

What Is Local Government Planning?

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This discussion guide describes the elements of planning as they apply to city and county governments.

Nature of the planning process

Governments at all levels plan. The federal government has the responsibility to anticipate the country's current and future needs in defense, economic stability and growth and many other areas. State governments look ahead to determine needs for transportation, welfare, education and other fields. Local governments must also develop plans; they adopt annual budgets, recommend bond issues and provide new services and facilities. Governmental planning pertains to a deliberate, organized process of governmental policy making and operations. Both officials and concerned individuals and groups need to share in such planning if it is to be an effective method for community improvement.

Planning consists of a systematic, continuous, forward-looking approach to meet the community's needs. It includes finding ways to fit a community's many activities and facilities into a workable, well-rounded whole. Planning improves communication and coordination among the many private decision makers and governments — local, state and federal.

Sound planning helps the community find workable solutions to real problems. It encourages decisions based on priorities and efficient execution of those decisions. The starting point begins with the community as it exists — its strengths, its shortcomings and its hopes.

As considered here, planning involves a local government process to help improve the quality of decision making in a community. The purpose, of course, is to make the community a better place to live. Planning assists both private and government decision makers from heads of families to administrative officials. It helps them identify community problems and suggest possible solutions.

The decision-making process involves the entire fabric of a community. Local government makes decisions that affect the private sector of the community — to make a zoning change, to add new educational services and facilities or to improve the water supply.

Public duties include electing officials, deciding bond issues and monitoring the actions of officials such as the appointment of administrative officers, the adoption of a budget, and the enactment of an ordinance.

Participants in the planning process

For years, planning was simply furnishing technical and professional advice to elected and administrative officials. Citizen participation constituted a part of the planning process primarily at the implementing or action stage.

The public, which was seldom invited to participate at the earliest stages, usually had only two choices — accept, or reject — the plans in total. For this reason, many plans lay for years on some back shelf gathering dust. The 1960s revealed that such an approach was insufficient. Concerned persons now realize that the planning process is as important as the public decision-making process of the community.

The chief parties are:

- The public, especially interested individuals and groups which may include business, labor, political parties, news media, churches, neighborhood associations and other areas.
- Elected and appointed officials (county judges, council members, planning commission members, etc.).
- The chief executive (mayor, city manager, etc.).
- Professional planners (staff employees and/or consultants).
- Administrative officials (city manager, county engineer, park director, school superintendent, health officer, etc.).
- Non-resident personnel of state and federal agencies.

Each group plays a vital role. Continual contact among these parties must be established and maintained at all stages of the process. Officials and planners, from the outset, need to enlist the help and cooperation of the public in gathering information and in identifying needs and setting priorities. Citizen participation is probably the most difficult part of the planning process, and it remains the most neglected.

Elected officials carry a fundamental responsibility since they establish, to a large degree, the social, political, and administrative climate within which the planning process functions. Their attitude will determine basically the success or failure of planning. They themselves must seek and enlist the active, steady cooperation and participation of the public, business leaders, news media and other governments — local, state, and federal. It is in this larger arena that the basic objectives and policies are defined and redefined. The elected officials then have the responsibility to determine specific, concrete programs and services for their local government by passing budgets and adopting ordinances or regulations.

Citizens also have responsibilities — individually and as a member of a group be it a church, civic group, business corporation or political party. At a minimum, the individual citizen must make a reasonable effort to know about local issues and even serve on a committee or public body from time to time if asked. In business, he must be willing to forego a profit when it is improperly at the expense of others or the public.

Area basis

The location of homes, industrial plants, stores, schools, churches and others is of vital importance to a local community because it affects the quality and convenience of living and the costs of private and public services. Three patterns are interwoven in the geographic distribution of the community that are of primary concern. They are the: 1) natural features; 2) economic and social life; and 3) political structure.

Each pattern influences the other two. Pronounced geographic features of the community often determine where certain functions may be located. Main transportation routes, notably railroads, often follow the path with the least grade. Steep slopes or marshes may hinder construction.

Economic and social patterns concern most people, who tend to live in neighborhoods with others similar to themselves. Retailers locate in a commercial area where they can better serve their customers. Manufacturers situate their plants where they can obtain the best overall advantages for transportation, raw materials and labor force.

The governmental pattern, a quiltwork of conflicting and overlapping jurisdictions, establishes the framework for providing public services and facilities and land development regulations such as zoning, subdivision regulations and building codes. This structure, highly complex, includes cities, counties, special districts, and state and federal agencies. The typical urban community has at least five governments serving its people — county, city, school district, state and federal. Such a pattern usually does not coincide with the realities of the economic and social community. Communication among these governments in the same locality is usually minimal; the activities of one are often contradictory to those of another.

Time span

Planning applies to situations that last over a period of time. There are essentially three lengths of time with which planning is concerned:

Period	Years
Long range	More than 20
Middle range	From five or six to 10 or 12
Short range	Up to five or six

The customary master or comprehensive plan presents land use, community facility and transportation plans for a 20- or 25-year period. However, experience indicates that the single distant target date (the "blueprint") has proven unsatisfactory. Although the long-range view continues to be important, two factors have encouraged a shorter time period as well. The majority of projects or programs take place in a shorter time, say within a decade. This is called middle-range planning. The community renewal programs and neighborhood plans of recent years are aimed at completion within 10 to 12 years. Short-range planning focuses on the scheduling of service or capital improvement programs. At this stage the operating department head and specialists gradually assume primary responsibility.

Planning is dynamic and open ended. There are no "final solutions" to achieve the "ideal" community. The function of planning is to look to the future to help alleviate real problems and to make the most of all potentials.

Scope and subject matter

The purpose of traditional local planning has been to design a physical framework for the change and development of the community. Such planning pertains to the type and intensity of land uses as well as the kind and location of public facilities such as transportation and utilities. Services, such as health and police protection, are beginning to use planning. Using health services as an example, the service phase means the quality, quantity and variety of medical aid provided, not just the site of a hospital complex. Today, many local governments engage in planning for:

- Land use.
- Public services and facilities
 - Services such as police, fire, water, sanitary sewers, streets, recreation, education and welfare;
 - Physical facilities for such services.
- Economic, social, and environmental conditions.
- Financial needs.
- Natural resources.
- Housing.

Action orientation

In recent years, officials have turned more and more to planners to help find solutions to public problems because of the scarcity of qualified professionals trained to identify and to seek alternatives and solutions to these problems. About the same time, citizens who wanted to improve their neighborhoods and communities began to organize and to search for ways they could influence public policies that concerned them. They often used planners. For these reasons, and to meet immediate policy needs, the planning function has been moving closer and closer to the policy-making centers of government, especially for chief executives.

Today, while long-range planning remains important, attention centers more and more on questions of current concern housing, transportation facilities, health services, etc. The desire of planners to accomplish long-range plans also has been a factor. Planners are realizing that plans must eventually be translated into concrete action and must be placed in annual budgets and bond issues if they are to be achieved.

Steps in the planning process

The chief steps, shown below, are (or at least should be) open to public scrutiny and review. Interested citizens should have the opportunity to comment and make suggestions at any step.

- Initially, the community recognizes a need. This may come about through a disaster or emergency, a growing level of discontent with community trends or from a desire to anticipate future needs and to work toward them.
- The community defines the situation. At this point, many communities seek professional help by obtaining consultants or by employing their own staff.
- Preliminary goals and objectives are established to serve as guide posts for the research and analysis that follows.
- Next, the techniques of research and analysis are fixed, the needed data are assembled and the analysis and conclusions are drawn.
- Throughout the research and analysis steps, the preliminary goals and objectives are redefined.
- Alternative courses of action or ways are prepared and evaluated against the goals and objectives.
- The community decides what it will do. It may choose one of the alternatives; it may select a combination of suggestions; it may take an entirely different approach; or it may decide to do nothing.
- Then the decision must be implemented. Usually the community must be willing to obtain qualified personnel and funds to accomplish the task.
- Throughout the previous steps the community should continually review and evaluate the decisions made and the work carried out.

These steps are cyclical in nature with feedback at and among all steps involving the public at large, elected and appointed administrative officials, and the planners.

Planning tools

Communities use instruments to implement planning. Some persons regard the land use planning tools as the only implementing means. This view is too limited, for many additional techniques or methods are available to shape and to carry out decisions. All such planning tools are designed to affect the decisions and actions of people. Some of these tools are:

- Service programs,
- Zoning ordinances,
- Subdivision ordinances,
- Building codes,
- Housing codes,
- Building or setback line ordinances,
- Annual operating budgets and
- Capital improvement programs.

The public, as individuals and groups, have means to carry out public policy other than through local government. Some people may argue that such ways are not planning tools because they may not fall within the responsibility of local government. Examples of quasi-public planning implementation instruments outside the formal structure of local government include a civic or religious body, homes association, citizens or civic association, covenant, community development corporation, and tenant union.

Limitations of planning

As with anything that people undertake, local government planning has shortcomings. Some of these are:

- People sometimes become so involved in planning that they overlook its primary purpose. They enjoy the discussion as an exercise instead of using it as a means to guide community improvement.
- The chief aim is to influence the actions of private citizens and groups in a manner to improve the quality of the community. Such influence is often minimal and imprecise.
- The scope of governmental authority may be too limited; it might not be authorized to carry out activities in a given field.
- The capacity of local government might be such that it cannot develop and achieve plans.

- Local governments are subject to political pressures, some of which may be undesirable.
- Many times the persons involved fail to view the situation in broad enough terms.
- While the community that uses planning in a sound manner will reap many benefits, it takes time and money to obtain the help of professional planners.
- Communities change slowly and it may take years to see some of the benefits. Patience is needed.
- Too often planning is viewed as an exercise between the professional planners and the elected officials with only lip service given to citizen participation.

Planning in Missouri

Missouri law reflects the planning of the 1920s. These statutes are concerned with things "physical" 1) land-use arrangements — agricultural, industrial, commercial and residential — and 2) physical improvements such as streets, parks, bridges, public buildings and public utilities. The principal implementing tools consist of public ownership and operation of streets, parks, public buildings, and some utilities, notably water and sewer, zoning and subdivision regulations.

Our communities, confronted with many challenges since World War II, have found new meaning and direction. Federal legislation has greatly influenced the enlarging scope, which in Missouri as in many states now incorporates numerous new aspects as one writer states:

Those who persist in viewing planning as restricted in scope to land use inquiries may be surprised to learn that the function is now much more broadly interpreted. Planners must also concern themselves with the many means of implementing plans, including the consolidation of codes and ordinances, development of interjurisdictional means of cooperation, urban renewal programs, capital investment budgets, the preparation of zoning ordinances and other devices for land use regulation, and the day-to-day administration of policies, ordinances, codes and other legal and administrative mandates. (James M. Banovetz, ed., *Man and the Modern City*, Washington, D. C., The International City Management Association, 1971, p. 298).

In recent years, functional planning for transportation (highways), law enforcement and health services have become prominent. In the decade ahead, such planning will undoubtedly encompass many more fields.

In the past, the chief planning document was the land-use type of master or comprehensive plan with the implementing tools already mentioned. Professional planners and many others are beginning to realize that the zoning ordinance, subdivision regulations, and the capital budget make up only a fraction of the community's responsibility. Community leaders are realizing that planning also involves environmental, economic and social conditions as well as land use and locational relationships. Planning is as broad as the area of primary public concern.

Legal basis in Missouri

Like any public activity, local government planning has a legal framework based on the state constitution, state statutes, and charters for constitutional charter cities. The state statutes on local government planning are numbered as follows:

Local Unit	Statute
City	Chapter 89.010 to 89.480
County	Chapter 64.510 to 64.690; 64.800 to 64.905
Regional planning commission	Chapter 251.150 to 251.440

Other suggested materials

Handbook for Planning Commissioners in Missouri, MU Missouri Local Government Handbook Series, and MU Publication MP199, *A Three County Planning Program*.

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