Better Plans, Better Communities
Three Things to Take Your Comprehensive Plan to the Next Level

Presented by
Allison Stewart-Harris, AICP – Community Planning Manager, VHB
Andrew Smith – Principal Planner in Community Development, Atlanta Regional Commission

April 23, 2021
Speaking This Morning:

Allison Stewart-Harris, AICP
Community Planning Manager, VHB

**Favorite part of planning:** Getting to know different communities all over the region

**Planning pet peeve:** Wordles

Andrew Smith
Principal Planner, ARC

**Favorite part of planning:** Always learning new things about the unique places in our region – and contributing to sustaining those places

**Planning pet peeve:** People always asking if I “work for the government” or “know what’s going on with that pothole over on so and so street”
3 THINGS TO DO

1. #1
2. #2
3. #3

Behind the Curtain: Comprehensive Planning in GA
Behind the Curtain: Comprehensive Planning in Georgia + How We Got Here
WHY WE PLAN

- Anticipate Change
- Accommodate Present Needs
- Enhance Strengths
- Minimize Weaknesses
- Build Community
- Provide for Public Health, Safety, & Welfare
- Prepare for the Future
**BACKGROUND**

**BEFORE**

- **RC Primary Role**: coordinate regional and state reviews
- **Major Updates**: Every 10 years, minor update at 5-year mark
- **DCA Minimum Standards**:  
  - Data-heavy  
  - One-size-fits-all  
  - 3 deliverables  
  - Challenging or expensive for smaller communities

**AFTER**

- **RC Primary Role**: provide direct assistance, if asked
- **Updates**: Every 5 years
- **DCA Minimum Standards**:  
  - Emphasize flexibility, customization, usability  
  - Required elements + menu of optional elements  
  - 1 deliverable  
  - Provides an option for smaller communities
5-YEAR UPDATE: KEY REQUIRED ELEMENTS

• 5-year update, i.e., your next plan update after your first plan done under the “new” (post-2012) rules

• Most, if not all, communities are at this stage
  • Needs and Opportunities
  • Land Use Element
  • Report of Accomplishments (ROA) – Documents current status of every item from Community Work Program (CWP) in existing plan
  • Updated CWP – Includes items noted as Underway or Postponed in ROA, plus any brand-new items
  • *Broadband Element – Wasn’t required until 2018*
### Optional Plan Elements

- Target Areas
- Public Safety
- Greenspace & Recreation
- Education
- Human Services
- Natural Resources
- Inter-Govt Coordination
- Solid Waste Management
- Infrastructure + Facilities
- Community Sustainability
- Historic & Cultural Resources
- Disaster Resilience
TWO BIG QUESTIONS

#1
How Much Planning?

#2
Who Is Doing it?
### Recommended Guidelines

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*Pick and choose relevant topics from Optional Elements*
WHO’S DOING IT?

OPTION #1
Regional Commission

OPTION #2
Internal Staff

OPTION #3
Consultant
HOW WE OPERATE AT ARC: INITIAL STEPS

• Draft required MOA laying out roles and responsibilities

• Meet with local government staff to:
  • Review MOA
  • Confirm roles, responsibilities and expectations
  • Review plan requirements and process
  • Look at tentative schedule
  • Discuss existing plans and any other background information
  • Answer any questions
HOW WE OPERATE AT ARC: RC ROLES

- Designate Project Manager
- Update Needs and Opportunities, using ARC resources, local data, and community input → updated Vision and Goals?
- Review updated Community Work Program (CWP) developed by local staff
- Update Land Use Element
- Update other Elements as needed, e.g., Transportation, Housing, Economic Development
- Present/support/attend both required public hearings (1 at kick-off & 1 prior to transmittal for regional/state review)
- Facilitate one (1) public meeting
- Develop online public engagement portal, survey, etc.
- Facilitate three (3) Steering Committee meetings
- Develop language for official public hearing notices, if requested
- Develop ads and other public involvement materials, if requested
- Implement any revisions required by DCA following state review
- Provide final plan and other documents
HOW WE OPERATE AT ARC: LOCAL GOVERNMENT ROLES

- Designate primary contact to coordinate with ARC
- Develop Report of Accomplishments (ROA), showing status of items in existing CWP
- Develop new CWP, with ARC input
- Form Steering Committee, which must include:
  - Member of governing authority, i.e., elected official
  - Member of “economic development community”
- Schedule Steering Committee meetings, with ARC input
- Develop public awareness and invitations to Steering Committee and public meetings
- Provide locations for public meetings that have heat/air conditioning, water, and electricity (in a non-COVID world)
- Provide any food or beverages for Steering Committee and public meetings (in a non-COVID world)
- Post notices of public hearings as required by community’s existing procedures
- Provide timely notice to ARC of local government meetings that ARC staff should attend
EXAMPLE SCHEDULE: OCTOBER DUE DATE

End of 2020 / Beginning of 2021

- Execute MOA
- Hold initial meeting with local to identify:
  - Strengths/weaknesses of existing plan
  - Issues emerging in last 5 years
  - Sensitive topics, e.g., elections, community concerns, etc.
  - Public engagement considerations

- Up-front data work (RC)
- Review existing plan (RC)
- Assemble steering committee (local)
- Review CWP & evaluate status to inform ROA & new CWP (local)
- Schedule First Required Public Hearing, i.e., kickoff hearing (local)
EXAMPLE SCHEDULE: OCTOBER DUE DATE

- **Initial Hearing and Steering Committee Meeting #1**
- **Steering Committee Meeting #2**
- **Steering Committee Meeting #3**
- **ARC Finalizes Plan Document**
- **Second (Pre-Transmittal) Hearing**

DEADLINE for Review, Approval, and Local Adoption: Oct. 31
KEY TAKEAWAY: RIGHT-SIZE YOUR APPROACH

- RC vs. In-House vs. Consultant – pros/cons for each
- Think about your goals before choosing approach:
  - DCA requirements are the baseline
  - How do you anticipate using your plan?
  - Are there any gaps in your community’s planning that could be addressed through the process?
  - Do you want to completely overhaul a key element like Land Use?
  - Do you envision significantly changing your Vision/Goals? Or affirming?
  - What’s changed in your community? Annexation? Development? Leadership?
  - What are your resources? Budget? Staffing?
RIGHT-SIZING: SUGGESTED GUIDELINES

• **Recommend Light Update in following conditions:**
  • At 5-year mark after major update
    • Example: 2017 first plan under “new” DCA rules → 2022 next due date = standard/5-year update recommended
  • And/or if there’s been:
    • Minimal change or development in past 5 years
    • Minimal elected/community leadership change in past 5 years

• **Who’s Doing It?**
  • Larger community: In-house resources (e.g., Alpharetta, Cobb Co.)
  • Medium/Smaller community: RC assistance (e.g., Lithonia, Pine Lake)
RIGHT-SIZING: SUGGESTED GUIDELINES

- **Recommend Full Update in following conditions:**
  - At least every 10 years
    - Example: 2013 first plan under “new” DCA rules → 2018 standard update → 2023 next due date = major/10-year update recommended
  - And/or if there’s been:
    - Significant change or development in past 5 years
    - Significant elected/community leadership change in past 5 years
    - You experience problems with your plan or find yourself not using it

- **Who’s Doing it?**
  - Recommend hiring a consultant
COMP PLANS ARE LIKE CLOSETS
Agenda

Behind the Curtain: Comprehensive Planning in GA

#1 #2 #3

3 THINGS TO DO

#1
RIGHT SIZE

#2

#3
A Use for High School Chemistry (at last!)
### Periodic Table of Comp Plan Elements

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<th>Needs + Opps</th>
<th>Work Program</th>
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Period One Elements

- **GP**: Goals + Policies
  - Bb: Broadband
  - LU: Land Use
  - Tr: Transportation
  - ED: Econ. Develop.
  - Ho: Housing
  - CI: Capital Improve.
  - TA: Target Areas
  - PS: Public Safety
  - GR: Greenspace + Rec.
  - Ed: Education
  - HS: Human Services
  - NR: Natural Resources
  - IC: Inter-gov Coordin.
  - SW: Solid Waste
  - IF: Infrastruct. + Facilities
  - Su: Community Sustain.
  - DR: Disaster Resilience
Period One Elements

• **Long-term, consistent foundation for planning**
  » Address a wide *breadth* of planning topics,
  » **High-level, general direction** that states a position; squishy words are OK

• Differences between goals, policies, principles, or objectives? **No matter** – just provide the clear guidance
Period One Elements

NO

Needs + Opportunities

Stability

Medium

- Identifies the needs, opportunities, issues, and assets of the community right now
- **Best place to start** when you fire up your update
  - Focus on what’s changed
- One of the most meaningful places for **public input**
- Suggestion: get your other departments **involved** in this stage to document the needs/issues they are facing – not all are visible to the community
Period One Elements

Work Program

- List of projects/initiatives for the next 5 years
- Designate timeframe, funding, responsible party
- Not a place for squishy words; **active verbs**!
- Suggestion: two-tiered work program, short term and long term
Element Bonding

Goals + Policies

NO Needs + Opps

WP

WP

NO Needs + Opps

WP

WP

NO Needs + Opps

WP

WP

WP

WP
#2 Streamline
Documenting vs. Distilling

**Documenting**
- Reporting Out, Listing Everything

**Distilling**
- Analyzing, Prioritizing Focusing

**Needs + Opportunities**

**WP Work Program**
A collection of documents and lists may be comprehensive, but it’s not a plan.
Streamlining Tips: Goals + Policies

**Do**
Review all previous plan goals and policies with a critical eye

- Examine each goal/policy: is it still relevant?
- Are there duplicates, lots of overlap, or conflicts?
- Look for gaps: are there any topics that are not addressed?

**Assume the previous plan’s goals/policies are comprehensive, consistent, and relevant**
**Streamlining Tips: Goals + Policies**

**Do** Stick to **one topic** per goal/policy

- “Encourage the development of workforce housing”

- **Thumb up**

- “Encourage workforce housing, senior housing, protection of single-family neighborhoods, and walkability”

- **Thumb down**
**Streamlining Tips: Goals + Policies**

**Do** Keep it general, but not so general that it has no meaning

"Support the development of innovation centers"

**TOO GENERAL:**
"Support innovation"

**TOO SPECIFIC:**
"Partner with Gwinnett County to create an innovation center northwest of downtown"
Controversial Opinion:
You don’t need a vision statement.
Controversial Opinion:

You don’t need a vision statement.

Do it if you can rock it:

“Lawrenceville will be known as the heart of Gwinnett and the college town of tomorrow, where inclusion is a way of life, new urban living is just living, and art comes to life in a talent-rich, regional epicenter of community.”

Or treat it more like branding:

“Deliberately rural...” (Chattahoochee Hills)
Streamlining Tips: Needs + Opportunities

**Do** List all needs and opportunities, but make priorities clear

**Identify top 3 - 5 high-level needs and opportunities**

**Have a massive, unorganized list of everything heard in the process**
Streamlining Tips: Needs + Opportunities

**Do**
State needs and opportunities as clear, complete thoughts

“Need more diverse retail options downtown”

“Retail”
Streamlining Tips: Work Program

Do Create your work program with **intention**

**INCLUDES ITEMS THAT...**

- Represent a **significant investment** of money or staff time
- Have a definable **start and finish**
- Are **community facing**
- Will see action in the **next five years**

**THINK 2X....**

- Represent a **very minor investment** of money or staff time
- Have **no viable funding source**
- Have no definable **start and finish**
- Are **internal facing**
- Are **day-to-day/regular tasks**
Streamlining Tips: Work Program

**Do** Use the **Report of Accomplishments** as a learning tool

- Evaluate it **early**
- **Identify weak spots** – what types of items got stuck?
- **Remove** items that are goals/policies, not work program items

**Complete it as an afterthought, especially at the end**
Agenda

Behind the Curtain: Comprehensive Planning in GA

#1
RIGHT SIZE

#2
STREAMLINE

#3
#3 Align
Align: No Orphan Needs + Opportunities

• Need/opportunity without a goal or policy?
  – It’s time to write some policy
• Need/opportunity without a work program item?
  – If it’s a priority, figure out a first step, put in work program
  – Not a priority, might be OK
• Work program item without a goal or policy?
  – **Might be time to write some policy**
• Work program item without a need/opportunity?
  – **This is a very tricky, very common problem**
  – Easiest path: add a need/opportunity
  – Best practice: evaluate the item and consider if it’s the best use of resources
Align: Common Pitfalls

- **Biggest gulf is typically between needs/opps and work program**
  - Work programs typically come together by departments submitting their lists of projects – not vetted, not necessarily tied to anything else in plan

- Treating Needs/Opportunities, Goals/Policies, and the Work Program as **separate tasks**

- **Flip-flopping**: work program items that are actually goals/policies, vice versa
Align: Is this really an issue? Seems basic...

YES
This is actually an issue.
We are not very good this, at least in the Atlanta region.

• VHB Comprehensive Plan Study:
  • 50 Atlanta-area Comp Plans
  • 29 topic areas
  • 7,000+ goals/policies, needs/opps, work program items coded by primary topic

• Using our Comps tool, which provides a:
  • Macro look across the region for planning and policy trends
  • Micro look at single plan content and alignment
Align: 50 Atlanta Area Comprehensive Plans

- City of Acworth
- City of Alpharetta
- City of Austell
- City of Avondale Estates
- Town of Braselton
- City of Brookhaven
- City of Canton
- City of Chamblee
- City of Chattahoochee Hills
- Cherokee County
- City of Clarkston
- Clayton County
- Cobb County
- City of College Park
- City of Decatur
- DeKalb County
- City of Doraville
- Douglas County
- City of Douglasville
- City of Dunwoody
- City of East Point
- City of Fairburn
- City of Forest Park
- City of Grayson
- Gwinnett County
- City of Hapeville
- Town of Haralson
- City of Holly Springs
- City of Jonesboro
- City of Kennesaw
- City of Lake City
- City of Lawrenceville
- City of Lithonia
- City of Lovejoy
- City of Marietta
- City of Moreland
- City of Morrow
- City of Newnan
- City of Norcross
- Paulding County
- Town of Pine Lake
- City of Powder Springs
- City of Riverdale
- City of Senoia
- City of Smyrna
- City of Stone Mountain
- City of Tucker
- City of Union City
- City of Villa Rica
- City of Woodstock

Population Range: 185 - 932,650 residents

- 22 by Regional Comm.
- 8 by Staff
- 19 by Consultants

- 3,173 Goals + Policies
- 1,806 Needs + Opps
- 3,417 Work Prog. Items
Align: Comps Tool Topics

**LAND USE**
- General Land Use
- Mixed Use
- Commercial/Industrial
- Land Use Planning
- Controls/Regulations

**HOUSING**
- General Housing
- Affordability
- Single-Family
- Multi-Family/Mixed
- Housing Planning

**TRANSPORT.**
- General Transp.
- Roads
- Parking
- Transit
- Bike/Ped
- Transportation Planning

**ECON DEV.**
- General Ec Dev.
- Jobs
- Small Businesses
- Retail
- Industry
- Ec. Dev. Planning

**OTHER**
- General Other
- Parks/Nat. Resources
- History, Arts, Culture
- Character/Beauty
- Facilities/Services
- Governance
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29 Topic Areas

One line represents one jurisdiction's Comp Plan

- **No alignment....(Orphan!)**
- **Partial Alignment**
- **Full Alignment**
- **Goal/Policy Only**
- **No content**
### Big Picture Take-Aways

- **48 out of 50** plans have at least one topic with orphans
  - Average amount is 4 topics with orphans
- We do best in the “Other” category...yet it’s content that’s not required
- Many of our plans are pretty quiet on Housing topics
Alignment Awards: Larger Communities (50k+)

Cobb County

Work Program
Needs + Opps
Goals + Policies

COBB COUNTY #1

Controls & Regulations
Land Use Planning
Commercial + Industrial
General Land Use
General Transportation
Roadways
Parks + Nat. Resources
Housing
General Economics
Jobs
General Other
Transportation
Pedestrian + Bicycle
Parking
Freight
Governance
Econ Dev.
Retail
Industry
Facilities - Services
Land Use
Affordability
Single-Family
Multi-Family
Housing
Transportation Planning
Econ Dev.
Planning
Other
Alignment Awards: Medium Communities (20-50k)

CITY of CANTON

CITY of LAWRENCEVILLE
Alignment Awards: Small Communities

CITY of VILLA RICA
Population: 10K – 20K

CITY of LOVEJOY
Population: Less than 10k
Wrap-Up
3 Big Things

#1 Right Size

#2 Streamline

#3 Align
Questions? Comments? Get in touch!

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