

# Understanding Sustainability: Soliciting Public Input in the Comprehensive Planning Process<sup>1</sup>

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*This paper is part of the Understanding Sustainability series, a series of discussions on sustainable development that includes specialized papers on sustainability, local planning, and comprehensive plans.*

The previous article in this series described the origins and concepts of sustainability and sustainable communities, and included a discussion of what comprehensive plans are and how they are organized. In this article, we will introduce the importance of the comprehensive plan information gathering process for the development of sustainable communities.

As stated in previous publications, comprehensive plans can address sustainability concerns as they describe both the long- and short-term visions for a community. As such, they represent the accumulation of the concerns of the community and approaches to dealing with those concerns by local government. Public processes of meetings, charrettes, written comments, and other inputs contribute to the construction or amendment of comprehensive plans. Government agencies have an obligation to visit with the community and assess the most pressing concerns and issues. The better the government is at drawing out these issues from the residents, the better the resulting comprehensive plan.

## Location

Council or commission chambers are often the venues for comprehensive plan meetings. In an attempt to foster input and accommodate the public, communities often provide multiple meetings taking place at varying times of day or evening. The public's degree of awareness, concern or frustration, opposition or support of the public on any topic covered by the comprehensive plan may influence the success of this approach and ultimately determine the extent of public input.

Unfortunately, many members of the community who have strong opinions and ideas will sometimes choose not to have their voices heard for a variety of reasons. Because of their unwillingness to participate, these residents become the most difficult to include in the process. There is a sub-group within this group, those who attend public input meetings but choose not to participate. They are typically intimidated by the setting or feel unqualified to comment. Many of the residents in our cities and towns never set foot in county or government buildings, and rarely, if ever, choose to speak in public. Public speaking is a very difficult task for many, and perhaps even more so in an environment as formal as a city or council chamber. Often, as professionals, we lose sight of this fact. The public hearing process is designed to gather input for a comprehensive plan (with which many are unfamiliar), and we may be asking too

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much of resident attendees to voice their opinions and ideas in such an environment.

Every effort must be made to encourage public input from all groups represented in the community. Providing alternative methods to solicit public input helps gather a wide variety of perspectives and create a comprehensive plan that meets the needs of the majority of residents. Below are some tips for creating an inclusive process that reaches a large segment of the population.

- Choose venues that are more familiar and where residents may be more comfortable participating, such as libraries, schools, or churches.
- Work with local reporters and design a series of articles focusing on major portions of the comprehensive plan. Today, many newspapers have a “comments” section, which may provide a vehicle for more feedback and input.
- Offer leadership roles to residents from underrepresented groups.
- Do research with citizens to discover what community sites, locations, or venues they frequent and request permission from the property manager to post a written article on the comprehensive plan with a call for comments.
- Host meetings at alternative sites in your jurisdiction such as restaurants, coffee houses, and shopping malls.
- Introduce the comprehensive plan in small portions and ask for comments.

Remember that you need to keep a record of all public comments because they may fall under the purview of the Sunshine Law. To understand any recording requirements and/or obligations you may have with this law or any other, consult with your city/county attorney.

Before holding public workshops and soliciting public input, it is important that staff be well versed and understand the overall concept of sustainability. To develop their personal understanding of the concept of sustainability, provide staff opportunities to attend webinars, workshops, and other educational opportunities. When staff feels sufficiently versed, it may be advantageous to develop a citizen’s sustainability committee—a committee that recommends, develops, and discusses sustainable actions and ideas for the city/county. Over time, developing this type of committee may result in a better overall understanding of the importance of sustainability with staff, citizens, and, ultimately, elected officials.

Fundamental to the strength of any comprehensive plan is the thorough understanding of both present and future needs and how the plan addresses these needs. Reliance on the expertise of the writers alone without public input is contrary to the very meaning of the word “comprehensive.” The more adept the city/county is at soliciting public input the better the final product will represent the needs and desires of the community.

## Obstacles

Comprehensive plans are by definition the long-term sustainability plan for the community. Unfortunately, few communities have formally recognized the importance of balancing and integrating the economic, social, and environmental demands in their comprehensive plans. With the fluctuation of fuel prices, unprecedented droughts, tightening budgets, and the increasingly urgent call for awareness of the impact of climate change, many community leaders have begun to question if there is a better way to create a truly sustainable community.

Community sustainability is a complex topic. It touches every part of a community, from development issues to the ‘where’ and ‘how’ of product production and disposal within the community. The concept may be difficult to explain, especially in brief. More than likely, the average citizen is not entirely sure what the term sustainability means, but has previously been exposed to the concept. It is a common situation that participants become overwhelmed, disillusioned and frustrated as discussion concerning sustainability moves from generalities to more specific recommendations. The development of a broad overview of an entire community is a daunting task; and do not expect to accomplish it all at once. The entire process may take more than a few years and should be a on-going process. It is important to remember that, if genuine, the pressure to develop more sustainable communities will consistently be a topic discussed by the community at future public comprehensive plan forums.

## Conclusion

Sustainability is not contradictory to growth, profit, and development. Sustainability means that we plan to our limits, and that we base development on those local strengths, resources, and uniqueness that definitively form the core of a community. If such efforts are undertaken, local development can be sustainable and, therefore, socially, environmentally, and economically beneficial, now and going forward. Developing a comprehensive plan that reflects the broad array of interests within a community is

the first step in developing a long-term plan for sustainability. Facilitators need to ensure the process used to gather public input strives to reach as many community members as possible and encourages participation from underrepresented groups.