal. It can be compared to a person saying, “When I grow up, I want to be....” The vision for a community is a road map of how or what that community will be when it is “grown up.” An effective plan is built on a vision.

An effective plan maintains or improves the quality of life as expressed in the vision. It should guide day-to-day decisions about development. The development that occurs should be based on the direction provided by the plan. An effective plan provides a strategy to achieve the changes needed to maintain or improve the quality of life and achieve the

vision. These strategies may include policies or work plan items, but these will be the actions that result in change as envisioned by the plan. A plan is effective when the vision balances the supply of land, facilities, and services with the demand created by population growth. A healthy community will have enough land for living, working, recreation, and future needs. All of this is part of the vision for your community's future.

*Was the plan created with meaningful citizen involvement and do citizens continue to be a part of the on-going planning process?*

There are several ways to evaluate whether citizen involvement in the planning process is effective. When the planning process includes meaningful citizen involvement, citizens know about the plan and how it affects them. Citizens look to the plan for information and guidance about growth and development of their community. Most important, citizens use the plan to address concerns about their neighborhoods and the community. Whether your citizen involvement program is small or large, a successful and effective plan must be the result of citizen participation.

*Is your plan consistent?*

All parts of a consistent plan work toward the same vision without contradicting each other. Work program items and implementing programs and regulations are based on and agree with the plan, leading to the outcomes envisioned in the plan. The maps, policies, strategies, and action plans all lead to a common vision.

*Do you have a realistic plan?*

A plan should indicate not only what is desirable, but also what is possible, given available resources. Most plans feature a full range of objectives. A good plan will also include the ways and means to measure whether the community actually achieves what the plan calls for. In doing so, the plan becomes a vehicle for resource allocation, as well as managerial accountability. It may be tempting to limit your vision, based on concerns for funding and other resources. A realistic plan can and should include big dreams. However, the plan is the place where annual actions, ongoing strategies, and other implementation measures lead the community in a balanced and realistic manner toward the achievement of those big dreams.

*Is your plan financially feasible?*

Simply stated, there should be funds and financing mechanisms to make sure that facilities, services, projects, and programs are provided as described in the plan.

*Does your plan have an appropriate vision, objectives, policies, and strategies?*

The vision, policies, and strategies must continue to be effective as a guide to decisionmaking and implementation of the plan. One way to assess the effectiveness of the vision, policies, and strategies is to consider whether development throughout the community is consistent with them. You should also consider whether the vision and

policies guide the budget process. Does your community achieve the desired results as expressed in the vision, policies, and strategies of your plan?

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## AFTER THE PLAN – IMPLEMENTATION

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Plans are only good intentions unless they immediately degenerate into hard work.  
Peter Drucker

The plan has been completed, the planning process has been followed, and all public meetings have been successfully conducted. How do we keep this excitement and momentum going? The best way is to first recognize that planning never ends. As soon as the plan is completed, several strategies can be used to make sure the plan is carried out or implemented. These are described in this section and include training sessions for the “users” of the plan, an assessment of the success of the public involvement program, and laying the groundwork for the next update process in 5 or 10 years.

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## HANDING OVER THE REINS

How many times have you heard that plans just gather dust on a shelf? Unfortunately, without an implementation step, that is exactly what happens to many comprehensive plans. It is important, therefore, to complete the planning process through to the point of implementation of key strategies. The plan is not the end of the process, but an essential step along the way to a great community.

This is a good time to hold a celebration. Organize a community-wide event or picnic to celebrate and announce the successful completion of the plan. Save the long speeches and technical reports for another time, but do display a future land use map, display photos of public workshops and other events, and invite key stakeholders to take some well-deserved credit for their contributions.

After everyone has recovered from the celebration, but while the work is still fresh, hold a series of training workshops to establish ownership of the new plan. Such workshops provide a hands-on way of making certain that all the parties involved in the administration of the plan are familiar with all of the goals, objectives, and strategies contained in the plan. These workshops, led by a facilitator from the planning team, should involve elected officials, planning commission members, city and county planning staff, members of the public, volunteers, and anyone who would be considered a “user” of the plan. Don’t forget developers, real estate professionals, and neighborhood representatives. The training workshop could involve a “user’s guide” to the plan with a reference guide to the various components and sections

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## THE PLANNING PROCESS IS A CONTINUING PROCESS

Your community will change over time. It will grow or decline. People will move in and out. New roads and utilities will be built. The economy will rise or fall. Lifestyles will change. The needs, dreams, hopes, and expectations of the citizens of your community will change. The plan should change as well.

There are two reasons to amend the plan. One is that you want to keep the overall direction represented by the plan, but you need to update the information on which the plan is based, and modify policies, strategies, or other parts of the plan as a result. On the other hand, a periodic evaluation of the effectiveness of the plan may reveal that the plan needs to be adjusted to achieve the future direction desired by the community. Revisions to the plan will result from this evaluation.