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Organization of the Planning Program

Anything that gets done in Vermont is a result of lots of effort.
—Dorothy Canfield Fisher

A planning program provides a systematic way for the planning commission to develop or revise the plan. The program will provide a blueprint for action and will insure that progress is made in an orderly and logical way.

To get started on developing a plan, the municipality must determine whether the plan or a major revision to the plan is needed. This decision is usually made by the planning commission. However, the impetus for the decision sometimes comes from other sources. The selectboard may decide that planning is needed to manage the town better. A group of citizens concerned about the changes occurring in the community may demand an assessment of the town's problems and the development of a plan to remedy them. The municipal planning staff may find the existing plan outdated and an insufficient guide to resolving current issues.

Whatever the source of the demand for the plan, it is the planning commission that must be responsible for its development. This chapter describes how the planning commission can organize itself to develop the plan, discusses how a planning program should be set up, what should be considered in a major revision to an existing plan, and what sources are available for assistance.

Planning commissioners should keep in mind that a plan is never really a finished product, but rather a cut in time, indicating where the town is at within a continuous process. As imperfect as a plan may seem to the commissioners who developed it, it is better than no plan in providing some guidance for community leaders. Since the plan will be updated at least every five years, if not more frequently, there is ample opportunity to refine it.

4.1 Getting Started

4.2 Designing the Planning Program

4.2.1 *Outline the Process*

The first step in designing the program is to outline the process that your community will follow. Each community should develop its own process based on how citizens will be involved, how much information is available, the extent of revisions required, and specific objectives for the new plan. For example, some communities may have an extensive public participation effort—through forums, surveys, media presentation—at the beginning of the process. Others may delay public participation until they have prepared maps and collected background data. A community may decide that the best approach is to divide the town up into planning areas to focus on neighborhood issues. If this were the case, town planners would want to establish the boundaries of these planning areas early in the process.

Regardless of the specific approach of each municipality, there are general steps that every process for the development of a plan should contain:

1. preliminary assessment of community aspirations, issues, and needs
2. collection and analysis of background information
3. establishment of goals and objectives
4. development of the plan
5. preparation of an implementation program
6. public review and comment
7. adoption process

4.2.2 *Set the Work Schedule*

The municipality should decide how each step in the process will be accomplished. What are the specific tasks involved? Who will be responsible for them? How much time should be allowed? Chapter 5 will explain the tasks involved in these steps in more detail. The planning commission should review that chapter and then itemize the tasks that will meet their specific needs. Next to each task the commission should list who will be responsible for carrying it out and the estimated time it will take. See Table 4.1.

It is important to be clear about what the planning commission will do and what individual commissioners, special subcommittees, staff, other technical advisors, and consultants will do. Commissioners may be assigned the responsibility for conducting surveys, doing research, holding informal discussions, and drafting sections

of the plan. Before assignments are made, the municipal commission should contact the regional planning commission to discuss what assistance is available. If the municipality has its own planning staff, consider the staff's existing work load and ability to undertake specific tasks. If it appoints subcommittees, the planning commission should make clear what is expected of them and when their work is due. The commission should stay in close contact with the committees by assigning a commission member to the committee or by holding regular joint sessions.

Table 4.1
SAMPLE WORK SCHEDULE
FOR TOWN PLAN

STEP	TASK	RESPONSIBILITY	SCHEDULE
<i>Preliminary Assessment</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prepare for public discussion 2. Hold public discussion 3. Hold planning commission meeting; identify issues 	PC/RPC PC/RPC PC/RPC	Weeks 1, 2 Week 3 Week 4
<i>Collect and Analyze Data</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Town history 2. Population, housing, economy, fiscal conditions 3. Base map preparation 4. Physical conditions 5. Land use and special features 6. Community facilities and services 7. Summary—needs and options 	Historical Society RPC Tax Map Consultant Intern, RPC Intern, RPC, PC PC/RPC PC/RPC	Weeks 5-8 Weeks 5-8 Weeks 1-4 Weeks 9-12 Weeks 9-12 Weeks 9-12 Weeks 13-16
<i>Goals and Objectives</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prepare draft goals 2. Hold public discussion 3. Finalize goals 	PC/RPC PC/RPC PC	Weeks 17,18 Week 20 Week 22
<i>Preparation of Plans</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prepare land use plan 2. Prepare transportation plan 3. Prepare community facilities plan 	PC/RPC PC/RPC PC/RPC	Weeks 23-26 Weeks 27-30 Weeks 31-34
<i>Implementation Program</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Identify actions 5. Schedule actions and estimate 	PC/RPC PC/RPC	Weeks 35-36 Weeks 37-38
<i>Public Discussion</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hold neighborhood discussions 2. Review comments and amend plan 	PC members PC/RPC	Weeks 35-36 Weeks 42-45
<i>Adoption Process</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Planning commission notice, hearing, and review 2. Selectmen's review and hearing 3. Selectmen adopt 	PC Selectmen Selectmen	Weeks 46-49 Weeks 54-57 Week 57

This schedule assumes that the town obtains assistance from the regional planning commission and a student intern for data collection, mapping, and plan preparation.

PC—Planning commission RPC—Regional Planning Commission

The work schedule will clarify what each person or group's responsibility will be and the approximate time the process will take. The community may wish to coordinate the schedule with established community events, such as a town meeting or a major public gathering. The mandatory time requirements for adoption of plans in **24 V.S.A. §§4384 and 4385** should be considered if the community's objective is to have the plan in effect by a certain date. Generally, however, the main purpose of a schedule is to insure that progress is made.

4.2.3 Determine the Planning Period

It is important to determine what time period the plan will cover. Five years? Ten years? Twenty years? According to **24 V.S.A. chapter 117**, plans expire every five years. This requirement does not limit a plan to a five-year period, however. Most plans cover immediate, short-range needs as well as long-term objectives. Plans should not cover too long a period or they will not be used. Neither should plans be short-sighted or the actions of today could interfere with solutions to long-range needs. The planning period will vary from community to community depending on local and regional conditions and trends in growth and development.

The planning period also varies for different objectives within a community. The parts of a community exist in varying time cycles. Trees can take up to 100 years to mature. Road construction takes a much shorter period of time. The fact that some issues have longer timeframes than others should be taken into consideration when planning.

4.2.4 Prepare a Public Participation Program

The people in the community will benefit from planning and will shape the community's future. Therefore, it is essential that they be involved in designing the plan. To begin with, the people can articulate the community's values on which the plan is based. They also know most about community needs. They perceive what works well and what doesn't work in the community today. This participation in the exchange of information and ideas will result in more effective actions and broader support. By involving people in the planning process, the commission will make the plan a more pertinent and usable document. The people will also have a greater

sense of involvement and control in the community's future. Their commitment and understanding will help in adopting and implementing the plan.

The planning commission must weigh what it learns from the public participation process with other factors. Stated community needs must be balanced with budget constraints; competing interests must be balanced; and special interest groups and neighborhood issues should be evaluated along with broader municipal interests.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

Who should be involved? Everyone. Changes made to the statute in 1988 significantly increase the focus on citizen participation. In preparing a plan, the planning commission should solicit involvement throughout the process. It is directed to offer informal working sessions that meet the needs of the public, and should otherwise create an environment that offers opportunities for the public to get involved. **24 V.S.A. §4384.**

While not everyone will be interested in contributing to the planning process, the planning commission should be creative in developing methods that will encourage as many people as possible to participate. They should reach out to all residents - to those in the various geographic areas of the town, to those of differing backgrounds, to citizens' groups, to special interest groups, and to local officials.

Residents: All residents of the community should be informed about the plan and its progress. Their comments and ideas should be solicited in the process. These people will help to define community values, needs, goals, and objectives. As broad a representation as possible from the resident population is needed to make the plan effective. In addition, most communities find that there is a great variety of skills and expertise represented by their residents and that they are a tremendous resource.

Local officials: Local officials will be valuable sources not only for information but also for public goals, policies, and implementation strategies. These officials include the school board, road commissioner, recreation committee, library committee, and, in larger municipalities, department heads. Local officials also will be responsible for implementing certain components of the plan through such means as the expenditure of funds or provision of a new service. Therefore, their involvement in its development is important.

The legislative body, as elected officials, should be closely

involved in the plan. The support of its members can influence the acceptance and successful implementation of the plan. Remember that ultimately it is the legislative body that must adopt the plan, the implementing regulations, and a capital budget and program.

Citizens' groups: Consider involving various interest groups in the community including business and civic organizations, environmental groups, garden clubs, the local grange, and the historical society. These groups could collect and study information on a variety of topics and could assist in communicating the purposes and policies of the plan to the larger citizenry.

People with special interests: It is a good idea to discuss with different segments of the population the aspects of the plan that affect them. For example, the farmers should help to develop and review the proposals for farmland. Lakeshore property owners should be informed of proposed shoreline uses. Local businesses should participate in discussions of future commercial growth. Low-income groups should be involved in assessing housing needs. A major developer should be consulted as to his or her plans and informed of the community's plan as well. The interests of these people should be weighed with the interests of the community as a whole.

AT WHAT POINTS IN THE PROCESS SHOULD THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATE?

There is an opportunity for public participation in all stages of the process—preliminary assessment, collection of background information, goal formulation, development of plans and implementation strategies, and adoption. The planning commission should assimilate and evaluate what it hears from the public at each stage.

HOW CAN THE EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION AND IDEAS BE PROMOTED?

The methods of public participation will depend on budgetary considerations; the stages at which public participation is to occur, the ability of the commission, its staff, or consultants to carry out the effort; and the degree to which citizens are already organized in the community. A brief summary of methods of public participation is discussed below:

Surveys: A survey is a useful device for gathering public opinion about community values, goals and objectives, and future needs. If a community wants the results to be representative and

statistically valid, then the sampling technique used is important. Professional help may be necessary. Some communities are more informal in their approach; they distribute surveys at town meeting or conduct informal polls. Keep in mind that surveys are useful to

EXAMPLE—SURVEYS

The Town of Colchester conducted a random sample phone survey of residents. The purpose of the survey was to determine the town's high priority planning issues that the new town plan should address. Volunteers conducted the survey; many respondents expressed appreciation for being included.

inform people as well as to collect opinions.

Media: Newspapers, newsletters, radio, commercial television, public television, and cable television are good vehicles for communicating planning information and providing forums for debate. For good public relations it is extremely important that the information presented for publication is accurate. The planning commission may want to prepare its own articles and news releases on the plan for local and state newspapers.

Committees: Many communities use a committee approach to collect information, brainstorm issues, and establish goals and objectives. Committees can be selected according to issues or geographical areas of the town. Committees can be effective if their responsibilities and agendas are identified and agreed upon in advance, if the time frame and reporting requirements are clear, if the leadership is carefully chosen, and if coordination with the planning commission is maintained. The planning commission is responsible for integrating the work of the committees and to consider it within a broader community context. When creating committees, it is helpful to try to include members who have differing viewpoints so that the final committee report represents

EXAMPLE—COMMITTEES

The planning commission of the Town of Charlotte set up eight committees to work on major issues confronting the town. Each committee was given a specific list of tasks, a schedule, background information, and a reporting form. The work of the committees was integrated by the planning commission and used in rewriting the town plan.

the broad range of community interests.

Workshops and forums: Workshops or public forums are often used to present information and obtain public feedback on a particular topic or series of topics. They are useful for clarifying

goals, prioritizing issues, exchanging ideas, and resolving conflicts. It is important that the purpose of the workshop is identified in

EXAMPLE—WORKSHOPS

The planning commission of the Town of Stowe sponsored a series of well-attended planning workshops on community character and growth. The workshops were designed to inform the public of planning issues and provide the planning commission with information to use in the development of a new town plan.

advance and that the session is structured to achieve that purpose.

Public hearings: Chapter 117 requires that a minimum of two public hearings be held to provide maximum opportunity for the public to comment on plans before their adoption. However, most communities find that more hearings are necessary because of changes that are made to the plans, conflicts that arise, and strong public interest.

Existing community events: Another option for communicating ideas and for public input is to make use of social gatherings that are sponsored by other organizations within the community, such as a chicken pot pie supper or a local fair. The planning commission could set up a major display with questions and surveys. This is particularly good as there is a captive audience. It is important that the planning commission work very closely with the sponsoring organization, such as the school, the church, the fire department.

4.2.5 *Plan the Budget*

A planning budget should be established that includes costs for mapping, hiring consultants, conducting special studies, surveying, holding workshops, and printing the plan itself. Funding sources could include municipal budgets, contributions, or grant applications. In addition, the state's Municipal and Regional Planning Fund was specifically created to financially assist municipal planning efforts. Finally, additional technical assistance may be provided by regional planning commissions, nonprofit organizations, and state agencies. Because of municipal budgeting cycles, most planning commissions will have to anticipate their expenses in advance if they wish to use municipal funds.

When contracting for specific technical assistance, the planning commission should put the tasks out to bid. This should ensure that the work is done at a reasonable cost. While it may be difficult

to accurately predict the costs, discussions with potential bidders may help make a reasonable estimate.

4.2.6 Coordinate with Adjacent Towns, the Region and State Agencies

At this early stage, adjoining and nearby municipalities should be notified that a plan is being developed or revised and asked for information on their own planning and development activities. Many planning issues transcend municipal boundaries, and some municipalities share facilities and services such as sewage treatment facilities and water supplies.

Just as the growth and development trends within a region affect a municipality, the planning decisions of a single community can affect the entire region. Therefore all municipalities developing a plan should contact their regional planning commission. The regional planning commission can also assist with data collection, data analysis, development of goals and policies, implementation strategies, and coordination with other municipalities.

The 1988 changes to the statute create a structure to facilitate coordination between town, regional, and state agency plans. The purpose of this coordination is to identify and resolve differences in land use planning as early as possible, thereby reducing conflict in the permitting process and in decisions on expenditures of public funds.

Municipal planning: One of the required elements of the municipal plan requires a "statement indicating how the plan relates to... adjacent municipalities, areas, and the region." **24 V.S.A. §4382(a)**. To coordinate at the local level, a planning commission should begin by obtaining and reviewing the plans of adjacent municipalities as part of the information collection and analysis phase. If conflicts are identified, it is usually best to try to resolve them directly with that municipality. If that fails, the statute encourages municipalities to work with the regional planning commission or the Council of Regional Commissions to resolve the dispute.

Regional planning: The municipal planning commission should review the regional plan. If conflicts are identified, the planning commission should try to resolve the issues directly with the regional planning commission. If a conflict cannot be resolved informally, either the regional planning commission or a town may appeal to the Council of Regional Commissions. **24 V.S.A. §4476**.

State agency planning: State agencies that have an impact on land use are required to develop land use plans, and these plans are required to be compatible with approved municipal plans.

Municipalities should review these agency plans for compatibility with their own plan. Again, conflicts may be resolved directly with the particular agency, or through an appeals process to the Council of Regional Commissions. **24 V.S.A. §4305d.**

4.3 Keeping the Plan Current

4.3.1 Evaluations

Each community will have its own unique circumstances which will determine the extent and type of revisions it will need to make to its plan over time. Some will need to make amendments to the plan long before it expires. Others will find that the plan was adequate over the 5 year period, but needs some changes before it can be readopted for the next 5 years. And some communities will find that a total re-write of the plan will be necessary to meet community needs.

The extent of the changes to be made can be determined from evaluations of the plan that have been done since it was adopted. Evaluations should be conducted regularly, and not just when the plan is due to expire. In these evaluations, municipalities should consider the changes that have occurred in the community, new issues that have arisen, and the effectiveness and adequacy of the existing plan and implementation measures. Based on the evaluation, the municipality may decide whether to amend, readopt, or re-write the plan. Whatever the municipality's course of action, those involved will have to consider their information needs, and the process they will follow to make the necessary changes.

4.3.2 Updating Requirements

All municipalities are required by Chapter 117 to review and update the information on which their plans are based every five years and to consider this information when evaluating their current plan. **24 V.S.A. §4387.**

The information that should be updated includes:

- statistical data on population, housing, the economy, and trends in land development
- data on community facilities and services, including current usage, remaining capacity, identified needs, and planned improvements
- land use maps
- fiscal conditions
- roadway traffic and safety conditions

- identified needs
- planned improvements

4.3.3 Expand the Data Base

Municipalities may wish to expand their data base to address new issues or to provide better background information on existing issues. For example, strip commercial development may be emerging as a problem requiring recommendations for action in the plan. The town may then decide it needs more restrictions on land use and access along the highway. Data on curb cuts, traffic congestion, accidents, and land use changes should be added to the plan to support land use policy changes and access controls. In another example, a town may have a policy of protecting natural areas, yet the current plan has no information on natural areas. An amendment might include a natural areas inventory.

4.3.4 Reassess Goals and Objectives

The goals and objectives stated in the plan should also be evaluated every five years. New information, from statistical data or community surveys, may show that the goals and objectives no longer reflect community values or needs. Perhaps the goals are too vague and have not been useful guides for regulatory actions or Act 250 reviews. Or maybe the long-range goals are still appropriate, but the short-range objectives need to be changed to reflect new conditions. Changes may not be required in every case; the goals and objectives may still be suitable.

4.3.5 Revise Implementation Program

The implementation program sets forth the short-term actions (up to five years) that will carry out long-range goals and objectives. At the end of five years, the program will need to be revised. Certain actions will have been completed. Steps that have not been taken will need to be evaluated. Were they impractical? Were they under-funded? Did they lack community support? To respond to new issues or address unmet needs, new strategies will need to be developed.

4.3.6 Focus on Geographic Areas

When they have amended their plans, several municipalities in Vermont have divided their communities into planning areas. The boundaries of these areas have been based on neighborhoods, natural boundaries, or built-up versus rural areas. The use of

planning areas may help in examining the special issues of unique geographical areas. One community is proposing to vary its standards for subdivision review from one area to another to reflect differing development characteristics and facilities and service needs.

A plan amendment may focus on a geographical area requiring special treatment. For example, an urban waterfront may need a revitalization strategy; flood plains may need to be redesigned after a severe flood; or an historic village may need a design plan.

4.3.7 Focus on Topics

Communities may find that their original plan did not adequately address a certain topic, such as housing or public facilities. Or perhaps a new topic has emerged as an important issue that calls for further data collection and analysis and new strategies. If other sections of the plan still seem relevant and up to date, a community may prefer to focus on one or two topics rather than overhaul the entire plan. The community may wish to form a special task force to address the issue in detail.

4.3.8 Revise the Format

Often a community will find that the organization of its plan makes it difficult to use. The plan may sit on the shelf instead of serving as a constant guide. Perhaps the policies are not easily referenced or an implementation strategy may be difficult to locate. The timing and responsibility for implementation may not be clear. In the amendment process, the suitability of the current format should be evaluated. Some municipalities prefer to organize their plans by topic (housing, transportation, environment, and so on). Others use the order in which the plan was developed (background information, goals and objectives, plans and strategies). Still others put the goals first, plans and strategies second, and supporting data last. Whatever order you select, the format should be understandable and the content carefully indexed to make the plan easy to use.

4.4 Sources and Uses of Technical Help

4.4.1 Regional Planning Commissions

The regional planning commissions are valuable sources for information and technical help. They have statistical data and geographic information systems (GIS) mapping capabilities that can be used in the development of the municipal plan. (See Section

5.8 of this manual for a discussion of GIS.) They can help you prepare the plan, analyze issues, develop policies and strategies, and organize the effort. Each commission provides technical assistance within the limits of its resources.

4.4.2 Staff

Municipalities with professional planning staff will usually give the staff the responsibility for organizing the development of the plan. The staff's time must be balanced between the plan and other activities, especially application reviews. The commission must set clear priorities to assist the staff in budgeting its time.

4.4.3 Conservation Commissions

In 1977 Vermont passed legislation enabling towns to establish conservation commissions. **24 V.S.A §4501**. The major mission of a conservation commission is to look after the community's natural resources. In carrying out this charge, these commissions can conduct inventories of the town's resources, identify unique areas, work on natural resource sections of the plan and other similar type projects for the planning commission. They can also assist and make recommendations to the planning commission in the review and evaluation of development proposals. As a means of providing effective communication between the planning and conservation commissions, a joint member can be appointed.

4.4.4 Planning Consultants

A planning consultant may be hired to provide expertise not available locally at the time it is needed. The planning commission should decide the tasks for which a consultant is needed. It should establish a budget, time frame, and reporting requirements. It should then send a Request for Proposal to qualified consultants, a list of whom can be obtained from the regional planning commission. Finally, the planning commission, in conjunction with planning staff and/or a member of the legislative body, should interview candidates to evaluate their credentials, their compatibility with the commission and staff, and the suitability of their proposals.

4.4.5 Federal and State Agencies

Federal and state government agencies can provide data as well as technical assistance to municipal planning commissions. As part

of the state agency planning process, many state agencies are developing specific programs and information to assist municipal planning commissions. Some of this information is routinely distributed to the regional planning commissions for use in regional and town planning, and can be requested from them. Contact your regional planning commission to find out what information is available for distribution. Other information can be requested directly from the agencies. Chapter 5 describes the types of information provided by the agencies that are most often used by municipal planning commissions. Appendix B gives the addresses and phone numbers of these agencies.

4.4.6 Colleges and Universities

Colleges and the University of Vermont are good sources of data and technical assistance. The School of Natural Resources at the University of Vermont has a faculty of planners, foresters, wildlife biologists, and other technical people. Its Geographic Informative Systems laboratory offers computer mapping services for a fee. The Center for Rural Studies at the university offers assistance in data collection and analysis. Fees may be charged there as well, depending on the request. Other faculty at other colleges around the state may have skills in planning and planning-related fields.

4.4.7 Interns

Interns from colleges or universities can be helpful in performing certain data collection and analysis tasks. Planning commissions should remember, however, that these interns are not professional planners. Whenever possible the commission should help a student earn credit for his or her work or should pay a stipend to provide an incentive for the intern's continued involvement. Some communities have found the work of interns to be very valuable in the development of the plan.

4.4.8 Other

There are many other local and regional organizations that can provide technical help to the planning commission. Among these are land trusts, regional development corporations, community action agencies, conservation groups, and non-profit housing organizations. See Appendix B of this manual for a list of resource organizations.