

What is a Comprehensive Plan?



The Comprehensive Planning Law was enacted in 1999 (see section 66.1001, Wis. Stats.). Sometimes referred to as the “smart growth law,” the Comprehensive Planning Law does not mandate how a community should grow, rather it leaves such decisions up to local communities.

Comprehensive Planning Law defines a comprehensive plan as containing at least nine elements:

1. Issues and Opportunities
2. Agricultural, Natural and Cultural Resources
3. Economic Development
4. Housing
5. Intergovernmental Cooperation
6. Transportation
7. Land Use
8. Utilities and Community Facilities
9. Implementation

Consistency Requirement

Beginning on January 1, 2010, if a local governmental unit enacts or amends an official mapping, land division, or zoning ordinance, the enactment or amendment ordinance must be consistent with that community’s comprehensive plan.

Plan Update

Comprehensive plans must be updated no less than once every 10 years. However, the law does not define update. A thorough update of background information and a public participatory process to evaluate plan vision, goals, objectives, policies, and programs is recommended.

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Benefits of Comprehensive Planning

- Understands the past and present – a plan collects useful information about the community, such as historical trends, present conditions, and (by studying trends) where it is headed.
- Lays out a roadmap to the future – a plan puts down on paper a community’s goals, objectives values, and aspirations – its vision for the future – and the steps needed to achieve these things.
- Guides land use regulations – provides a rational basis for land use regulations and makes land use decisions more predictable.
- Is proactive rather than reactive – a plan helps communities to identify and resolve issues early on, before they become conflicts.
- Coordinates community activity – a comprehensive plan should take into account all of a community’s policies, programs, departments, initiatives, services, plans, regulations, responsibilities, and systems.
- Saves money \$\$\$ – a plan identifies functions within a jurisdiction or between jurisdictions that conflict, are duplicated, or could be strengthened through coordination. For example, a town and a school district could jointly own and maintain a park and playground. Several towns could share road maintenance equipment, building storage or other needs.
- Preserves local control – the comprehensive plan promotes a bottom-up, rather than a top-down approach. The state does not adopt or certify a local comprehensive plan. Instead, a plan must be adopted by a community’s governing body.
- Preserves local autonomy - the Comprehensive Planning Law does not alter the legal relationship between jurisdictions. Local governments continue to have the same powers and authority over land use that they had before the law was passed.
- Promotes property rights – the Comprehensive Planning Law makes planning more transparent and open to the public, including landowners, than prior to the law.
- Promotes economic development – planning helps communities retain existing businesses, attract new ones, revitalize downtowns, develop housing for workers, and recommend steps to improve infrastructure capacity.
- Promotes intergovernmental cooperation – through the required Intergovernmental Cooperation Element, communities identify existing cooperation between jurisdictions, identify existing or potential conflicts, and describe processes to resolve these conflicts.
- Protects resources – planning helps protect the things a community treasures most, including historic buildings, forests, farmland, bluff areas, wetlands, scenic vistas, downtown main streets, lakes, rivers, village squares, etc.