

PLANNING

21ST CENTURY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN DESIGN FOR EVERYBODY SUBURBAN DENSITY ISLANDS

SUBST ANCE ROLE FORM

WELCOME TO THE NEW GENERATION.

FOR MORE THAN 100 YEARS, planners have been making big plans for their cities. Plans have certainly evolved a great deal in that time, but never so much as in the past five to 10 years. Community engagement has gotten more robust, GIS and other technologies have altered the plan-making landscape, and there's much more—and more varied—data available to planners than ever before. Then there are the game-changing global shifts like climate change and the prevalence of social media—the list goes on.

These realities are changing not only the process and outcomes of comp planning, but the document itself. It's true that plans do some of the same things they've always done: shape land-use and transportation patterns, conserve natural resources, and create great communities. But now, they're doing a lot more.

If we had to characterize how it's evolving, we'd say that the 21st century plan is a departure from traditional "sit-on-the-shelf" plans in three major ways: its substance, its role in communities, and the form that it takes. Read on to see planners' and writers' takes on this new generation, and their list of the communities leading the way.

—THE EDITORS

SUBSTANCE

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Comp plans are addressing new challenges more creatively than ever before, say **Ben Herman** and **Darcie White**.

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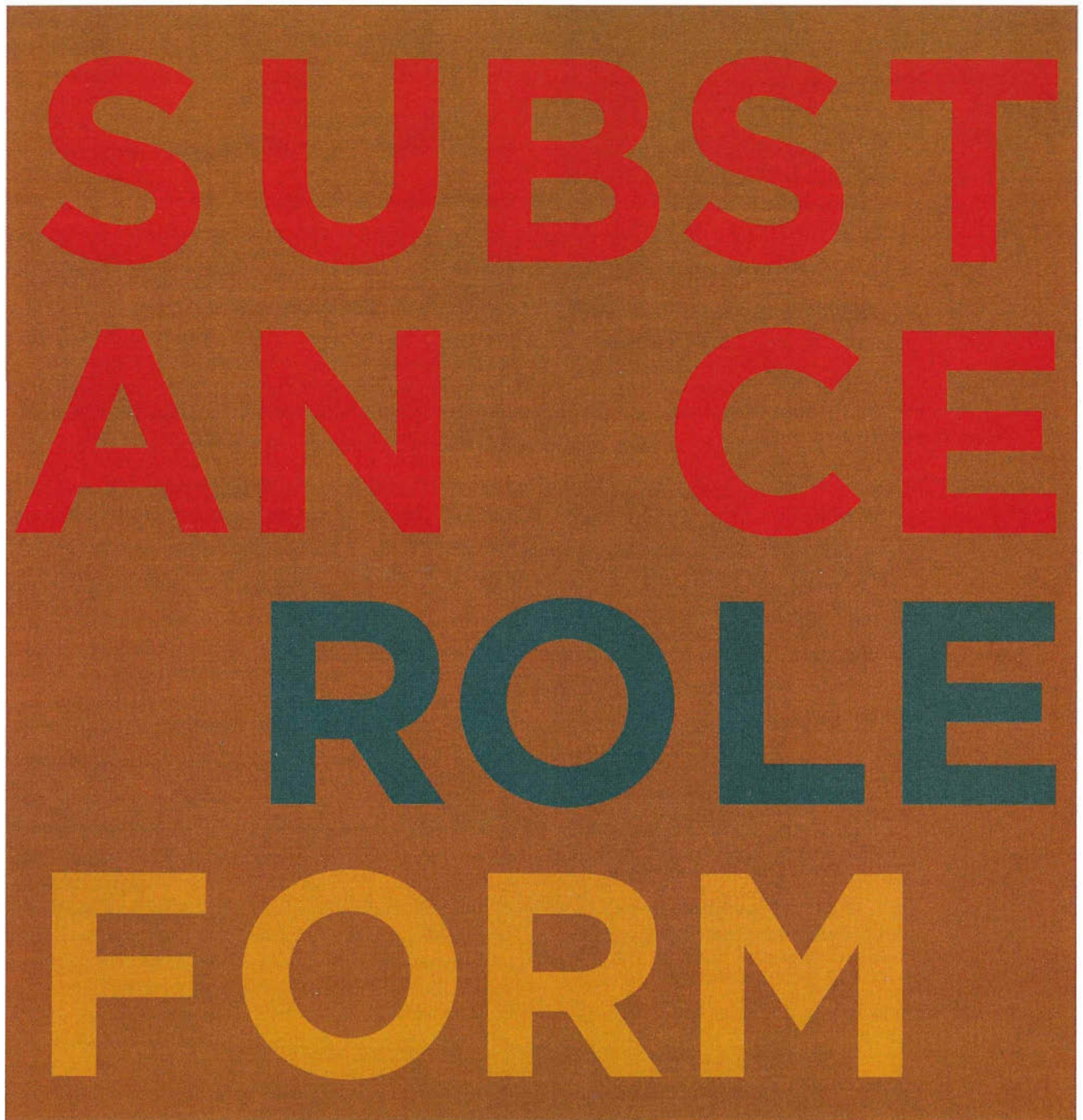
Silvia Vargas and **Nancy O'Neill** explore comp plans' expanding influence. **David Rouse's** sidebar looks at standards for sustainable outcomes.

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Say goodbye to three-ring binders on a shelf. Plans today are living documents. **Ryan Holeywell** tells us what's next.

THE 21ST CENTURY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN





SUBST AN CE

By
BEN HERMAN,
FAICP,
and
DARCIE WHITE,
AICP

IT'S BEEN A LITTLE OVER FIVE YEARS since the start of APA's Sustaining Places Initiative (see sidebar on p. 26). In that time, a significant number of new or updated comprehensive plans have been completed that continue to define the framework for the 21st century plan. The content of many of these plans is a departure from plans that came before them.

First, they cover new topics: sustainability, social equity, energy, climate change, and adaptation are all front and center, and land use and transportation are much better integrated. They also employ a more creative structure based on themes and big ideas, rather than the more traditional organization by elements such as housing, land use, environment, or transportation. Not all do, of course—Raleigh and Seattle are examples of forward-thinking communities that retained an element-based structure in their recent plans, but they did so in a manner that addresses 21st century challenges and opportunities.

Finally, comprehensive plans of today are far more results-focused than ever before, with more emphasis on setting desired outcomes and tracking progress.

As we move into the early decades of a new century, planners and their communities are crafting a new generation of comp plans and updates that will be shaped by several key trends that will help drive their content and focus.



Evolving challenges and opportunities

While comprehensive plans will continue to address traditional planning topics, they are also tackling new and evolving challenges:

- Equity, health, and income disparity
- Meeting the needs of changing populations
- Climate adaptation and mitigation, as well as planning for energy needs of the future
- Resilience and the dynamic and unpredictable pace of change

Increasingly, these challenges are being addressed through the lenses of sustainability and resilience, rather than as stand-alone issues. Although resilience has been characterized by many as the “next generation” of sustainability, a 2015 Post Carbon Institute publication entitled *Six Foundations for Community Resilience* suggests that one way of looking at sustainability and resilience is as two different frameworks for achieving the same goal: organizing how we interact with the world around us and with each other in ways that can continue indefinitely.

Take Seattle’s 2035 *Comprehensive Plan* update (2035.seattle.gov), slated for adoption in 2016. It is structured around four core values that guide the goals and policies in the plan: Race and Social Equity, Environmental Stewardship, Economic Opportunity and Security, and Community. Longmont, Colorado’s draft policy framework (www.EnvisionLongmont.com), also slated for adoption this year, is organized around six guiding principles that address responsible stewardship of resources (environmental, historic, financial), community health and adaptability, and access to services and opportunities, among others.

Both plans not only take on big issues like the environment and equity, but use them as framing concepts. Sustainability and resilience are interwoven throughout. “After experiencing the devastation of the floods in 2013,” says Erin Fosdick, AICP, a senior planner with the city of Longmont, “we began to understand that community resiliency is a critical component to consider. Using the framework of the comprehensive plan, we’ve been able to expand these conversations, for example, by helping people understand that we’re talking about more than environmental quality, hazard mitigation, and disaster preparedness. We are truly looking at the big picture—how all the interrelated things covered in our plan, including sustainability and resiliency, move us closer to our desired vision.”

A key opportunity associated with this approach is the ability to generate discussion at the local level about what it means



Community members see themselves as plan stakeholders when they know they are part of a greater whole.

6 Foundations for Community Resilience

NUMEROUS RESILIENCE FRAMEWORKS and tools for building community resilience are available, but no single approach will likely work for all communities. For its part, The Post Carbon Institute identifies six foundations as essential—no matter where or how resilience-building efforts are undertaken, or which challenges are of most concern locally. The foundations support building community resilience.

- 1 PEOPLE.** The power to envision the future of the community and build its resilience resides with community members.
- 2 SYSTEMS THINKING.** Systems thinking is essential for understanding the complex, interrelated crises now unfolding and what they mean for our similarly complex communities.
- 3 ADAPTABILITY.** A community that adapts to change is resilient. But because communities and the challenges we face are dynamic, adaptation is an ongoing process.
- 4 TRANSFORMABILITY.** Some challenges are so big that it’s not possible for the community to simply adapt; fundamental, transformative changes may be necessary.
- 5 SUSTAINABILITY.** Community resilience is not sustainable if it serves only us, and only at this point in time; it needs to work for other communities, future generations, and the ecosystems on which we all depend.
- 6 COURAGE.** As individuals and as a community, we need courage to confront challenging issues and take responsibility for our collective future.

SOURCE: *SIX FOUNDATIONS FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE*, POST CARBON INSTITUTE 2015; SIXFOUNDATIONS.ORG.

**GLOBAL IMPACT
OF
THE COMPACT
OF MAYORS**

Cities are where some of the most effective and immediate climate actions take place. In the U.S. 122 cities have signed on; there are 452 worldwide.

WATCH:

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VIDEO

to be a sustainable and resilient community, and the importance of strengthening cross-linkages between the two as part of the planning process. A sustainable community is resilient and a resilient community is sustainable. This interdependence shows up in overlapping goals, policies, and metrics being addressed in today's comprehensive plans, which seek to:

FOSTER inclusivity and equity through attention to issues of cultural and racial diversity, affordability, gentrification, and homelessness.

ADAPT to a changing climate by planning for development and infrastructure that can withstand major disruptions due to flooding, wildfire, sea-level rise, or other catastrophic events without failure of critical systems.

REDUCE greenhouse gas emissions through expanded use of renewable energy, reduced reliance on single occupant automobiles, and mitigation of the urban heat island effect.

MINIMIZE future risk to people and property.

PROMOTE emergency preparedness, reducing impacts from future crises on populations, infrastructure, and institutions.

ENCOURAGE community health and wellness and improve health outcomes (e.g., rates of disease and obesity) through expanded access to health and human services, healthy food, and opportunities to lead active lifestyles.

PROVIDE a range of housing options to meet the needs of all ages, income levels, and abilities, including strategies to address affordable housing and homelessness.

IMPROVE access to services by aligning future housing, employment, and services with investments in multimodal transportation systems.

PROTECT the natural environment by preserving important resource areas.

ENHANCE food security through preservation of agricultural lands and expanded support for local and regional food production, sales, and processing.

FOSTER economic diversification at a local and regional scale.

PROMOTE a culture of transparency, accountability, and fiscal sustainability by aligning plan policies with budgets and capital investment plans.

While this shift toward a more integrated approach is being driven in part by increased awareness at all levels, it also gets a big boost from initiatives such as the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities Network, which is focused on helping communities become more resilient to the physical, social, and economic challenges of the 21st century. Also influential is the Compact of Mayors, a coalition of the leaders of 452 cities who have pledged to reduce and prepare for the impacts of climate change.

Both of these efforts, and others, are compelling elected officials to publicly commit to taking action to address new and emerging challenges. The role of the comprehensive plan in establishing a policy foundation for these actions is being defined right now, as the next generation of plans begins to take shape.

Boulder, Colorado, known for its innovative planning practices and its landmark approach to growth management, is in the process of preparing an update to the *Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan*. At the same time, the city is preparing a resilience assessment and strategy, with help from the 100 Resilient Cities initiative. The resilience strategy will be fully integrated with the plan update, which is expected to be complete in 2016. The update will build on the legacy of the plan that has been in place since the 1980s, but is adding several areas of enhanced focus, including climate, energy, and resilience; housing/jobs balance and the need for middle income housing; and urban form.

Boulder and other communities at the forefront of working to reduce climate impacts—Portland, Oregon, is another notable example—have had sustainability or climate action plans in place for many years. As a result, their recent comprehensive plan updates look to align policies and recommended actions between targeted resiliency and climate initiatives and their comprehensive plans, and continue to seek new and innovative ways to become more sustainable and resilient.

The vast majority of communities, however, do not have sustainability or climate action plans in place. Newly initiated plan update processes coupled

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— ERIN FOSDICK,
AICP, SENIOR
PLANNER,
LONGMONT,
COLORADO

with the desire to advance the community's understanding of 21st century issues related to sustainability and resilience will provide new opportunities to address these policy choices and new models will continue to emerge.

One of the most important considerations for these emerging models will be their ability to withstand political change over time. The most effective plans and policies are ones that have—and maintain—broad support. It is important to recognize that establishing an aggressive greenhouse gas reduction, affordable housing, or other kind of target may not be realistic in all communities today—or in the future. As such, planners must be prepared to discuss a range of possible approaches to advance local sustainability and resilience initiatives and to help make the case as to why they are important.

Accountability and measurement

Effective planning can be defined as the transformation of knowledge into action. With the axiom that “what gets measured gets done” in mind, cutting-edge plans can make this transformation possible by defining their community's desired outcomes and linking them to measureable metrics that assess the results of plan policies and implementation.

These kinds of plans make it clear how the community's planning vision will be defined, measured, and acted upon. That helps planners, decision makers, and stakeholders understand more clearly the effectiveness of action strategies so that they can adapt and revise them to meet adopted goals.

Imagine Austin, the Austin, Texas, comprehensive plan (austintexas.gov), adopted in 2012, links policies, goals, metrics, and actions in its chapter on Implementation and Measuring Success. The city charter requires that the planning commission and staff provide an annual report to city council about the implementation of the comprehensive plan, including metrics to track progress.

Similarly, the 2013 Norfolk, Virginia, comprehensive plan, *plaNorfolk2030*, (norfolk.gov) contains 11 elements, each of which highlights key issues facing the community, along with goals, desired outcomes, and metrics and actions for each. “Because we're measuring progress all the time, it's really resulted in the plan being more of a living document,” says George M. Homewood, AICP, the city's planning director. “We've changed some of the initial metrics to reflect the reality of the community, and to help better inform us about the effectiveness

of the actions in the plan. This approach has been a real game-changer for us not only in terms of the plan's effectiveness, but also the level of participation by other city departments.”

Continuous improvement

Traditionally, a comprehensive plan is revisited every five years or so and generally left untouched in the interim. In today's planning environment, the plan is never really “done,” as communities need to remain nimble to be able to respond to ever-changing circumstances. Also, with an increasing focus on implementation and measuring progress, many communities are continually evaluating the effectiveness of strategies and adjusting them as needed.

Since the adoption of *Imagine Austin*, city staff members have focused on strategic implementation efforts, with eight priority programs providing the structure and direction needed to implement the plan. Each priority program has a lead department, cross-disciplinary team, community partners, and a work plan that is reviewed and revised on an annual basis.

In Fort Collins, Colorado, following the adoption of its last major plan update in 2011, known as *Plan Fort Collins*, (fcgov.com/planfortcollins) the city made major changes to its organizational structure by combining economic health, environmental services, and social sustainability departments under one umbrella—the Sustainability Services Area. The city has just completed strategic action plans for each of the three departments to implement key initiatives of its comprehensive plan.

LAND-USE CHANGE REQUEST SITES

Using this interactive map, see what may be in store for the major update to the *Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan*.

EXPLORE:

tinyurl.com/zq975lv

MAP

‘Because we're measuring progress all the time, it's really resulted in the plan being more of a living document. We've changed some of the initial metrics to reflect the reality of the community, and to help better inform us about the effectiveness of the actions in the plan. This approach has been a real game-changer for us not only in terms of the plan's effectiveness, but also the level of participation by other city departments.’

—GEORGE M. HOMEWOOD, AICP, PLANNING DIRECTOR,
NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

Place-based design

While incorporating design into comp plans is not a new idea, what is changing is an increased focus on plans that make areas more livable, more vibrant, and more people-oriented. Particularly as planners are increasingly being asked to manage change through increased density and urbanization, plans will need to provide more clarity about the desired future form and shape of their community. New technologies help. They illustrate desired patterns, at varying scales—from the structure and form of the entire city to that of its districts, neighborhoods, and corridors.

One trend in comprehensive plans that has gained momentum over the past few years is the concept of form-based or place-based land-use plans. Place-based planning is a way to shape the future of the city by concentrating on the look, feel, form, and character of places instead of conventional categories of land use.

Portland, Oregon's draft comprehensive plan update (portlandoregon.gov/bps/68411), slated for adoption early in 2016, includes an Urban Design Framework diagram that identifies centers and corridors (areas that are expected to grow and change) within the city's physical context. The framework supports the evolution of the city by illustrating the linkages and relationships between various elements of the built and natural environment through a network of place types: centers, corridors, transit station areas, city greenways, urban habitat corridors, and employment areas. It also identifies a set of "pattern areas"—broad geographies that are defined by existing patterns of natural and built features, such as the central city, neighborhoods, and inner-ring districts, and provides basic urban design characteristics and comparisons for different types of centers, corridors, and other features.

A sustainable community
is RESILIENT and
a resilient community
is SUSTAINABLE.

A City's Form Matters

Portland, Oregon's Urban Design Framework shows how the Vision and Guiding Principles in the *2035 Comprehensive Plan* are reflected in the location and form of future change. It brings urban design objectives to the ground and details how the city will achieve them.



CENTERS

Places with concentrations of commercial and community services, housing, gathering places, and transit. Centers provide services to surrounding neighborhoods and are a focus of housing and job growth.



CORRIDORS

Major city streets with new growth offer critical multimodal connections to centers, commercial services, jobs, and housing options.



TRANSIT STATION AREAS

Station areas along high-capacity transit lines connect people to important areas of residential, employment, and urban development.



CITY GREENWAYS

A system of distinctive pedestrian-and bicycle-friendly streets and trails, enhanced by tree canopy and stormwater facilities that expand transportation and recreational opportunities across the city.



URBAN HABITAT CORRIDORS

A system of natural and built areas that provide safe, healthy places for residents and migratory fish and wildlife species that live in and move through the city.



EMPLOYMENT AREAS

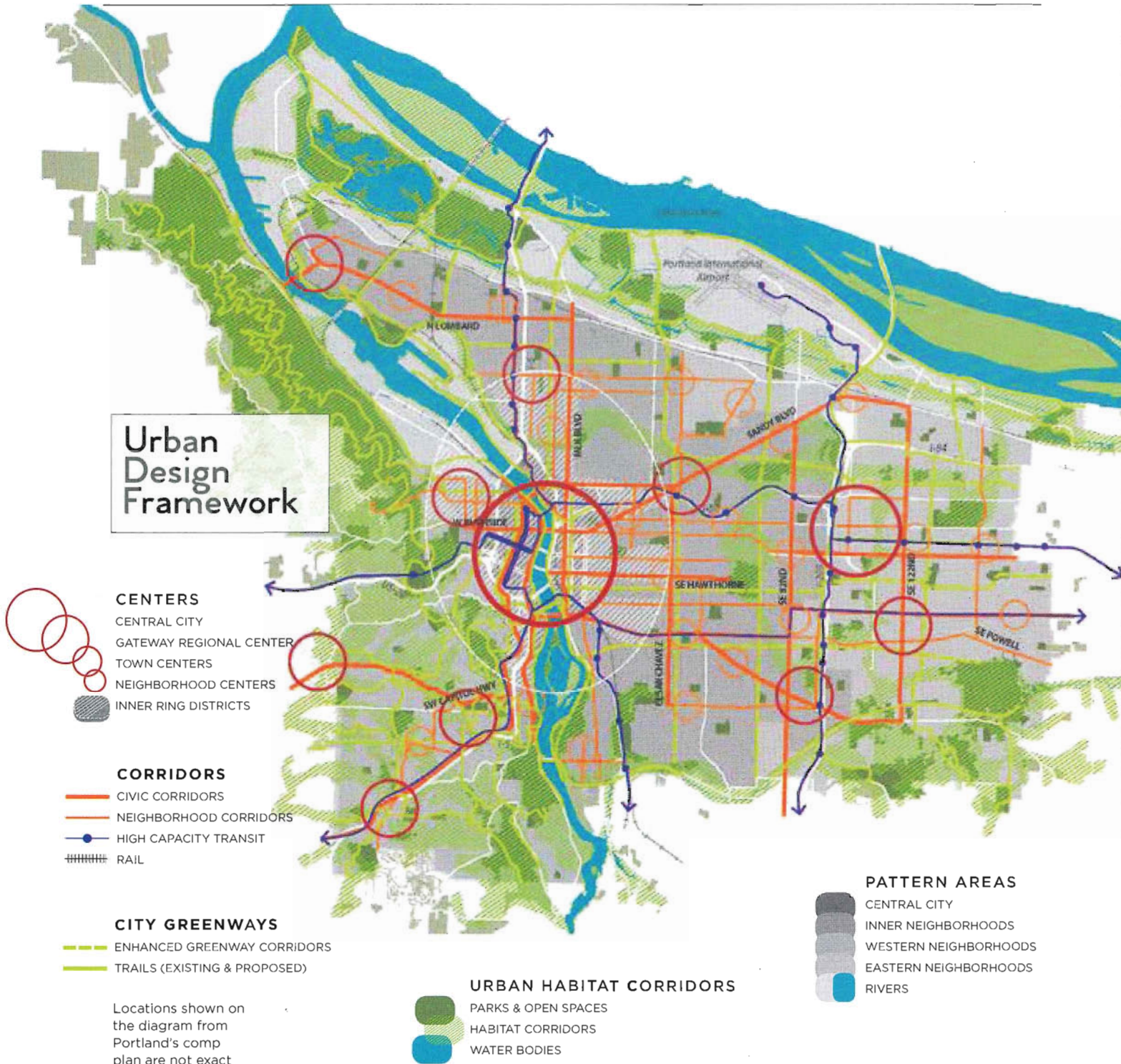
Diverse and growing areas of employment host a variety of business sectors in different parts of the city.



PATTERN AREAS

Portland's broad geographies are defined by existing patterns of natural and built features.

SOURCE: PORTLAND'S 2035 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN RECOMMENDED DRAFT, AUGUST 2015



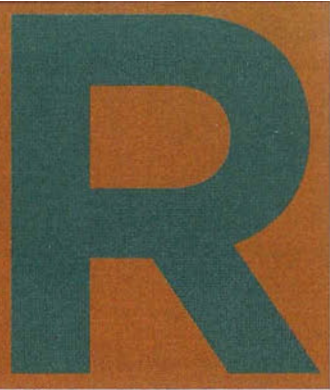
Locations shown on the diagram from Portland's comp plan are not exact boundaries. Detailed boundaries for centers, corridors, habitat areas, and all other items shown on the map will be defined in supporting plans or through future planning projects.

What's next?

The current generation of plans is breaking new ground in addressing the goals of the Sustaining Places Initiative to help communities of all sizes achieve sustainable outcomes. Looking to the future, new challenges—global economic shifts, energy innovations, and emerging transportation technologies such as driverless vehicles and autonomous delivery systems—will need to be addressed

in community plans. The comprehensive plan will continue to evolve and will have an increasingly important role as the central unifying document for communities to address the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

Ben Herman is a senior consultant with Clarion Associates, a national planning firm based in Denver. He served on APA's Sustaining Places Task Force and Plan Standards Working Group. Darcie White is a director with Clarion Associates. Her practice focuses primarily on comprehensive planning.



ROLE

By SILVIA VARGAS,
AICP, LEED AP, and
NANCY O'NEILL,
AICP, LEED GA

UNTIL ABOUT THE MIDDLE OF THE LAST DECADE, the role of the comprehensive plan was still seen primarily as managing community growth through land-use policy. But that's changing, with a whole new generation of plans taking on much more expansive and influential roles.

Following the global recession, budget cuts, the increasing need for cities to operate efficiently, and an upward tick in partnership development, the function of the comprehensive plan changed in significant ways. Indeed, cities, counties, and regions are now not only using comprehensive plans for new purposes, they are also increasingly recognizing the intrinsic value of the planning process itself. And as always, cities continue to use plans to respond to shifting demographics and preferences that dictate where people and jobs want to locate.

So what is the role of the comprehensive plan of the 21st century? Several trends are helping to redefine this evolving document.

PIECING THE PUZZLE TOGETHER

Today's comp plans are more than high-level policy documents, often tackling issues at multiple scales simultaneously. This new generation of plans is bringing various types of community plans together.

That is just what the recently adopted *PlanLafayette* (tinyurl.com/pqajj3v) does. One of the smallest parishes in Louisiana, Lafayette has experienced robust economic growth over the last two decades, and



Downtown Action Plan

Lafayette's plan for its center city, part of its comprehensive plan effort, focuses on the character of public spaces. Additionally, three small area plans model urban, suburban, and rural areas.

BUILDING INTERFACE

The interface of the building at the end frontage line, particularly on the ground-level facade and the surface treatment of its setback (if any). Also takes into account the ratio of building height to street width to create a sense of enclosure for the outdoor room.

FRONTAGE LINE

Front and side (on corner parcels) property lines interfacing with the public right-of-way.



PUBLIC FRONTAGE

Consists of a pedestrian walkway (sidewalk) nearest to the frontage line, and the furnishing zone between the walkway and the curb.

THE THOROUGHFARE

The area between the curbs consisting of driving lanes, bicycle lanes, parking lanes, and medians.

The overall comprehensive plan vision is necessarily complemented with an incremental, targeted, and more detailed effort on the ground. The synergy of this effort involves neighborhoods, businesses, and public agencies that can deliver projects that the community can see and say, "We want more of that."

—CATHIE GILBERT,
PLANNING
MANAGER,
COMPREHENSIVE
PLAN OFFICE,
LAFAYETTE,
LOUISIANA

SOURCE: DEVELOPMENT + DESIGN CENTER, DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY, LAFAYETTE DOWNTOWN ACTION PLAN

has attracted many new residents, students, and visitors to the community. But most of the growth has occurred in the areas surrounding the city core, and these areas are growing faster than the city.

This is one of the reasons why *PlanLafayette* includes a Downtown Action Plan that examines questions about development and public space character in the core of the city. The action plan asks, “What do we need to do to draw attractive, convenient new residential development and amenities to downtown?” and “How can we create better, more vibrant public spaces for people to enjoy throughout downtown?”

Also folded into the *PlanLafayette* process was the development of three small area plans that provide a planning model for urban, suburban, and rural parts of Lafayette Parish. Priorities set by the community during the plan’s visioning stage served as the foundation for these smaller-scale plans, which are given the weight of policy by being integrated into the comprehensive plan.

The *Seattle Comprehensive Plan* (and ongoing *Seattle 2035* update) (2035.seattle.gov) takes a different multiscale planning approach. That plan includes an Urban Village Strategy that identifies specific areas where growth can be concentrated to “build on successful aspects of the city’s existing urban character” and a Neighborhood Planning element that incorporates 33 neighborhood-tailored plans to “make the Comprehensive Plan relevant at a local level.”

Likewise, the 2015 comprehensive plan for Southlake, Texas, *Southlake 2030* (cityofsouthlake.com/index.aspx?NID=524), contains fine-grain elements such as a Public Art Master Plan and a Wayfinding Sign System Plan, which identifies key destinations throughout the city, recommends sign design concepts, identifies potential sign locations, and provides a priority installation list.

“I think that this two-pronged planning approach is critical, especially in communities that do not have a long planning history,” says Cathie Gilbert, planning manager of the newly formed Comprehensive Plan Office in Lafayette. “The overall comprehensive plan vision is necessarily complemented with an incremental, targeted, and more detailed effort on the ground. The synergy of this effort involves neighborhoods, businesses, and public agencies that can deliver projects that the community can see and say, ‘We want more of that.’”

Local governments are also leveraging planning

processes to identify interface points between the comprehensive plan and other existing or ongoing planning efforts like mobility plans and parks and recreation master plans. In these cases, the role of the comprehensive plan is to integrate those separate efforts into a cohesive, interconnected framework of policies and actions.

In the recent preparation of *Plan Houston* (planhouston.org)—Houston’s first citywide planning framework, which was approved just last year—nearly 150 independent plans, visions, and studies were reviewed and evaluated for alignment with the city’s vision, goals, and strategies. *CONNECT Our Future* (connectourfuture.org), a planning framework for guiding growth and investment in the bistate, 14-county region surrounding Charlotte, North Carolina, incorporates and coordinates dozens of studies prepared by eight different work groups.

And the ongoing *Imagine Boston 2030* (imagine.boston.gov) process assumes a similar role: It seeks to reconcile a number of major planning efforts, ranging from the City’s Climate Action Plan to a High School Redesign initiative. The list goes on.

Momentum for movement

These days, citizens are more hands-on in the planning process and are more invested in its outcomes. Dwindling municipal budgets are making the public take a greater interest in understanding how money is being spent, and in keeping local governments accountable for producing concrete results that align with the comprehensive plan. This, in turn, is leading to plans that are increasingly action- and project-oriented, as well as more performance-focused.

Back to *Plan Houston*. Its implementation will rely on two mechanisms: An annual work plan—prepared with input from the mayor, city council, city departments, and the public—will identify major project priorities for each budget year, assign responsibilities, and set project schedules. And a series of performance indicators will track progress and inform both policy making and the preparation of the annual work plan.

In South Lake, Texas, a Strategic Management System (cityofsouthlake.com/DocumentCenter/View/4573), adapted from business and industry’s “Balanced Scorecard” tool, governs and monitors the activities of the city and helps to maintain alignment with its comprehensive plan. The SMS guides the way the city does business and helps determine

how time and resources are invested. Finally, it gives the city a framework for demonstrating results in a measurable way through the publication of an easy-to-read annual “dashboard report.”

“Our Planning Department has expanded its traditional role by linking its comprehensive plan to the city’s strategic management system,” says Ken Baker, AICP, planning director for the city of South Lake. The associated measurement tools ensure timeliness and accountability, he adds.

Tracking and demonstrating progress also helps maintain planning momentum after adoption. Planners know that the hard work really begins once the plan is adopted—but keeping up the pace, excitement, and engagement that drove the planning process can be a challenge. Tools such as Houston’s annual work program and South Lake’s dashboard report, tied to the cities’ comp plans, are essential in showcasing incremental success and keeping those plans fresh and at the forefront of the public’s mind.

There are other tools for monitoring, coordinating, and communicating progress on plan implementation. The need has grown in recent years as it becomes more urgent for planners to deal with rapid change and engage the public in creative ways.

- The Lafayette Consolidated Government honors its comprehensive plan (and identifies next steps) annually during PlanLafayette Week. Stakeholders host events and national planning experts are frequent guest speakers.
- Austin’s interdepartmental work groups meet once a year to establish priorities and assess progress vis-a-vis the performance metrics established in *Imagine Austin*. The city also hosts an educational speaker series for residents, a practice it began during the planning process.
- In addition to preparing an annual progress report, the Washington, D.C. Office of Planning has developed a database to track completion of action items from the *District of Columbia Comprehensive Plan* (planning.dc.gov/page/comprehensive-plan) and to coordinate more efficiently with other agencies involved in plan implementation.
- Philadelphia issues online annual reports on

‘The [planning] commission staff is very interested in not only completing District Plans but seeing to their implementation, working closely with various organizations and city agencies to see recommendations come to fruition.’

—ELEANOR SHARPE, DEPUTY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PHILADELPHIA PLANNING COMMISSION

its plan, *Philadelphia 2035* (phila2035.org), but those reports also can be distributed as calendars for the upcoming year: an original way to inform and keep reminding the public of what has been done and what is coming up. “The [planning] commission staff is very interested in not only completing district plans but seeing to their implementation, working closely with various organizations and city agencies to see recommendations come to fruition. The calendar allows the city to mark progress of all district plans and present a status update that keeps the public interested and engaged,” says Eleanor Sharpe, deputy executive director of the Philadelphia Planning Commission.

Nexus to budgeting

Increasingly, the new generation of comp plans are helping communities do fiscal planning, driving the development of capital improvement plans and municipal budgets. That function helps everyone understand the return on investment of both public and private projects and prioritize spending.

The Philadelphia City Planning Commission coordinates the development of a six-year capital program and budget. Philadelphia’s Planning Commission is fairly unique in that it is chartered to prepare and recommend an annual capital program and budget.

That process typically entails considerable inter-agency coordination and partnership with the city’s Budget Office and other operating agencies, with the end result ensuring that public investments are consistent with the physical development goals of the comprehensive plan, notes John Haak, AICP, director of Planning Policy and Analysis. The district plans contained in *Philadelphia 2035* play a key role in prioritizing those expenditures.

In Raleigh, North Carolina, the *2030 Comprehensive Plan* (www.raleighnc.gov/cp) requires major

A NEW STANDARD FOR COMPREHENSIVE PLANS By David Rouse, AICP

APA launched the Sustaining Places initiative in 2010 to define the role of planning in addressing the sustainability of human settlement. This initiative has focused on the role of the local comprehensive plan as the leading policy document and tool to help communities of all sizes achieve sustainable outcomes.

One major result is the Comprehensive Plan Standards for Sustaining Places. The standards draw on research of best practices from leading contemporary plans and the testing of the draft standards with pilot communities, providing a framework for advancing sustainability through the processes, substance, and outcomes of comprehensive plans.

The standards, outlined and explained in *Sustaining Places: Best Practices for Comprehensive Plans* (PAS 578), consist of interrelated components, each supported by a set of best practices.

PRINCIPLES. Normative statements of intent that underlie a comprehensive plan's overall strategy and provide substantive direction for integrating sustainability into the plan: *Livable Built Environment, Harmony with Nature, Resilient Economy, Interwoven Equity, Healthy Community, Responsible Regionalism.*

PROCESSES. Planning activities that take place during the preparation of a comprehensive plan and define how it will be implemented: *Authentic Participation and Accountable Implementation.*

ATTRIBUTES. Plan-making design standards that shape the contents and format of comprehensive plans: *Consistent Content and Coordinated Characteristics.*

BEST PRACTICES. Planning action tools employed by communities to activate the desired principles, processes, and attributes of their comprehensive plans. There are 85 in all, such as planning for the provision and protection of green infrastructure (Harmony with Nature principle); establishing implementation indicators, benchmarks, and targets (Accountable Implementation process); and using plan formats that go beyond paper (Coordinated Characteristics attribute).

"Memphis and Shelby County have benefited from using the standards as a guide for the regional plan," says John Zeanah, AICP, program manager for the *Mid-South Regional Greenprint & Sustainability Plan*. That Tennessee region was one of 10 pilot communities where the standards were tested and refined. "[They] have been a valuable tool for project planners

to evaluate how effectively the vision addresses sustainability best practices," he says.

What's next

Building on the experience and success of the pilot communities, the APA board in September 2015 approved the establishment of a voluntary program to recognize exemplary plans that meet the standards, successfully integrating sustainability into their comprehensive plans.

A one-year pilot of the Comprehensive Plan Standards Recognition Program is under way. Watch for details—and see how your community can participate—at planning.org/sustainingplaces/compplanstandards.

David Rouse is APA's director of research. He was a member of APA's Sustaining Places Task Force and coauthored *Sustaining Places: Best Practices for Comprehensive Plans*.

PILOT COMMUNITIES

Auburn, Washington
 Foxborough, Massachusetts
 Goshen, Indiana
 Memphis/Shelby County, Tennessee
 New Hanover County, North Carolina
 Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
 Rock Island, Illinois
 Seattle
 Savona, New York
 Wheeling, West Virginia

RESOURCES

FROM APA
 Comprehensive Plan Standards for Sustaining Places: planning.org/sustainingplaces/compplanstandards

Sustaining Places: The Role of the Comprehensive Plan (PAS Report 567, 2012): planning.org/store/product/?ProductCode=BOOK_P567

Sustaining Places: Best Practices for Comprehensive Plans (PAS Report 578, 2015) planning.org/store/product/?ProductCode=BOOK_P578



capital projects "not tied to immediate life safety or capacity deficiencies" to undergo ROI analysis. Analysis of a project's return on investment is an important element of the city's CIP criteria.

Wichita-Sedgwick County in Kansas makes clear the connection between the comprehensive plan and the budget: Its

new plan is explicitly framed as a Community Investments Plan (tinyurl.com/arpe8zy)—"a policy framework to guide future public investments in municipal buildings and infrastructure" in an era of diminishing revenues and increasing fiscal constraints. The plan introduces a trilevel evaluation process to facilitate decision making on new, upgrade, or replacement projects that includes detailed project analysis; project selection and funding; and capital improvement programming.

The Government Finance Officers Association acknowledges the role of comprehensive plans in capital improvement planning and recommends, among other things, that:

- Plans should provide a vision for capital project plans and investments.
- Local governments should make capital project investment decisions consistent with their comprehensive plans.
- Local finance officers should be part of the comprehensive planning process from the onset, to ensure a balance between aspirations and fiscal realities.

Local governments also use the comprehensive plan process to kick-start projects and engage community members as partners in implementation. Shrinking or stagnant fiscal budgets, combined with increasing service costs, mean that communities need those partnerships more than ever.

When concerns about obsolescence and disinvestment in Lafayette's older neighborhoods and commercial corridors emerged as one of the community's top priorities during the planning process, the Lafayette Consolidated Government launched Project Front Yard to bring together individuals, businesses, government, and media partners in promoting community beautification through education. The project takes its lead from more than 40 action items—some individual, some collective—spelled out in *PlanLafayette*, including litter removal programs, river cleanup days, education initiatives, public art programs, and gateway revitalization and improved streetscape efforts.

In its first year, Project Front Yard attracted local and regional business partners, including over \$1 million in in-kind media coverage from 14 local media outlets, which has helped to mobilize the

community to participate in tree planting, litter collection, and storm drain cleanup events. Since it was adopted, the program has even picked up regional momentum, gaining adoption in neighboring Acadia, Iberia, and St. Martin Parishes.

Platform for dialogue and building trust

Finally, local governments are increasingly appreciating the usefulness of the planning process as a backdrop for open, honest conversations about difficult community issues. These conversations help launch good relationships that can lead to more systematic consultations, continued beyond plan adoption. In Lafayette, the city-parish commitment to ongoing community engagement and visible, on-the-ground-improvements is helping to build trust.

Communities are also recognizing the need to involve broader audiences in the planning process to ensure equitable and full representation of the issues, as well as to strengthen the credibility of the process and get buy-in for adoption and implementation. For Portland, Oregon's *2035 Comprehensive Plan* (portlandoregon.gov/bps/57352) process, staff set up neighborhood "drop-in" sessions for residents to come learn, at their convenience, how plan changes might affect them. A Comp Plan Helpline fields call from citizens, and the plan's mobile- and tablet-friendly Map App, which allows users to see proposed land-use and zoning designations and details about transportation projects on a parcel-by-parcel basis, has been viewed more than 120,000 times.

Open communication in an iterative planning process has become especially critical in building trust with the community, especially to show process participants how their input is used and assimilated at each step. Portland staff used a database to track comments received on each draft plan product. The database is updated after each public outreach event. The compiled public input and comments is made available to the public and advisory committees on an ongoing basis, while the staff briefs commissions and officials on how the project responds to public feedback. Planners are now getting ready to roll out an interactive, searchable version of the database using GIS, which will allow the public to review comments on specific sites or areas of the city. ■

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'Our Planning Department has expanded its traditional role by linking its comprehensive plan to the city's strategic management system.'

—KEN BAKER,
AICP,
PLANNING
DIRECTOR,
SOUTH LAKE,
TEXAS



FORM

By RYAN
HOLEYWELL

FOR YEARS, COMPREHENSIVE PLANS—whether they’re produced by municipalities, regional organizations, or other entities—have had a pretty standard format: They’re placed in a three-ring binder that sits on the shelf. An identical PDF will usually appear on a government website.

Today, for better or worse, that’s still the standard. But in a few places, planners are taking a different approach.

Take Charlotte, North Carolina. When officials there won federal funding to develop a regional growth plan, they knew they had to do something different from the status quo if they wanted their work to be relevant.

“We didn’t want just a paper copy of something,” says Michelle Nance, AICP, planning director of the Centralina Council of Governments, which represents the greater Charlotte area. “A PDF is static. It just didn’t seem right for us, with the variety of communities we’ve come to represent.”

When CCOG set about developing an ambitious new growth plan—spanning 14 counties across two states—it took a different approach: the plan, which debuted in March 2015, is entirely digital, living online at connectourfuture.org.

Visitors can examine regional priorities like “improve air quality” or “increase transportation choices,” then drill down to learn more about



the strategies the region is implementing to achieve them. The site also has a dashboard where visitors can see the area's progress on a slew of different metrics using data pulled into an easy-to-understand graphic interface.

The hope is that the format will make it easier for different constituencies to focus on their specific priorities. "Because each of our communities is very different, we knew we wanted it to be interactive," Nance says. "It had to be relevant to so many different types of users."

A new movement

Across the country, planning departments are starting to rethink the way they present their work, realizing that cumbersome PDFs may be alienating their communities.

"This is definitely something I've been thinking a ton about over the last few years," says Manisha Gadia Bewtra, AICP, analytical services manager with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, which serves the Boston area. "Why are we doing things in a way that doesn't help people consume information?"

Bewtra and a growing number of other planners are increasingly frustrated with the limitations of

old-school PDF and paper documents. Her organization recently helped develop a plan for downtown Lynn, Massachusetts (dtl.mapc.org/What_We_Learned/Downtown_Planning.html) which had no print component whatsoever. The move initially required officials to embrace a new way of thinking, but ultimately, it made for an easier, more coherent presentation of information, Bewtra says.

"One thing I'd say to planners," she says, "is that they shouldn't be afraid to do experimentation."

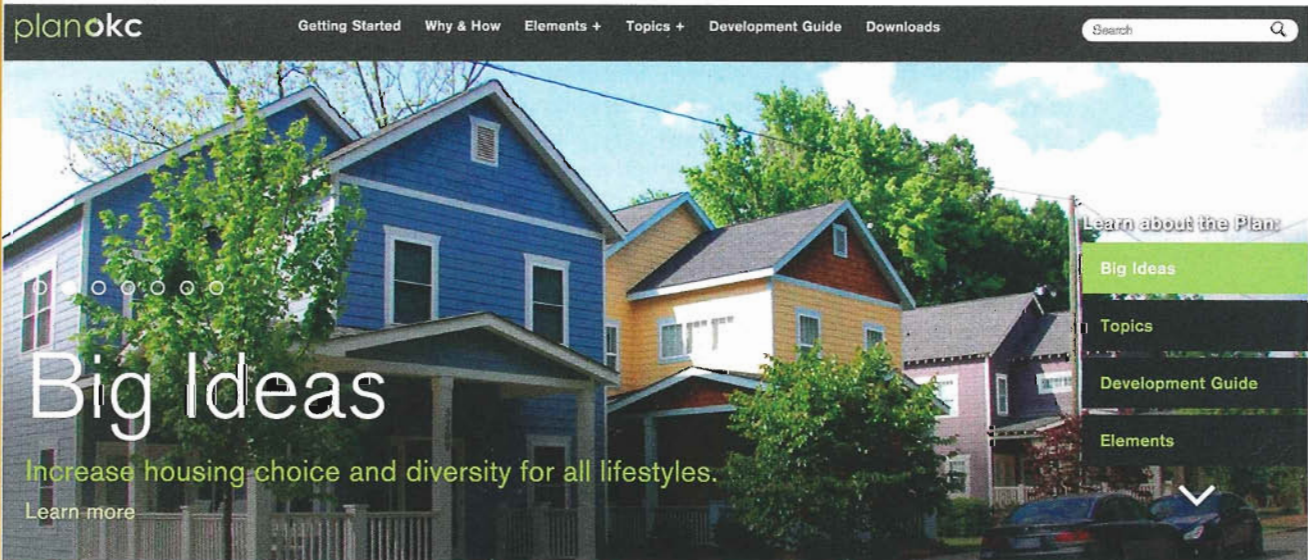
Ease of use

Communities switching to digital plans see several benefits. For starters: It's good public relations. PDFs come off as dated. A smartly designed website, meanwhile, can provide help with branding. Web-based plans can also be more accessible to the public, since they're most likely to be discovered through Internet searches (generally, information within a PDF is hard to find unless you know where that file is located). "If something's not on the web," Bewtra asks rhetorically, "does it really exist?"

A digital plan can be easier to navigate, says program planner Geoff Butler, AICP, of Oklahoma City. He also believes that his city's council members and planning commission members—who all have tab-

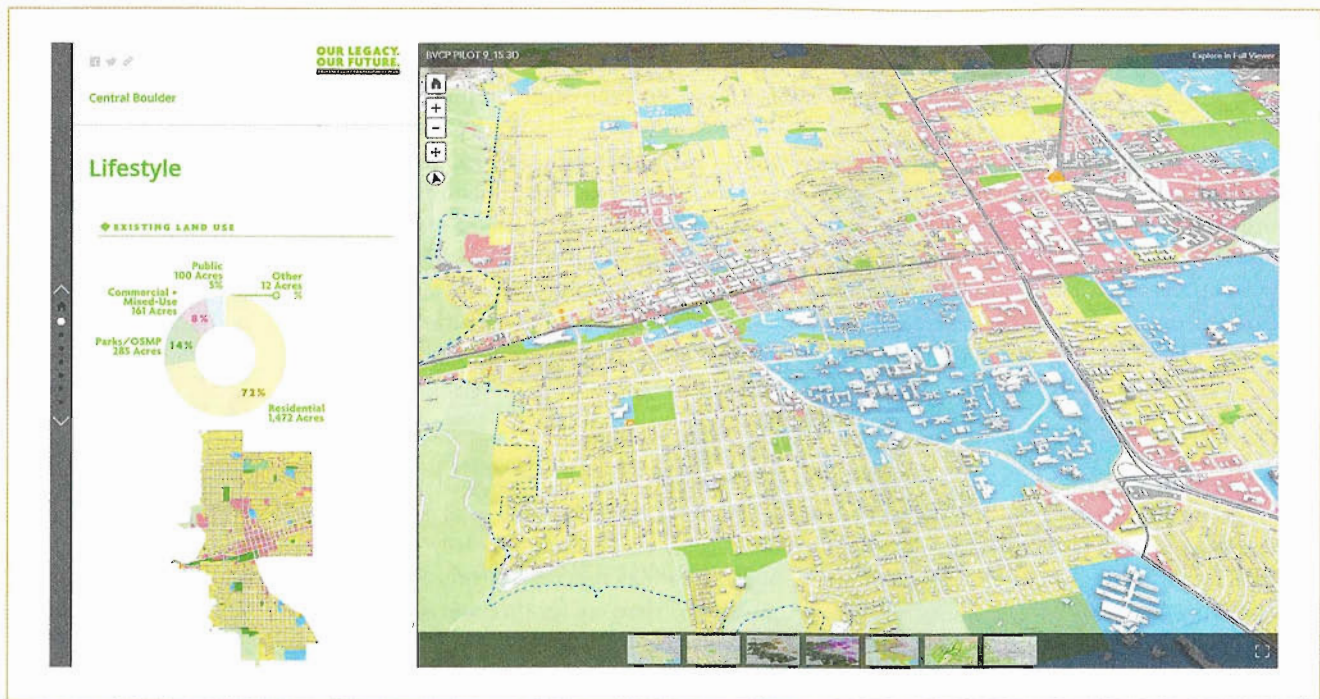
'One thing I'd say to planners is that they shouldn't be afraid to do experimentation.'

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Planokc.org

Oklahoma City's new comprehensive plan homes in on seven big ideas. The website was designed with help from Sasaki Associates.



GIS software firm Esri is experimenting with creating 3-D models of cities that can be displayed online within communities' comprehensive plans. This is a screenshot of its template for Boulder, Colorado.

lets—are more likely to regularly use his city’s new comprehensive plan if they don’t have to carry it around in a cumbersome binder. “You can do two clicks and see what the city’s doing about transit and all the initiatives around it,” Butler says. “It’s a big, thick document if you go through the printed version.” *Planokc* (planokc.org), the city’s first comp plan since 1977, was approved last July.

Navigability and portability not only help elected and appointed officials stay informed themselves, but is also a great outreach tool. So, when Joe Constituent asks what the city is doing about transit, an official can just pull out his or her phone, click on the “transit” icon, and show him.

Next generation tools

But where the movement is really poised to shake things up is by giving developers, planners, and citizens access to next-generation tools.

“We want to move away from the comprehensive plan as a static PDF,” says Shannon McElvaney, global community development manager at GIS software company Esri. “What I see in the future for the comprehensive plan . . . is live data feeds that can be used in your planning efforts.”

In Boulder, for example, Esri has created 3-D representations of city plans that could be included

in its comprehensive plan, which is currently being updated. “It’s been really well received by the public,” McElvaney says. “Anybody doing planning and development can look at the context of where they’re building.”

Esri is also experimenting with how to more dynamically represent form-based codes that may appear in general plans and other documents. Those visualizations could be accessed from any web browser.

And in Houston, the city’s first-ever comprehensive plan (planhouston.org) includes a tool that allows visitors to input an address or draw a polygon on a map and see all the existing plans—produced by the city or other entities—that include that location. So far the tool contains more than 200 plans.

Making the switch

Communities that embrace the new method frequently tout their ability to continuously update a plan so that residents can see progress or so that plans can be tweaked more quickly.

“Given the constant development pressure the city is under, it gives us the ability to respond more quickly to development issues,” says Vince Papsidero Jr., FAICP, planning director in Dublin, Ohio, which is among the communities taking this next-genera-

‘What I see in the future for the comprehensive plan . . . is live data feeds that can be used in your planning efforts.’
 —SHANNON MCELVANEY, GLOBAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT MANAGER, ESRI

tion, digital focus to its comprehensive plan update.

In Houston, the plan is online, along with an annual implementation document (which was set to go live last month), that outlines how, exactly, Houston will achieve its goals. Residents will also be able to view various indicators. "We want to remain flexible," says Jennifer Ostlind, AICP, deputy assistant director of Houston's planning department. "We know priorities change. We have a framework. So in that sense, a website is much easier to update regularly."

Yet the ease of updates comes with an obligation to keep the web-based content fresh.

"It requires a big commitment," notes Jeff Reichman, principal at January Advisors, a consulting firm that helped with the digital presentation of Houston's new plan. "Any time you set up a new website, you're committing to keeping it up to date. People don't want to see old information."

A study released last year by Planetizen found that 53 percent of the planning department websites they looked at had been visibly updated in the last 30 days. At the other end of the spectrum, 18 percent hadn't posted new information in six months.

Reichman can't say exactly how often cities should update the information on their plan's webpage, but it's important to keep it fresh by communicating community members' input and highlight planning department work related to the plan.

Reichman and his team also had to coordinate closely with Houston's IT staff on how to present the plan. The city planning staff wanted the digital plan to look different from that of other city-produced webpages to convey the idea that it was something new. That meant a whole different set of procedures to build and maintain the site.

But others say creating and maintaining an online plan doesn't have to be a cumbersome process. "This is something the average planner with a little bit of web design training can undertake," says Bewtra, the Boston planner. "Obviously people understand there are things you can do with a large budget . . . but you can do quite a bit with a lean budget as well."

Potential pitfalls

Still, roadblocks can arise. Bewtra says there's a risk that the type of visually appealing widgets used to provide live updates within a plan could become defunct or face glitches over time. Stakeholders need to clearly decide who's responsible for website upkeep.

She also notes an even broader concern: the risk

that the web just feels more ephemeral than print. "You can't anticipate completely how information will be viewed in the coming years," she says. In other words, planners need to figure out how to archive and maintain their web-based plans for posterity.

Case in point: The last time Boulder updated its general plan, it presented the information online with lots of hyperlinks and searchable functionality. But when the city later revamped its entire website, much of that work vanished. "That's one of the challenges you find with things being fully embedded," says Lesli Ellis, AICP CEP, Boulder's comprehensive planning manager. "If you make changes to your system, you have to have update the plan too."

Reichman said one easy way to avoid this is to give the plan its own website that's separate from the rest of the city website. *Plan Houston's* website is supported by the same staff that maintains the city's website, "but it's not folded into the same Internet behemoth," Reichman says, which may protect it from any wholesale changes that occur to the city's website in the future.

Print lives on

Despite the shift to online presentations, print documents aren't dead quite yet.

The Centralina COG, for example, is among several planning departments that developed a magazine-style document to share with stakeholders and local elected leaders who "like to show it off," says Nance, the council's planning director. Those types of resources are also useful for community members who aren't comfortable with the Internet but still want to be informed about planning. "There are some folks who just don't operate that way," she says.

In Houston, the planning department knew from the onset that it wanted its plan to be housed online. But the city staff soon realized there wasn't an exact legal mechanism in place for the city council to approve a website. It had to develop a more traditional PDF as well, simply so the council could have a document to vote on.

And in Oklahoma City, even though the vision was always to have the plan appear on a dynamic website, the process began with creating a traditional print document as a way to help planners think about how to organize it. "It's distinct," says Butler of a physical document or a static PDF. "You know the beginning and the end and you can send it through the planning commission and city council." ■

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