

THE RHODE ISLAND COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING STANDARDS  
GUIDANCE HANDBOOK SERIES

**GUIDANCE HANDBOOK #1:  
THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN 101**

APPROVED BY THE STATE PLANNING COUNCIL

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*Comprehensive planning by municipal government is necessary to form a rational basis for the long-term physical development of a municipality and to avoid conflicting requirements and reactive land use regulations and decisions.*

*The Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL subsection 45-22.2-3(a)(1)*

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Additionally, the topical content for the guidance handbook series was developed in conversation with numerous experts, including staff from the Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program. These knowledgeable individuals are the reason that the manual is helpful, user-friendly and thorough.

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## INTRODUCTION

This handbook is meant to be an accompaniment to the Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning Standards Manual (“the Standards Manual”). Guidance Handbook #1 - The Comprehensive Plan 101 provides basic information about why communities undertake comprehensive planning and explains the many components of a comprehensive plan. This handbook will be most helpful for citizen planners and new planning board members who may have little experience with comprehensive planning, but it is also intended to provide local planners with clear definitions of common terms, such as assessment, goal and policy, as well as details on elusive plan components, such as the implementation program.

This handbook is split into three sections. [Section 1 - The Context for Comprehensive Planning](#) provides general information about the framework in which comprehensive planning happens. [Section 2 - General Standards for Comprehensive Planning](#) presents more information about the general standards found within the standards manual. [Section 3 - The Components of a Comprehensive Plan](#) provides an overview of the pieces that make up a comprehensive plan, including assessments, inventories, goals, policies and implementation actions.

## NOTES

In some cases, this guidebook presents “notes” that are relative to the content being discussed. Each note that occurs within the text will be tagged with a symbol to alert the reader to the note’s purpose, as shown below.



This symbol is used to identify references to the Rhode Island General Laws (RIGL). Blue text within this note provides a link to the actual RIGL citation.



This symbol alerts the reader to something that is required for State approval.



This symbol alerts the reader to potential data sources.



The text following this symbol provides additional suggestions to enhance comprehensive plans.



This symbol alerts the reader to sample goals, policies and actions that would fulfill the requirements.



This symbol indicates general information that is secondary to the main point of the text, but could be helpful to the municipality.



This symbol alerts the reader to a cross-reference within the guidebook series. If a concept is mentioned in the text area and more information on the concept is available elsewhere in the guidebook series, this note will point the reader to where to find it.



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## SECTION 1. THE CONTEXT FOR COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

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## WHY SHOULD COMMUNITIES PLAN?

There is no question that comprehensive planning is challenging. To craft an effective, thoughtful comprehensive plan takes a lot of discussion, negotiation, goal setting, prioritizing and allocating of scarce resources. So then, why do communities undertake such a difficult process? Simply, comprehensive planning is essential – to the municipality, to the regions within our state, and the state.

For a municipality to sustain itself – economically, socially, and physically – and to maintain a high quality of life, communities must be proactive about planning for their future. A comprehensive plan sets forth a vision for the community – a glimpse of what a community aspires to be in 20 or more years – and lays out the specific path that, if followed, will achieve the vision. Without a vision for the future, a community can develop without foresight, without purpose, without consideration of all of the aspects that are essential to maintaining a high quality of life for residents. And, without a detailed road map for achieving the vision, community decision makers may not know how to make progress towards the end state that is desired by the community.

All of the conversations, workshops and assessments that go into crafting a comprehensive plan are necessary for determining the community’s shared vision for the future and for outlining the appropriate steps that will lead to achieving that vision. And, though the comprehensive planning process can be challenging at times, it can also be the impetus for important discussions about topics yet to be broached (such as sea level rise, affordable housing or public energy consumption).

The comprehensive plan can be a valuable tool for a community. A well written comprehensive plan gives direction to private development and encourages economically sustainable community growth. The plan should act as a guide for planners, public officials, municipal department leaders and citizens for achieving the community’s goals. With the right goals and policies, a comprehensive plan can act as armor, protecting the community’s vision and strengthening its every step.

This is why we plan.

## THE INTENT OF COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

When the State’s reciprocal system of comprehensive planning was established in 1988 by the Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act (cited throughout this handbook series as “the Act”), the General Assembly laid out several findings that provide insight regarding the intent of comprehensive planning. The findings of the Act assert that local comprehensive planning is necessary to form a rational basis for the long-term development of a municipality. Also, the Act states that comprehensive planning is needed to:

- Provide for protection, development, use, and management of our land and natural resources;
- Promote the appropriate use of land;
- Provide for the coordination of growth and the intensity of development with provisions for services and facilities;
- Provide a basis for municipal and state initiatives to ensure all citizens have access to a range of housing choices, including the availability of affordable housing for all income levels and age groups; and
- Recognize and address potentially conflicting land uses as well as shared resources in contiguous municipalities and encourage cooperative planning efforts by municipalities.

The Act makes clear that municipalities are required to plan for their future development so that the State as a whole may benefit from the appropriate use of the land.



See the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, [RIGL subsection 45-22.2-3\(a\)](#) for a complete list of findings.

## THE GOALS OF COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

The Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act sets forth the following goals for the comprehensive planning system and process. The goals are intended to guide both State and municipal actions in the fulfillment of the Act's requirements.

*(1) To promote orderly growth and development that recognizes the natural characteristics of the land, its suitability for use, the availability of existing and proposed public and/or private services and facilities, and is consistent with available resources and the need to protect public health, including drinking water supply, drinking water safety, and environmental quality.*

*(2) To promote an economic climate which increases quality job opportunities and overall economic well being of each municipality and the state.*

*(3) To promote the production and rehabilitation of year-round housing and to preserve government subsidized housing for persons and families of low and moderate income in a manner that: considers local, regional, and statewide needs; that achieves a balance of housing choices for all income levels and age groups, recognizes the affordability of housing as the responsibility of each municipality and the state; takes into account growth management and the need to phase and pace development in areas of rapid growth; and facilitates economic growth in the state.*

*(4) To promote the protection of the natural, historic and cultural resources of each municipality and the state.*

*(5) To promote the preservation of the open space and recreational resources of each municipality and the state.*

*(6) To provide for the use of performance-based standards for development and to encourage the use of innovative development regulations and techniques that promote the development of land suitable for development while protecting our natural, cultural, historical, and recreational resources, and achieving a balanced pattern of land uses.*

*(7) To promote consistency of state actions and programs with municipal comprehensive plans, and provide for review procedures to ensure that state goals and policies are reflected in municipal comprehensive plans and state guide plans.*

*(8) To ensure that adequate and uniform data are available to municipal and state government as the basis for comprehensive planning and land use regulation.*

*(9) To ensure that municipal land use regulations and decisions are consistent with the comprehensive plan of the municipality, and to ensure state land use regulations and decisions are consistent with state guide plans.*

*(10) To encourage the involvement of all citizens in the formulation, review, and adoption or*





See RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL subsection [45-22.2-3\(c\)](#).

## RHODE ISLAND'S PLANNING FRAMEWORK

Rhode Island has a long legacy of reciprocal comprehensive planning. In 1988, when the Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act was first passed, the General Assembly built on the important local planning work already being conducted in many municipalities, becoming one of the first states in the country to adopt a statewide system of reciprocal community planning. Under this reciprocal system, the State sets broad goals and policies through the State Guide Plan and municipalities develop comprehensive plans that reflect these in a way that is relevant to their individual context. The local comprehensive plans serve as the basis for land use regulation and establish an implementation program for achieving stated goals. The local comprehensive plans are reviewed by the State and when approved, become binding on State agencies by requiring conformance of their programs and projects to the comprehensive plan.

### THE STATE GUIDE PLAN

The State Guide Plan is established by Rhode Island General Law 42-11-10 (7)(d), which states:

*The state guide plan shall be comprised of functional elements or plans dealing with land use; physical development and environmental concerns; economic development; energy supply, access, use, and conservation; human services; and other factors necessary to accomplish the objective of this section. The state guide plan shall be a means for centralizing and integrating long-range goals, policies, and plans. State agencies concerned with specific subject areas, local governments, and the public shall participate in the state guide planning process, which shall be closely coordinated with the budgeting process.*

Each State Guide Plan element contains goals and policies for the State as a whole. Most also contain strategies and actions to guide State agencies, municipal governments, and private individuals and organizations in order to help the ensure that the goals are achieved.

### THE LOCAL COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The comprehensive plan is a far-reaching, over-arching policy document. It sets a vision and lays out a path for achieving it.

Recognizing that municipal governments make the majority of development and land use decisions within the state, the reciprocal system of community planning reinforces the considerable role of the municipality in achieving the goals of the State as a whole. Municipalities are charged with preparing and adopting plans that, in addition to implementing local goals, help to implement the goals laid out in the State Guide Plan and the Rhode Island General Laws. Therefore, the goals and policies found within local comprehensive plans must be consistent with and embody the goals of the State.



See the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL subsections [45-22.2-6\(b\)\(1\)](#) and [45-22.2-9\(d\)](#) (3).

## THE LOCAL ZONING ORDINANCE

A community's zoning ordinance regulates the development of land by detailing allowed uses, dimensional requirements and other important parameters for development. It must be in alignment with the vision set forth in the comprehensive plan. For instance, if a comprehensive plan states that a certain neighborhood shall remain low-density, single-family residential, the zoning ordinance must outline the requirements that development must follow to be in line with that intent. To achieve this consistency, comprehensive plans are required to set forth a schedule for making any necessary amendments to the zoning ordinance and map that may be necessary after the comprehensive plan has been adopted.



See the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL subsections [45-22.2-5\(c\)](#), [45-22.2-6\(b\)\(2\)\(iii\)](#), [\(11\)](#) and [\(12\)\(iv\)](#), and [45-22.2-13\(c\)](#). Also, see the RI Zoning Enabling Act of 1991, RIGL chapter [45-24](#).

## LOCAL SUBDIVISION AND LAND DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS

A community's land development and subdivision regulations deal specifically with the development of land into subdivisions and large scale development projects. These types of projects are reviewed by the local Planning Board or Commission, pursuant to the local subdivision and land development regulations. Land development regulations include specifications for landscaping, parking lots, rights-of-way, and other design considerations. Subdivision regulations govern the division of tracts or parcels of land and establish performance standards for land disturbance activities and the mitigation of adverse effects of the environment.

Findings of a Planning Board or Commission relative to subdivisions and land development projects must demonstrate that the development is consistent with the adopted comprehensive plan. This consistency is a valuable tool for communities, who can set their vision for the future in their comprehensive plan and then implement it through the Planning Board or Commission.



See the RI Land Development and Subdivision Review Enabling Act of 1992, RIGL chapter [45-23](#).

## EACH MUNICIPALITY IS UNIQUE

The reciprocal system of comprehensive planning has been set up to acknowledge that every community in Rhode Island is unique. Each community has different opportunities, challenges, and physical constraints. Each community has a different political context and the history, culture and sense of place of individual communities has been developed and crafted distinctively over time. Each city and town has a unique combination of characteristics, making it crucially important that comprehensive planning be done locally, in consultation with the public. The best people to set the vision for a community are the people who live and work there. The best plan for achieving that vision is set through public involvement, detailed analysis and prioritizing at the local level.

The RI Division of Planning's Statewide Planning Program (RI SPP) has crafted this guidance to assist communities in making planning decisions at the local level. The Division of Planning is responsible for ensuring that local plans are consistent with and embody statewide goals and meet the requirements

of the Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act. Therefore, this guidebook attempts to make very clear what the State will be looking for in order for a comprehensive plan to receive approval. However, in the end, the comprehensive plan is the community's plan. It should be based on community input and grounded in the truth of everyday life in the community. It should lay out a unique vision set by those with a stake in how it all turns out, set forth an actionable plan for moving towards the vision, and establish a process by which accountability can be set and progress can be evaluated.

## THEMES FOR COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

### WHAT IS A PLANNING THEME?

*theme (n): a particular subject or issue that is discussed often or repeatedly*

Merriam Webster's Learner's Dictionary

Comprehensive planning is all about making connections. Through analysis and discourse, the public, municipal officials and employees and other stakeholders discover how each land use, transportation, economic development and infrastructure decision is connected. The comprehensive planning process provides a venue for discovering how the way we use land relates to what transportation options are appropriate, how the transportation options provided relate to a family's cost of living, how a high cost of living relates to the need for economic development, how encouraging economic development relates to the form of buildings and spaces, how specific building forms relate to compact development patterns, how compact development relates to land conservation and so on. The connections that are presented within a community's comprehensive plan are extremely important.

As everything within a comprehensive plan is connected, comprehensive plans may include a number of overarching, underlying planning "themes" that come up over and over again, throughout the plan, like main ideas in a story. A comprehensive planning "theme" is a principle or a value that points to something important to the community. Themes are broad in scope; they represent an ideal state that is worthwhile yet perhaps difficult to achieve. Since themes are far-reaching, in comprehensive planning it is likely that themes will show up in many of the topic areas within the plan.

Below are some planning themes of statewide importance. These themes, however, are not the only themes that can run through a comprehensive plan. We encourage you to think broadly about your community's vision and to determine which planning themes are most appropriate for your city or town.

It is not necessary for a municipality to identify the specific themes that are woven throughout its plan, but rather to be aware of the interconnectedness of the topics and the importance of that interconnectedness for decision making.



### SUPPORTING PLACE

*Communities are real places, chosen as objects to love, with particular landscapes, sounds and smells and particular people who live there.*

Mary Pipher, "In Praise of Hometowns," in Sustainable Planet: Solutions for the 21st Century.

Rhode Island, and every city and town within it, is full of places - charming places, scenic places, bustling places; places for recreation, places for relaxation; places for gathering together and places for enjoying a quiet moment alone. It is Rhode Island's variety of places that make our State interesting and enjoyable. Each community, whether our most urban or rural, whether coastal or inland, has significant places that

are cherished and should be supported.

Supporting place requires communities to recognize the pieces of the municipality that have value to the community and making decisions that reflect that value. The way we use our land has specific implications for the places that we love and we must be aware of this reality.



## SOCIAL EQUITY

*Equity – ensuring full inclusion of the entire region’s residents in the economic, social, and political life of the region, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, neighborhood of residence, or other characteristic – is essential for creating successful plans.*

[An Equity Profile of Rhode Island: Executive Summary, page 1](#)

The concept of social equity may be difficult to grasp, especially in comprehensive planning, but it is essential. A comprehensive plan is intended to provide a vision for the entire community, even though each community is made up of unique individuals with different characteristics and needs. Equity in comprehensive planning means both ensuring that the comprehensive planning process is equitable and that the goals, policies and implementation actions of the plan lead to equitable opportunities.

An equitable comprehensive planning process is one in which input is garnered from all segments of society in an unbiased way. When crafting public participation plans, communities should attempt to solicit input from residents and business owners who represent the overall make-up of the municipality in terms of age, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood of residence, income level, educational attainment level, etc. And, when interpreting and using the input received from these groups, equity means that everyone’s opinion is heard and valued, regardless of differentiating characteristics.

Equitable outcomes of the comprehensive plan would be goals, policies and actions that provide all people and groups access to the goods, services, employment opportunities, housing, recreational opportunities, transportation options, etc., that are available within the municipality. Equitable outcomes also ensure that everyone in the community is able to live free of hazards, in a healthy, diverse and welcoming community.



## PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY

*We ought to plan the ideal of our city with an eye to four considerations. The first, as being the most indispensable, is health.*

[Aristotle, Politics \(ca. 350 B.C.\)](#)

Since the time of Aristotle and throughout the history of America, it has been well known that community planning and public health are inextricably linked. Indeed, the first Planning Commissions in America were charged with improving the physical conditions of cities in order to decrease incidence of disease. New data, though, suggests that improving public health outcomes is more than living free from environmental hazards such as pollution, lead-paint and asbestos. Improved public health outcomes must begin with improved social equity, increased economic opportunity, increased transportation options, more affordable housing opportunities and increased safety in public places, such as in parks and on sidewalks.

Acknowledging the direct impacts of the built environment, economic and land use policy and access to opportunities on public health, it is easy to see how the comprehensive plan can have a direct effect on the health of a community’s residents. Almost every topic required to be addressed within a comprehensive plan can be said to have an impact on public health. Every community should think critically about how

the current policies are affecting public health and set forth policies and implementation actions to make improvements where possible.



## STEWARDSHIP

*stew•ard•ship (n): the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care*

[Merriam Webster's Dictionary](#)

Stewardship is an integral part of the comprehensive planning process. The common use of the term implies stewardship of our natural resources, but when we assume the role of community stewards, we become responsible for much more. We are all stewards of our communities. It is everyone's responsibility to demand the careful management of the lands within our borders, to consider the impacts of our decisions on future generations and to assure that our communities will sustain themselves through changing conditions.

Indeed, many of the topics addressed within a comprehensive plan should be considered through a stewardship lens. Are we growing in a way that does not consume more land than necessary? How can we strengthen the economy so that future generations have adequate employment opportunities? How can we improve housing affordability so that our children can buy homes within the communities where they grew up? In essence, the comprehensive planning process itself is community stewardship. We are proactively planning for a better future state than the one that currently exists.



## ECONOMIC VITALITY

*eco•nom•ic (adj): of, relating to, or based on the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services; vi•tal•i•ty (n): capacity to live and develop*

[Merriam Webster's Dictionary](#)

Every resident is innately dependent on the local and state economy. The economy touches almost every aspect of family and community life and so much of what individuals, families and communities are able to do is dependent on economic conditions. The strength of the economy, the ability of businesses to prosper and the opportunity for residents to be fully employed, is inherently linked to both individual income and public tax revenue. If communities want a better quality of life, improved public facilities and services, and overall better standards of living, the comprehensive planning process offers a means to achieve the coordination necessary to better support economic vitality.

There are many ways in which communities can encourage economic development, as described in Guidance Handbook #6 - Planning for Economic Development. However, economic vitality is included as a planning theme because of its connections to all of the planning topics. Creating a community with economic vitality requires careful consideration of how the various components of the community affect the economic conditions.



## RESILIENCY

*re•sil•ience (n): an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change*

Communities must be resilient, able to adapt, move forward and flex with changing conditions. Resilient places have the capacity to avoid risk, bounce back, to become better than they were before, to plan ahead so that they can recover from changes and losses quickly and effectively. Resiliency is necessary for sustainability; a community cannot sustain itself if it doesn't have the capacity to recover from change.

The term resiliency brings to mind images of neighbors coming together to share candles and clean up debris after a hurricane, or of communities standing in solidarity after a tragedy. While communities often demonstrate their resiliency after a catastrophic event, resiliency is built every day, well before these events happen. Resilient places develop over time and municipalities can have a direct impact on the ability of the community to recover, adapt and thrive by assessing and planning. From creating public spaces where neighbors can get to know one another, to implementing flood-resistant building standards and revising zoning ordinances to allow for flexibility, comprehensive plans can help build resiliency.



## CONNECTIVITY

*In nature we never see anything isolated, but everything in connection with something else which is before it, beside it, under it and over it.*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Everything in a community is connected. People, goods, money and resources are constantly flowing throughout communities. A comprehensive plan must recognize that everything is connected by an intricate web of physical and non-physical channels. Municipalities thrive when connections are able to occur – when residents connect with the place in which they live, when money is exchanged for work and goods, when knowledge is passed from generation to generation, when people know who to call in a time of crisis.

The term connectivity is often used to describe a street network that provides multiple options for travel, allowing people and goods to move efficiently throughout the system. In a broader sense, though, community connectivity is about creating multiple options for all types of connections to be made.



## REGIONAL APPROACH

*re•gion (n): an administrative area, division, or district; a broad geographic area distinguished by similar features; a sphere of activity or interest*

Merriam Webster's Dictionary

The Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act calls for coordinated land use and conservation planning, across our small yet mighty state. In this spirit, the Act sets forth a process by which neighboring municipalities could undertake joint comprehensive planning. While no one has yet chosen to create a joint comprehensive plan, there are some important aspects of comprehensive planning that must extend beyond municipal borders. Just as everything is connected within a municipality, each municipality is connected to the others across the state – by water bodies, air, wildlife, vegetation, open spaces, conservation areas, roads, railways, etc. – and comprehensive plans must recognize and address these connections.



See the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL section [45-22.2-7](#).

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## SECTION 2. COMPREHENSIVE PLAN BASICS

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## THE BASIC INFORMATION

Comprehensive planning in Rhode Island is governed by the Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act (“the Act”), RIGL chapter [45-22.2](#). The municipal Planning Board or Commission is responsible for developing the comprehensive plan. Per the Act, at a minimum, comprehensive plans must be revised and re-adopted every 10 years. In addition to this re-adoption, municipalities are allowed to amend their comprehensive plans up to four times a year. Comprehensive plans must have a 20-year planning horizon. Once locally adopted, municipalities are required to send their comprehensive plans, and any amendments to their plans, to the RI Division of Planning for review. The Division reviews plans and amendments based on criteria set forth in the Act and either approves or denies approval. Staff from the Division is available to assist municipalities during the crafting of their plans and amendments, with the intent of helping communities draft plans that are eligible for approval.

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE REQUIRED CONTENT

The Act requires certain content be included in each comprehensive plan. To receive State approval, every comprehensive plan must include:

- Maps, including:
  - existing conditions, such as land use, zoning, key infrastructure, service areas for public water and sewer, historical and cultural areas and sites, and natural resources;
  - a Future Land Use Map (FLUM); and
  - a map identifying any discrepancies that exist between the FLUM and the existing zoning categories;
- Inventories and assessments related to specific content areas;
- Goals, policies and implementation actions related to specific topic areas;
- A chapter specifically dealing with land use; and
- An implementation program.

For reference, the topics required to be addressed within a comprehensive plan are:

- Natural resource identification and conservation;
- Open space and outdoor recreation identification and protection;
- Historical and cultural resources identification and protection;
- Housing;
- Economic development, including agriculture;
- Services and facilities, including energy and potable water;
- Circulation/transportation;
- Natural hazards; and
- Land use.

This handbook provides general information about inventories and assessments, and goals, policies and implementation actions. Guidance Handbooks #2 through #14 provide guidance on addressing the topics required by the Act, standards for inventories and assessments and addressing State goals with

topic-specific community goals, policies and implementation actions. Guidance Handbook #15 provides guidance on the comprehensive planning process, including local adoption requirements, and Guidance Handbook #16 discusses requirements and guidance for mapping.



Municipalities are free to construct and organize their comprehensive plans in any manner they see fit, to suit their needs. However, the Act requires that comprehensive plans include land use and the implementation program as specific sections of the plan.

## DATA, INVENTORIES, FORECASTS , ASSESSMENTS AND NEEDS

The Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Act requires not only that certain topical areas be addressed, but also that inventories, assessments and forecasts be compiled to determine the community’s needs. In fact, all of the data presented within the comprehensive plan should be related to the identification of needs.

Each of the topical handbooks provides important information about the inventories, assessments and forecasts that will be required for State approval. These handbooks also contain important information about using inventories, assessments and forecasts to determine the community’s needs. This section is intended to provide general information about these items to help in understanding this guidance and fulfilling the requirements.



See the Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL section [45-22.2-6](#).

## INVENTORIES

*in•ven•to•ry (n): a survey of existing conditions*

For the purposes of this guidance and comprehensive plans in general, the word “inventory” is used to describe the gathering of information. Inventories are the first step in identifying needs – we must know what exists before we can draw conclusions and set actions.

The term inventory can be confusing as it brings to mind long lists of data. It is important to remember that an inventory is only as useful as the information included and that too little or too much information can make an inventory less useful. Throughout this document, the words “inventory,” “describe,” and “identify,” are used synonymously to mean “gather data about.”

A good example of the purpose of an inventory is to think of it in the context of a retail business. On a regular basis, retail business owners conduct an inventory of their products, including how many of each type of product, and then use this information, along with some other data, to draw conclusions. The number of products within the store is simply a data point, to be combined with other data points for other purposes – i.e. combined with the wholesale cost of the products in order to determine the replacement cost, or compared with historic numbers to determine if products are selling as predicted. In a similar way, the inventories of the comprehensive plan are about gathering data that can be used and combined to perform assessments and determine needs.

## FORECASTS

*fore•cast (n): a description of the conditions, quantities, or values anticipated to occur at a designated*

Similar to an inventory, a forecast provides data that can be used to draw conclusions. More specifically, a forecast provides data about the future. A forecast helps a municipality figure out what the conditions will be like at a future point in time, so that goals, policies and implementation actions can be included in the plan that will meet future needs. The Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act requires that comprehensive plans use a minimum 20-year planning timeframe for all forecasts.

## ASSESSMENTS

*as•sess•ment (n): the analysis of data to identify needs*

The term “assessment” is used to represent an analysis of data that results in a statement regarding the status of the community. Assessments use the data that has been collected in the inventories and forecasts to determine whether problems, issues and/or needs exist within the community. While inventories and forecasts present data only, an assessment draws conclusions about what is happening within a community and particularly, about the existing and future needs. Assessments can be quantitative, meaning based in numeric data, or qualitative, meaning based in subjective data.

## NEEDS

*need (n): a lack of something necessary; a condition requiring relief*

A “need” is a statement about something that is lacking in the community and particularly, something from which the community requires relief. Needs are determined through assessments, which are based in inventories and forecasts.

A comprehensive plan’s assessments may show that there are gaps between the existing or future condition and the most desirable condition, but not every gap is necessarily a need. The community should review the results of each assessment and determine those gaps which constitute needs and necessitate action, those gaps that, if left unfilled, would present a significant problem. Each identified need within the comprehensive plan must be addressed with goals and policies and/or implementation actions that would help to relieve the need. Communities must decide for themselves the areas in which the lack of something presents an intolerable need.

## GOALS, POLICIES AND IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

The Act requires that goals, policies and implementation techniques (or actions) be included to address each of the required topics. Goals, policies and implementation actions have different purposes and should be crafted so that they can be used by the municipality effectively. While policies and actions may both lead to achievement of the same goal, it is important to remember that they are not necessarily linked hierarchically.

Each topical handbook contains sample goals, policies and implementation actions that would help a comprehensive plan embody and be consistent with the goals of the State.



The Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act **does not** require that comprehensive plans include objectives and therefore objectives are not required for State approval.

# QUICK GUIDE TO GOALS, POLICIES AND IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

GOAL: A desired outcome. Simple, broad, high-reaching.

Appropriate public transportation options will be available for the community's use.

**POLICIES:** Statements that guide municipal decision makers so that all decisions help to achieve the goals.

Encourage employers to offer incentives for commuting via an alternative transportation mode.

Promote the use of alternative transportation by public employees.

Support development that includes elements designed to increase the use of alternative transportation.

Allocate higher densities of residential and commercial uses in areas well served by public transportation.

**ACTIONS:** Specific, measurable acts whose implementation will bring the municipality closer to achievement of its goals.

Assess the conditions of the city's rights of way for use by bicycles, annually, in order to maintain an up-to-date list of necessary improvements.

Create a designated city-wide network of on-street bicycle routes that connects the city's key destinations and highest density neighborhoods.

Adopt site and architectural design guidelines for commercial development that increase pedestrian interest and safety.

The **goals** define the place where all of the community's hopes and dreams have been realized. The community's goals should be realistic yet ambitious, unhindered yet obtainable.

The **policies** of a comprehensive plan give direction to decision-makers and key community leaders, providing guidance on handling difficult issues, prioritizing the allocation of scarce resources and working together to achieve goals. Policies set out the parameters for action; they are the procedures that must be followed for the goals to be achieved and they set the tone for community action.

Specific and attainable, the **implementation actions** are the steps that can be taken, along and in line with the path that has been set out, to reach the goals. These actions, if completed, will keep the community moving toward its goals.

## A NOTE ON OBJECTIVES

While not required for State approval, many communities find it helpful to include objectives within their comprehensive plans to make it easy to measure their success. Objectives are related to the goals, but are measurable and attainable within an identified timeframe. Objectives set a time period by which a specific, measurable outcome will be achieved.

**Example:** By 2025, 5% of the population will use a means other than a single-occupant vehicle for commuting.

## SETTING THE VISION WITH GOALS

*goal (n): a desired outcome*

There are many overlapping and interrelated aspects of the community, all of which should be considered when determining the community's vision, (which is why the Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Act requires that communities address a wide variety of topics within their comprehensive plans). The comprehensive plan's goals should answer important questions about the future of the municipality, such as:

- > How will lands be used in the future?
- > How will uses be distributed?
- > What kinds of places will exist within the community?
- > What will the transportation network consist of?
- > What types of goods, services and jobs will be available for residents?
- > What services will be provided to residents by the community?
- > How much and what types of energy will the community be using?
- > Will there be enough water to serve all of the community's residents and businesses?
- > Will the community have properly planned for natural hazards and climate-related stresses?
- > How much open space will be available for residents use?
- > What types of recreational opportunities will be available, where will they be located and who will they serve?
- > Will there be any historically and culturally significant structures or places remaining?
- > Will there be any opportunities for cultural enrichment?
- > What types of housing will be available?
- > Will all of the community's residents be able to afford housing that fits their needs?
- > Will the elderly be able to age in place?
- > Will there be jobs for young people returning from college?
- > Will residents be healthy? Will they be happy? Will they enjoy life in the community?

The answers to these questions (and more, as explained in this guidebook) should all be found within a community's comprehensive plan – these are the community's goals. The goals define the place where all of the community's hopes and dreams have been realized. Goal setting is an important step in the comprehensive planning process. The community's goals should be realistic yet ambitious, unhindered yet obtainable. When a community envisions what it could be like in the future, there should be little nay-saying and almost no, "we'll never get there".

One easy way to think about the pieces of a comprehensive plan is to compare them to building a house. First, the builder needs to understand the end result. Should it be a safe home? An energy efficient one? How many people will live in the home? How many bedrooms and bathrooms are needed? Is closet space important? A large kitchen? Before setting a plan for building the house, the end result (or the goals) must be determined.

However, it isn't enough to just set a goal – a comprehensive plan must set forth the specific course of action that the community can follow to reach the goals. The course of action is composed of two specific elements that provide direction on obtaining the community's goals: policies and implementation actions.

## USING THE RIGHT VERB

Policies and implementation actions have very different purposes. When crafted correctly, each can be effective tools in helping a community reach their goals. The first step in using these tools correctly is knowing the difference; the second is using language that helps the reader understand the purpose of each. Each policy and implementation action should begin with a verb. Some typical verbs for each are below.

### POLICIES

Accommodate	Insist
Address	Maintain
Advance	Make sure
Affirm	Manage
Aid	Nurture
Anticipate	Persuade
Assert	Preserve
Assist	Prioritize
Assure	Promote
Balance	Protect
Base on	Recognize
Conserve	Recommend
Consider	Require
Continue to	Resist
Coordinate	Retain
Declare	Seek
Discourage	Support
Encourage	Urge
Ensure	Work to
Explore	
Foster	
Further	
Help	
Improve	
Inform	

### IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

Acquire	Implement
Adapt	Initiate
Adjust	Institute
Adopt	Inventory
Amend	Investigate
Appraise	Modify
Assess	Partner with
Begin	Prepare
Calculate	Provide
Create	Pursue
Collaborate	Regulate
Consult with	Review
Contact	Revise
Dedicate	Schedule
Designate	Study
Determine	Undertake
Develop	Update
Devise	Use
Disseminate	Work with
Enact	
Establish	
Evaluate	
Fund	
Hire	
Identify	

It should be noted that many, if not all, of Rhode Island’s municipalities already have adopted comprehensive plans, that include valid goals. When revising and re-adopting a comprehensive plan, communities should consider existing goals and whether or not they are still sufficient and/or appropriate.

## GUIDING DECISIONS WITH POLICIES

*pol•i•cy (n): statements that guide municipal decision-makers so that all decisions help to achieve the goals*

The policies of a comprehensive plan give direction to decision-makers and key community leaders, providing guidance on handling difficult issues, prioritizing the allocation of scarce resources and working together to achieve goals. Policies set out the parameters for action; they are the procedures that must be followed for the goals to be achieved and they set the tone for community action.

Following with the previous example, if the goal is to create a safe, energy efficient, 3 bedroom house, the policies would be those parameters for action that will help the home come to fruition. Some examples might be:

- Purchase only energy efficient appliances.
- Stay within budget.
- Follow the architectural plans.

Policies are typically phrased with guiding verbs, rather than action verbs. See the list on [page 18](#) for examples of verbs that are best suited for a comprehensive plan’s policies.

## MAKING PROGRESS WITH IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

*im•ple•men•ta•tion ac•tion (n): specific, measurable acts whose implementation will bring the municipality closer to achievement of its goals*

Specific and attainable, the implementation actions are the steps that can be taken, along and in line with the path that has been set out, to reach the goals. These actions, if completed, will keep the community moving toward its goals. To make them meaningful, implementation actions must be associated with a responsible party (will the builder put in the landscaping or will a landscaping company be hired?) and a timeframe (does the foundation go in first or the sewer connection?).

Implementation actions should be specific and action-oriented. Implementation actions should use action verbs, such as those found in the list on [page 18](#).

## KEEPING IT RELEVANT

Keeping a comprehensive plan to a manageable size is a skill that takes quite a bit of judicial editing. One of the most effective ways to trim the size of a comprehensive plan is to keep everything within it connected and relevant.

Everything contained within a comprehensive plan should be connected. Comprehensive plans are policy documents, setting forth a vision for the community (which takes the form of goals) and the specific course of action that, if followed, will achieve that vision (also known as the policies and implementation actions).

To craft a plan for achieving the goals, the community must understand where it is starting from (the existing conditions) and the likely changes that it will experience along the way (the future conditions).

To gain this understanding, communities must develop inventories, perform assessments, compile forecasts and analyze their needs. Assessments and inventories allow communities to set policies and implementation actions that will make it possible to reach their goals while accommodating any changes that are likely to occur along the way.

When finalizing the comprehensive plan, someone should complete a thorough read of the plan and remove any information that seems irrelevant. All of the data and discussions of the comprehensive plan should lead to the identification of needs and the policies and implementation actions that were chosen to help the municipality meet its needs and achieve its goals.



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## SECTION 3. GENERAL STANDARDS FOR COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

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## GENERAL STANDARDS FOR COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

The Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act requires certain content for a comprehensive plan. To receive State approval, every comprehensive plan must:

- 1.1 There shall be a single version of the comprehensive plan, including all amendments, appendices and supplements, which is fully updated and re-adopted at least once every 10 years.
- 1.2 Utilize a minimum 20-year planning timeframe in considering forecasts, goals, and policies.
- 1.3 Be internally consistent in its policies, forecasts, and standards.
- 1.4 Include a demographic profile of the municipality, including breakdowns of population race, education, income and age.
- 1.5 Include a 20-year population projection.
- 1.6 Include a development capacity (build-out) analysis that is based on the existing zoning districts.
- 1.7 Utilize data that is:
  - a. From a reliable data source;
  - b. The most recent available data;
  - c. Consistent throughout the document; and
  - d. Calculated correctly based on a methodology that is sound
- 1.8 For any and all plans and/or documents that are to be “incorporated by reference” into the comprehensive plan, the following requirements must be met:
  - a. The entire plan or document must be submitted to the State for review; and,
  - b. The entire plan or document must be included in the comprehensive plan either as an appendix or as a separate chapter or the text must include all of the following:
    - i. The words “incorporation by reference”;
    - ii. Identification of the material to be incorporated, by title, date, edition, author, publisher, and identification number of the publication;
    - iii. A statement of availability that includes the name(s) and address(es) of the municipal agency or agencies where the document can be viewed by the public, contact information (i.e. phone number and/or email address) for questions from the public regarding the material, and how copies can be obtained or purchased; and
    - iv. The document publisher’s address, phone number, email, and internet address, if applicable.

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### A SINGLE VERSION OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN (Standard 1.1)

The Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL subsection 45-22.2-12 requires municipalities to maintain a single version of the comprehensive plan, which is updated a minimum of every 10-years. The law also stipulates that newly adopted comprehensive plans supercede all previous versions.

## MINIMUM 20-YEAR PLANNING TIMEFRAME

(Standard 1.2)

The comprehensive plan must utilize a 20-year planning timeframe or planning horizon. Some municipalities choose to put a statement in the plan's introduction that the plan is based on a 20-year planning horizon, while others highlight the 20-year timeframe when each assessment or forecast is discussed. Either approach is acceptable, as long as every forecast looks forward a minimum of 20 years from plan adoption.

## INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

(Standard 1.3)

Comprehensive plans must be internally consistent in all aspects. All of the plan's goals, policies and implementation actions must be consistent, working in concert to bring about the desired future conditions. All of the plan's data must be consistent, presenting a solid base from which planning can take place.

## BASELINE DATA

(Standard 1.4, 1.5 and 1.6)

There is a lot of data required for compiling a comprehensive plan, much of which is described in the topical handbooks. However, there is some baseline data that is required for comprehensive plans that is relevant to multiple topical areas, on which comprehensive plans must be based. At a minimum, comprehensive plans must include the following baseline data:

- A demographic profile of the municipality, including breakdowns of population race, ethnicity, education, income and age;
- A 20-year population projection; and
- A build-out analysis that is based on the existing zoning districts.

For more information about the build-out analysis, see Guidance Handbook #13 - Planning for Land Use.



Some communities have chosen to include a "Community Profile" section within their comprehensive plan that describes the community and lays out basic demographic data that helps to set the context for the plan. This might be a good option for your community if there seems to be a lot of "extra" information woven throughout the plan.

## DATA REQUIREMENTS

(Standard 1.7)

The Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Act requires that comprehensive plans use "adequate, uniform, and valid data." To translate, this means that all of the data in the plan must be:

- From a reliable data source;
- Consistent throughout the document;
- Calculated correctly based on a methodology that is sound; and
- The most recent available data.



See the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL subsections [45-22.2-6\(b\)](#) and [45-22.2-9\(d\)\(7\)](#).

In each topical handbook, recommended reliable data sources have been given for required inventories, forecasts and assessments. Using any combination of the recommended data sources will be deemed adequate for State approval. If another data source is utilized other than those that are recommended, the comprehensive plan must state why the selected source has been chosen.

To receive State approval, all of the data used within the comprehensive plan must be consistent. As an example, if the plan presents an estimated future population for the year 2035 in the housing chapter, that same figure must be used everywhere the 2035 population figure is presented throughout the plan. If the plan includes a build-out scenario that bases future projections on an average annual rate of 20 new units built per year, this same figure must be used in other assessments and forecasts that use the number of units being built per year.

To maintain consistency, it is also helpful if the comprehensive plan uses the same terminology throughout when describing the same data. As an example, the phrases “new units per year,” “new units constructed per year,” “new units approved per year,” “new units permitted per year,” “units given a certificate of occupancy per year,” and “units developed per year,” may all be used when discussing new housing units, even though they all refer to a slightly different piece of data. To avoid confusion, it would be best to choose a phrase and a data point and stick with it throughout the plan. That way, the reader will know that the discussion is referring to the exact same piece of data in each instance.

Wherever a calculation is used to draw a conclusion or identify a need, the comprehensive plan should show the calculation and/or methodology that was used. All calculations must be mathematically correct and based on a methodology that is logical and appropriate.

The data used throughout the plan must be consistent and the most recently available, both when revising and re-adopting a plan or when amending a plan. When revising and re-adopting a plan, all of the data in the plan must be the most recently available data from the appropriate data source. For example, a plan adopted in 2016 may use 2010 Census data, but when re-adopted in 2026, the 2010 Census data must be replaced with the 2020 Census data. If data exists within a previous version of the plan that cannot be updated, it may be necessary to find an alternate data source or to remove the data from the plan, unless there is relevance in keeping the data for a historical comparison. When amending a plan, all of the data relevant to the amendment must be the most recently available, following the guidelines established above. The amended plan must have data that is consistent, so if data is updated as part of an amendment, all instances of that same data point must also be updated.

It is also important to note, however, that being recent does not necessarily guarantee that the data is reliable, accurate, or consistent with other data in the plan. This Guidance Handbook Series presents recommended data sources to ensure reliability. If another data source is used instead of a recommended data source listed in one of the Guidance Handbooks, it is important to verify that the data chosen still meets all of the other standards listed above.

## INCORPORATED BY REFERENCE

### (Standard 1.8)

Part of the comprehensive planning process is to review other plans and integrate the relevant contents into the comprehensive plan. Municipalities have two options for integrating the contents of other plans:

1) to integrate and reference, or 2) to incorporate by reference. More information on the difference between these two approaches can be found in Guidance Handbook #15 - The Comprehensive Planning Process. As discussed in Handbook #15, the integrate and reference option is generally recommended. However, when a plan is wholly applicable to the contents of a comprehensive plan, and should be considered in its entirety when making land use decisions, it may be appropriate for the plan to be incorporated into the comprehensive plan by reference. In those limited cases, for each plan that is incorporated by reference, all of the standards listed under Standard 1.9 must be met.



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