

Creating the Township Plan

Zoning is the primary tool that Ohio townships can use to manage growth and development. In Ohio – like most states – the practice of local zoning is to be “in accordance with a comprehensive plan”. Nonetheless, the Ohio Revised Code does not specifically define what constitutes a comprehensive plan, and recent Ohio court decisions have liberally interpreted what is required for local communities to meet this basic threshold.

Today, most Ohio townships that administer zoning do not have a separate systematic, up-to-date study that provides a rationale and justification for the zoning pattern, i.e., a true comprehensive plan. In many townships, the zoning map is locally regarded as “the plan” on which zoning authority is based. Nonetheless, if a township completes a truly meaningful comprehensive planning process, and the findings of that plan are clearly linked to the zoning resolution, the process of zoning will be more efficient, effective – and resistant to legal challenges.

Many township residents, citizen board members and officials are reluctant to embrace a planning process, due to its perceived length, complexity and expense. The important point is that to be usable, the planning process must be kept as basic, simple and down-to-earth as possible. Many local planning

processes, as practiced in the past, do not meet this test.

Over the past decade, numerous local communities have incorporated the principles of strategic planning, which has been used by private sector entities and corporations for years, into the public sector comprehensive planning process.

Strategic planning starts with a simple basic truth: at its most fundamental level, the process of planning for the future involves providing answers to three (3) basic questions:

*Where Are We Now?
Where Do We Want To Be?
How Do We Get There?*

If these questions are answered in a clear, concise, comprehensive and inclusive manner, then planning has taken place and the resultant product provides a true roadmap for the future. These questions can provide a viable structure for a township land use/comprehensive plan.

Answering the first question commonly involves the evaluation of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, commonly termed the SWOT factors. The culmination of the SWOT analysis (sometimes called the environmental scan) is the identification of the key issues relevant to the future physical development of the area. During a true SWOT analysis, the data search is focused on material that is directly relevant to the

four (4) factors. For a township land use plan, these would likely include land market analysis; interviews and/or focus groups attended by those directly involved with local land development; and relevant Census data. A common weakness found in many traditional comprehensive plans is data overload, i.e., the inclusion of too much commonly available data, some of which may be of limited actual use in formulating the issues.

The SWOT analysis and the identified issues form the basis for responding to the second question (Where do we want to be?). Simply stated, what are the goals we should pursue to maximize strengths and opportunities; address and minimize weaknesses and threats; and capitalize on those initiatives which trends indicate may be on the horizon.

This process is sometimes called visioning. Ironically, it is usually difficult to accomplish internally and commonly calls for use of an outside facilitator.

Traditional comprehensive planning typically calls for a 20-year planning horizon. Although strategic planning acknowledges such a time frame, the focus is on interim 10-year and 5-year objectives. Ideally, goals established for a 20-year horizon can be used as a basis for meaningful shorter-term objectives. The time frame that is appropriate for the specific local community should be discussed early in the process.

“How Do We Get There?” is the crux of the planning process. The recommendations should stem directly from the answers to the first two questions. If 5- and 10-year objectives have been identified, as above, the development of workable recommendations and strategies should be relatively straight-forward. Since the completed plan is to be the basis for zoning authority, the recommendations should be largely zoning-based. In other words, what can be done through zoning to implement the plan.

It should be noted that private





sector/corporate planning and public sector comprehensive planning are different. Nonetheless, communities that have incorporated strategic planning principles into the public comprehensive planning process have found the resultant plans to be more consistent with the rapidly changing context of smaller communities today. The key point is that the comprehensive planning process itself should evolve to address the changing needs of today's communities. The following recommendations are intended to work toward that objective.

Decision-makers should commit to active engagement throughout the planning process. In many counties

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and townships, leaders appropriate necessary funds and essentially turn the process over to an outside consultant. Typically, this approach yields a document that ends up sitting on a shelf. A meaningful planning process requires a series of hard policy decisions to be made and calls for the willingness to mold the final product into a document that will be enforced, and likely amended, over time. This is serious stuff!

To engage a younger demographic during the public planning process

requires careful attention to what has typically been called "public participation." The problem is that commonly used mechanisms to accomplish this (public meetings, etc.) are most relevant to older (and smaller) segments of the population. Newer methods of public interaction through social media (Facebook, Twitter, interactive web sites, etc.) should be incorporated into the planning process. It is usually possible for local "tech-savvy" residents to be solicited to assist in establishing initiatives to accomplish this in the planning process. Such newer methods should be regarded as an addition to, not as a replacement for, more traditional public participation methods.

Use focus groups and similar tools to obtain initial input. As mentioned above, commonly promoted mechanisms for public input may not result in adequate answers to "Where Are We Now?" Solicited input through focus groups, one-on-one interviews and similar mechanisms should be considered. Specific early input should be sought from real estate and development professionals who are familiar with land development trends in the local area.

Local groups such as county or regional planning commissions,

local Chambers of Commerce and/or business groups should be asked to sponsor events to obtain input. At a minimum, key members of such groups may assist in hosting focus groups or other events. If such groups can become an active part of the process early, it will be easier to bring them on-board later.

In most townships, there are specific key areas, the development of which have impacts above and beyond their boundaries; a major roadway intersection in an unincorporated

village might be one example. During the visioning portion of the planning process, such areas should be identified and given special attention. These areas are probable sites for future zoning controversy.

The future land use map is the comprehensive plan component likely to receive the greatest scrutiny. The future land use map is not – and should not be confused with – the zoning map.

The future land use map should be constructed as a general guide for future zoning amendments; it is not intended to be a "cast-in-stone" recommendation as to how specific individual small parcels are to be zoned. It should have sufficient detail to allow the Zoning Commission to discuss and make appropriate recommendations to the trustees in zoning amendment cases.

Implementation mechanisms and recommendations under "How Do We Get There?" should reflect the primacy of zoning as the principal tool to control physical growth. Some recent township comprehensive plans even propose specific wording changes to the township zoning resolution.

After completion and review, the township trustees should adopt the comprehensive plan. Although this step is not specifically referenced in the Ohio Revised Code, adoption provides an additional measure of legal justification for the zoning resolution. It is recommended that the trustees follow a similar procedure for plan adoption for zoning amendments. Prior to adoption, the plan and zoning resolution should be revised as needed to provide a clear linkage so that both documents work in concert to provide a common vision for growth and development of the township. ■

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