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Do Comprehensive Plans Matter?*

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"You can save what you love best about the place you live while accommodating and attracting desirable growth if you begin with a sound comprehensive plan."

New York Planning Federation, 1996¹

What is the Issue?

Comprehensive planning has often been more of an ideal than a routine practice. The authority to undertake comprehensive planning [See pullout] is identified in New York State law as "among the most important powers and duties" of municipalities. In 1986, however, barely half of the state's towns and villages had adopted comprehensive plans. This profile has changed over time: two-thirds of villages and almost three-quarters of towns now report adopting comprehensive plans. The use of other basic land use planning tools (zoning, planning boards, subdivision regulations, site plan reviews) is now also widespread.²

Does this mean that NYS residents are now in a better position to "save what they love best..." about their communities? Unfortunately, little if any systematic information has been collected about the quality, age, use, or effectiveness of municipal comprehensive plans in New York State. Merely tracking or monitoring the increased use of planning tools is at best a thin indicator of their impact on community development. The limited empirical research on plan quality and effectiveness is mixed rather than resounding in its reassurance, with conclusions about plans ranging from "somewhat weak"³ or "weak analytically and substantively"⁴ to increasingly "important... as a governing land use document."⁵ The bottom line for NYS is a lack of empirical evidence.

Research Methods

To obtain better information about comprehensive planning, CaRDI mailed a survey to a sample of NYS's planning board chairpersons in November 2007. The survey focused on the

status and role of local comprehensive planning. A response rate of 64% (95 of 149 mailed) was achieved. Statistical tests of these responses show that, in terms of municipal size and use of planning tools, the responding municipalities are representative of all NYS municipalities that have planning boards.

A comprehensive plan articulates goals and approaches pertaining to "the immediate and long-range protection, enhancement, growth and development" of the municipality. Plans may cover a broad array of topics, but they focus on implications for the built and natural environments, public infrastructure, and related land use issues. State law stipulates that municipalities that adopt comprehensive plans must ensure all land use regulations are "in accordance" with it.

Survey Results

The survey results are consistent with prior data that shows that about 70% of NYS municipalities with planning boards have adopted comprehensive plans. Our results also show that comprehensive planning is not entirely missing in the remaining 30% of municipalities. Thirteen percent of respondents report that their municipality has a comprehensive plan, but that it has not been formally adopted.

Because comprehensive plans are created during concentrated periods of special effort, communities working on plans often seek professional help. Nevertheless, 24% of the respondents with comprehensive plans reported no involvement by professional planners, consistent with 2002 research that found about a quarter of municipalities with planning boards lacked "satisfactory" access to professional planning assistance. Where professional planners were involved, the use of private consulting planners outstripped that of public sector planners by more than twofold. It seems likely that access to skilled professionals would influence both the likelihood of undertaking a plan as well as its quality.

Consistency between zoning regulations and a comprehensive plan serves as a key indicator of the plan's role in shaping land use. While NYS requires that local zoning be "in accordance" with comprehensive plans, the link between the two land use tools is not as close as might be expected. According to statewide data, 140 villages, 5 cities, and 103 towns have zoning but lack a written comprehensive plan. More subjectively, only 22% of responding planning board chairs felt zoning was "completely" consistent with the comprehensive plan, though more than half felt it was

¹ David Church & Cori Traub. 2002. *A Practical Guide to Comprehensive Planning*. NY Planning Federation, 2nd edition. See <http://www.nypf.org/publications.htm>

² See [www.senate.state.ny.us/SenateReports.nsf/6DD2F2819E02BB6185256EBD004E2D20/DD3D4F72731A168B852574C0004EDAEB/\\$file/luac08reportlowres.pdf](http://www.senate.state.ny.us/SenateReports.nsf/6DD2F2819E02BB6185256EBD004E2D20/DD3D4F72731A168B852574C0004EDAEB/$file/luac08reportlowres.pdf)

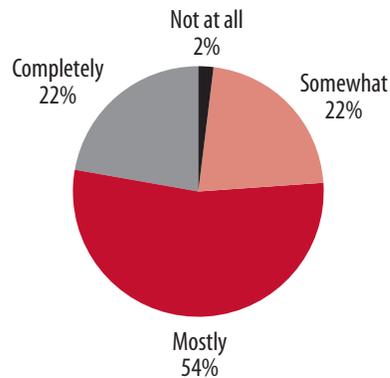
³ P. Berke, M. Backhurst, M. Day, N. Ericksen, L. Laurian, J. Crawford and J. Dixon. 2006. "What makes plan implementation successful?" *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, 33:581-600.

⁴ R. Burby. 2003. "Making plans that matter", *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 69(1):33-49.

⁵ E. Sullivan. 2000. "The evolving role of the comprehensive plan", *Urban Lawyer*, 32(4):813-837.

“mostly” consistent. Less affirmatively, nearly one in four thought zoning was only “somewhat” consistent (Figure 1.)

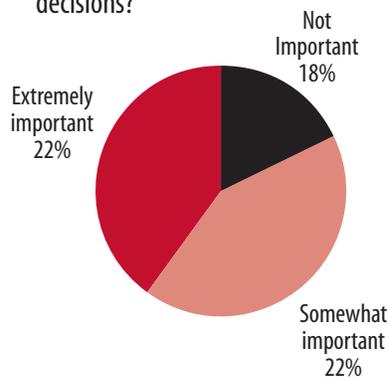
Figure 1: If you have zoning how consistent is it with your comprehensive plan?



One of the reasons for this lack of consistency is that many plans are seriously outdated. Though 56% of plans have been formally revised or adopted since 2000, another 22% predate 1990. About this same proportion (27%) were said to require “major revisions”. Only 13% were felt by the responding board chairs to need no revisions.

Are comprehensive plans actually used in planning board deliberations? Nearly a third (31%) of planning board chairs with comprehensive plans said the plan had “seldom or never” been referenced during board meetings during the prior year. However, a robust 75% felt they were personally “very familiar” with their plan, and 85% thought that at least some other board members were “familiar” with it. Board chairs weighed in directly on the central question, “How important is the plan in guiding board decisions?” As shown in Figure 2, a sizeable minority (40%) said the plan was “extremely important” in this regard, while just under a fifth (18%) dismissed its importance altogether.

Figure 2: How important is the plan in guiding board decisions?



Board chairs with plans were asked which topics were addressed in their comprehensive plans, as these are suggested but not mandated in state law. As shown in Table 1, only four of the listed topics were said to be addressed in 80% or more of the plans. Growth and development (92%) and the location and intensity of proposed uses (92%) were the most frequently cited topics among those that had comprehensive plans. Half or fewer of the plans addressed regional needs, affordable housing, educational facilities, health/emergency service facilities, or local economic development. Two of these (local economic development and affordable housing) were also among the lowest ranked by all respondents in a related question, “How well does your municipality plan for each topic?”. Board chairs who assigned greater importance to local economic issues like tax base, jobs and affordable housing were more likely to give poor marks to local planning in multiple topical areas.

Table 1: Which topics are addressed in your comprehensive plans?

Growth & development	92%
Location/intensity of proposed uses	92%
Recreation and park land	80%
Commercial/industrial facilities	80%
Plan implementation	76%
Agricultural uses	72%
Historical & cultural resources	71%
Utility infrastructure	66%
Future housing	64%
Population/socioeconomic trends	62%
Transportation	62%
Coastal/natural/sensitive areas	56%
Regional needs/issues	49%
Affordable housing	47%
Health/emergency service facilities	44%
Educational facilities	40%
Local economic development	40%

Discussion and Conclusions

These findings offer new insights into the scope, effectiveness, and impact of local comprehensive planning in New York State. The data suggest that for 25-50% of the communities with comprehensive plans in place, these plans serve as dynamic, evolving and functional guides to municipal efforts to shape the community’s future. In 20-25% of communities, existing plans appear to be too old, too ignored, or too irrelevant to be of use as a guide to the future. To realize the full rewards of good planning, we recommend that the state and other technical assistance providers assist local leaders to overcome the two most often identified barriers to “adopting, revising, or putting a plan to better use”: the sheer complexity of the process, and the associated costs.

* Heidi Mouillesseaux-Kunzman serves as guest editor on this issue.

