

O'HARA TOWNSHIP

Comprehensive Development Plan

Chapter 1 - Introduction and Purpose

THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The simplest way to describe the planning process is as an organized way of thinking about the future. If such thinking is to be translated into action, it needs to be accomplished in an orderly fashion, and made a part of an administrative process. Generally, this process consists of making surveys, analyses and projections; defining problems, setting goals and objectives; formulating alternative ways to reach objectives; choosing among alternatives; implementing decisions; experiencing outcomes; and finally evaluating those outcomes and updating goals and/or methods.

The vehicle through which this process is initiated and formalized for the guidance of officials and the understanding of the general public is the comprehensive plan. This Section defines the comprehensive plan: its development, its uses, its adoption and its implementation. The planning process is explained, and the relationship of local residents, the planning commission and the Township Council is discussed.

A comprehensive plan is a document that is designed to state basic policies and to guide future growth and development of the community. It carries no weight of law, but it can assist decision makers. It contains no rules or regulations, but it serves as a basis for any land use provisions enacted by the Township of O'Hara. It is broad in scope, examining the physical, social and economic characteristics that mesh to make the Township of O'Hara of today, but it seeks to apply this knowledge to the future. It speaks to various issues in general terms, but it can also make specific recommendations. Basically the comprehensive plan is, in part, a factual report that examines how the past has led to the present, as well as a report that can be used to chart the community's path into the future.

CONTENTS OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC), Act 247 of 1968, as amended, mandates that the comprehensive plan contain certain basic elements. These elements are:

- A statement of community development goals and objectives;
- A land use plan;
- A housing needs plan;
- A transportation and circulation plan;
- A community facilities and utilities plan;
- A statement of plan component interrelationships;
- A discussion of short and long range implementation strategies; and
- A statement of the relationship of the community's future development to adjacent areas.
- A plan for the protection of natural and historic resources.
- A plan for the reliable supply of water.

THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN IS BY NO MEANS LIMITED TO THESE ELEMENTS, NOR SHOULD IT BE.

In preparing the plan, studies must be conducted on various subjects, including the existing conditions within the community and the prospects for future growth. Usually, these studies include such items as a settlement history, existing land use, transportation and circulation, community facilities, municipal government, socio-economic analyses, natural features, population and housing. A recent amendment to the Municipalities Planning code also encourages the study of using renewable energy sources within the Township of O'Hara. Based on these studies, with consideration of the community development goals and objectives, the future plans for land use, transportation and community facilities can be prepared.

USES OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The comprehensive plan is an official statement setting forth basic policies concerning physical development and social and economic goals. It is typically of a general nature, with both short-term and long-range goals in its

recommendations, and considers all factors affecting growth and development. While some view its function as a general guide or framework for the future growth and development of a municipality, the use of specific proposals have more utility. The comprehensive plan has several uses:

- Policy determination: the plan aids in the consideration and evaluation of alternatives for general, short-term and long-range development policies;
- Policy effectuation: the plan lends guidance to specific and immediate programs and problem areas;
- Communication: the plan informs individuals of the present and future growth and development policies of the community;
- Conveyance of advice to the Township Council;
- Education: the plan helps everyone who uses it to understand the conditions, problems, and opportunities of the community by providing factual information.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

THE STUDIES

The studies conducted in the areas previously mentioned attempt to objectively analyze the community from a number of different perspectives. Each individual study takes an in-depth look at a topic. When completed, each study will then lend support to the development of the plan.

Various studies must be utilized to gather the data necessary to prepare the studies. Historical documents, municipal records, soil surveys, various census reports and other such sources of information are essential. From these sources, facts and trends can be assimilated and used to develop the basic assumptions and forecasts necessary for the development of the plan.

THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

While some plan statements may appear lofty, their importance cannot be overstated. In addition to being statutory requirement, they are not only supposed to guide the policy decisions made in the development of the plan, but also are closely examined by the courts should a land use decision be challenged.

The community development goals and objectives should be written as specifically as possible and be unique to each community. The goals and objectives should not be copies from another Municipality, nor should they be

drafted without thought and/or discussion. These statements underlie the future growth and development of your community.

THE PLAN DOCUMENT

The plan document itself is the final element of a comprehensive plan. After the studies have been completed and a factual base exists from which to make decisions, and after the community development goals and objectives have been stated to guide future decisions, a preferred plan chosen from several alternative plans will form the foundation for the community's future growth.

The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code requires that the plan contain at least a separate element for future land use, future housing needs, future transportation and circulation, future community facilities, the protection of natural resources, a reliable supply of water, an implementation plan and a statement of community objectives. The Township of O'Hara may, at its' option, prepare plans for other elements such as the promotion of energy conservation. It is also mandatory to explore the relationship with adjacent municipalities so that adverse impacts are avoided or minimized.

While future plans for transportation circulation and for community facilities may evolve quite naturally after the studies have been completed, there may be no one "perfect" plan for future land use that can be assimilated from this collection of data. Several different viable plans will be formulated. Only through thought and discussion will the best future land use plan be produced.

ADOPTION OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code contains the procedural requirements for adopting the comprehensive plan. The Township Council of O'Hara Township must hold at least one (1) public hearing after having given public notice of the hearing. The plan can then be adopted by resolution of the Township Council, provided that a majority of all members of the Township Council vote in the affirmative.

Although it is not specifically required, the planning commission should hold one or more public meetings on the comprehensive plan. Such meetings held during the plan preparation and after the plan completion, help to keep municipal residents informed of the planning process prior to the public hearing by the Township Council.

IMPLEMENTING THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

After the plan is prepared and adopted, the recommendations and policies set forth in the plan should be put into effect, or implemented. This is perhaps the most difficult step in planning. While the comprehensive plan carries no weight of law, many of the plan implementation devices do. If the planning commission and the Township Council properly perform their tasks, and invite participation, the plan can be implemented with a minimum of hardship.

The primary tools used to implement the comprehensive plan are the subdivision and land development ordinance and the zoning ordinance. Subdivision regulations attempt to:

- set minimum standards for the layout or design of developments;
- promote coordinated development;
- guide the type and locations of streets and other public facilities;
- insure the installation of necessary improvements;
- minimize existing or foreseen problems; and
- manage stormwater runoff and erosion.
- The zoning ordinance regulates:
 - uses of land, water courses and other bodies of water;
 - size, height, bulk and location of structures;
 - areas and dimensions of land to be occupied or to be unoccupied by uses and structures;
 - density of population and intensity of use; and
 - protection of natural resources and agricultural land.

Other legislative devices that can be used for plan implementation include the official map, building and housing codes, as well as codes for plumbing, electricity and fire prevention, and a capital improvements program. Code enforcement at the Township level is an important service to provide, but it can be costly in terms of a small town budget.

The comprehensive plan cannot be implemented entirely by codes and ordinances. Many recommendations made within the plan require action only by Township Council; capital improvements must be prioritized and funds allotted; areas where redevelopment or in fill development is desired should be clearly defined and steps should be taken to secure appropriate funding; and public relations, perhaps the keystone and the catalyst of most plan implementation techniques, must be fostered. Obviously, there can be many other similar actions that can aide in implementing the comprehensive plan, none of which require codes and ordinances to be put into effect, but which, nevertheless, are equally as important.

MONITORING

After a municipality adopts a comprehensive plan and any implementing codes and ordinances, there is a tendency to put the plan away and to consider the planning task complete. This is not, and should not be, the case. A community is never a stagnant place, and change is always occurring. Change must be examined to see what affects it may have upon the community. The comprehensive plan and its implementing ordinances must be revised accordingly. This examination and updating procedure should be done periodically, and is what is known as the continuing planning process. It is a continuous activity designed to protect the public welfare.

If a plan is completed then shelved and forgotten, it quickly becomes obsolete. Hence, it becomes useless and cannot be relied upon as an accurate resource to guide growth and development. For example, major highway improvements are scheduled for construction in this community. A new industry attracted by the transportation system may move into this community, followed shortly by workers seeking employment and housing close to their source of employment. The additional influx in population will require more houses, apartments, schools, and municipal services. By keeping abreast of such developments and amending the plan and its implementing ordinances accordingly, the community will be better prepared to deal with the changes impending.

TOWNSHIP RESIDENTS, THE PLANNING COMMISSION AND THE TOWNSHIP COUNCIL

Every effort has been made to insure that this plan has the support of the local residents. Without this support, no matter how grand a plan is, it risks the chance of either not being adopted or constantly being challenged as a "plot" to deprive people of their rights. Efforts were taken to involve local residents to the greatest extent possible, in the process of plan development.

The Township appoints local citizens as members to the planning commission to assume its obligations pertaining to planning. As such, the planning commission is responsible for the preparation of the comprehensive

plan and its implementing ordinances. The responsibility for insuring citizen awareness, falls, in large part, upon the planning commission. It is nonproductive to spend both time and money to develop a comprehensive plan, to present it to the Township Council for a public hearing and to have the plan shouted down and subsequently not adopted by an intimidated Township Council, due only to the actions of uninformed or misinformed local residents. The importance of citizen participation cannot be overstated. The plan ultimately belongs to the people who live in the Township of O'Hara.

The Township Council realizes that there is a real and pressing need for planning, and that planning is for the general welfare of all residents of the community – both present and future. By its very nature, planning must be implemented by ordinances and activities designed to preserve and to promote certain qualities and standards. This is not always a popular process with all segments of a community, and occasionally opposition may be encountered. However, the comprehensive plan examines many facets of the community and is formulated after much thought and discussion. Certain recommendations merit consideration at a public hearing, but a Township Council should not be intimidated into not voting for a comprehensive plan based solely on crowd reaction. The plan must be considered on its merits and its applicability to the entire community. The Township of O'Hara also has an educational role to fulfill. People tend to reject what they do not understand.

Planning for the future growth and development of the community is the responsibility of the Township Council. The comprehensive plan is the first step taken to rationally carry out this responsibility. It is generally prepared by the planning commission with input from the local residents and public and private organizations. Following its adoption, the Township Council has support upon which to base the plan implementation activities.

SUMMARY

The comprehensive plan is a document prepared to assist in the determination of future growth and development policies. It contains sections which study various aspects of the community, community characteristics, community development goals and objectives, and future plans for several basic areas of everyday living. It is officially adopted by the Township Council of O'Hara Township, and is implemented to a large extent by zoning and by subdivision and land development ordinances. The plan must be periodically reviewed and updated, and must have the understanding, coordination and support of the residents, the planning commission and the Township Council. While County Comprehensive Plans are required to be reviewed every ten (10) years, local and multimunicipal plans should also be reviewed and updated within the same time frame.

STRATEGIC PLAN ELEMENTS

A community's development plan serves as the policy statement for zoning, subdivision and land development, and planned residential development regulations. It coordinates the delivery of municipal services such as sanitary sewerage, public water, and fire protection and recreational programming. A development plan is an inventory of the strengths and weaknesses of a community and provides guidelines for new development to occur in order to protect existing development.

- (1) Identification of community goals and objectives
- (2) Influence within the region
- (3) Land use plan
- (4) Transportation plan
- (5) Community facilities and utilities plan (including recreation)
- (6) Housing plan
- (7) Capital improvements plan
- (8) Preservation and conservation plan
- (9) Short range and long range (Implementation Plan)

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

The Zoning Ordinance and the Subdivision Ordinance are the tools for carrying out the plans set forth by the Comprehensive Plan. They provide the regulations which must be followed by all developers so that the community's needs can be accomplished. They are specific, detailed pieces of legislation designed to carry out the general proposals stated in the Comprehensive Plan. Local land use regulations are used to coordinate and guide development, by providing standards for that development based on specific detailed regulations which promote quality land uses. How effectively these regulations are administered depends on the Township's planning philosophy.