

THE RHODE ISLAND COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING STANDARDS
GUIDANCE HANDBOOK SERIES

**GUIDANCE HANDBOOK #16:
THE COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING PROCESS**

Approved by the Rhode Island State Planning Council on
January 14, 2016

The general assembly hereby establishes a series of goals to provide overall direction and consistency for state and municipal agencies in the comprehensive planning process [...] To encourage the involvement of all citizens in the formulation, review, and adoption, or amendment of the comprehensive plan.

The Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL subsection 45-22.2-3(c)(10)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning Guidance Handbook Series is the result of over twenty-four months of cooperation and coordination among state agencies, local planners and other professionals interested in helping cities and towns craft better comprehensive plans. The guidance development process was overseen by the Comprehensive Planning Advisory Committee, a dedicated group of planning, land use, legal and community professionals who worked diligently to develop content on the comprehensive planning process and to review topical content as it was developed. Without this group the manual would not have become reality.

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 #16 - The Comprehensive Planning Process provides a recommended process for crafting a comprehensive plan, information on how to include staff of the Statewide Planning Program in comprehensive planning and details on the requirements for adoption of comprehensive plans by the municipality.

This handbook is split into six sections. [Section 1 - Including RI SPP in the Process](#) provides guidance as to how the staff of the RI State Planning Program can assist municipalities throughout the drafting and adoption of their comprehensive plans. [Section 2 - Crafting a Comprehensive Plan](#) provides recommendations for going through the process of drafting a comprehensive plan, all the way from preparation to plan development. [Section 3 - Obtaining Input](#) lists a variety of ways municipalities can engage residents and other stakeholders in the comprehensive planning process. [Section 4 - Formal Adoption Process](#) outlines the requirements for municipal adoption of the comprehensive plan. [Section 5 - Official State Review of Locally-Adopted Comprehensive Plans](#) describes the state review procedure laid out in statute. [Section 6 - Submittal Forms](#) contains the forms that must be submitted when requesting draft or final review of a comprehensive plan by the Division of Planning.

Throughout this handbook there are references to the “Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program” (“RISPP”), and the “Division of Planning.” RI SPP is a program of the Division of Planning and the terms are used interchangeably.

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 Rhode Island General Law (RIGL). Blue text within this sidenote 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.

SECTION 1. ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE FROM RI SPP

WHY DOES THE STATE REVIEW COMPREHENSIVE PLANS?

The Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL chapter [45-22.2](#), establishes 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.

Given this structure, municipalities can save time and resources by involving staff of the Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program (“RI SPP”) from the very beginning. Read on to find out more about the ways in which RI SPP can assist municipalities in completing their plans.

HERE TO HELP

RI SPP’s team wants your community’s comprehensive plan to be the best it can be and staff is available to assist in a variety of ways over the course of your update, long before the plan goes to the city or town council for approval and it is submitted to RI SPP for final review. With RI SPP staff involved in the process from an early stage, any major concerns can be discussed and addressed upfront, saving the municipality time post-adoption. Also, RI SPP staff have extensive experience in public participation, needs assessments, data collection and other important aspects of comprehensive planning, and would be happy to assist your team in whatever ways possible.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

To make the final approval process as easy as possible, we suggest the following pre-project process so that RI SPP staff can give you the maximum amount of support possible.

STEP 1: INITIAL CONTACT WITH RI SPP STAFF

Before advisory committees are organized, citizens are gathered, pen is put to paper or a consultant is hired, let us know that you are planning to begin your project. Call or email RI SPP to alert us to the fact that the community will be beginning the process and to kick-off RI SPP’s participation in the effort. Let us know where the community is in the process and, if there are any specific aspects of the plan that present concerns, point those out so that we can begin thinking of ways to assist in overcoming the concerns. If there is already a sense of how extensive the revisions will be, let us know that as well. During this initial contact, we will alert you to any recent changes to the Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act or to the Standards Manual, and we’ll also try to set up a time for the discussion outlined below under Step 2.

STEP 2: DISCUSSION WITH RI SPP STAFF

Upon undertaking the revision process, the municipality should review the existing plan to determine:

1. What aspects of the plan need revising (or how extensive the revisions will be) based on the contents of the standards manual; and
2. If there are any critical issues that the community will need RI SPP assistance with throughout the

update process.

Once this review has been completed, a meeting should be scheduled with all of the key players from both the municipality and RI SPP. At this initial meeting, RI SPP staff will answer any questions about the requirements for state approval outlined in the standards manual, give any initial ideas that could help to strengthen the plan, and provide general information about what will be necessary for the comprehensive plan revision to receive State approval.

This meeting also provides an opportunity for the team to review with RI SPP the process that will be undertaken to get from the existing plan to a plan that is ready for State approval and for RI SPP to give the team some ideas for the process based on our experience with other communities. The staff of RI SPP has experience developing comprehensive plans and engaging the public and would be happy to provide input to strengthen the process. Having this upfront meeting of the minds will get everyone on the same page about the process and requirements.

DURING THE DRAFTING PROCESS

Among other things, RI SPP is equipped to provide the following types of technical assistance to a municipality during the crafting of a comprehensive plan.

- Review proposed processes and methods for existing conditions analysis, such as surveys, assessment tools, inventory methods and data to be gathered.
- Assist in data gathering from State agencies or the U.S. Census Bureau.
- Review results of existing conditions analysis and provide recommendations on determining needs.
- Assist with determining the scope and process for public workshops and meetings.
- Assist with public workshop and meeting facilitation.
- Provide topical presentations to planning boards and/or citizens related to State goals.
- Attend advisory committee meetings to provide input on how suggested revisions support or hinder State goals.
- Review proposed implementation program (goals, policies, objectives, and implementation actions) and provide recommendations on strengthening the program.
- Provide samples and/or models of plan components as are available.
- Assist in developing required maps using available data.

To request technical assistance on your comprehensive plan, contact the Chief of the RI Statewide Planning Program. RI SPP is available to assist in similar ways for both full comprehensive plan revisions and amendments to a comprehensive plan.

DRAFT REVIEW

We highly recommend getting RI SPP staff involved in the draft review process as early as possible. RI SPP and many of the other State agencies are willing and able to review drafts of a community's comprehensive plan both as they are produced and in its final version.

Draft review of comprehensive plans can provide major benefits for municipalities. The most obvious benefit of draft review is the reduction in the statutorily mandated, post-adoption State review time

period. State review may take up to 120 days from the close of the comment period to review an adopted comprehensive plan if a complete, final draft was not reviewed prior to adoption. However, when a complete, final draft has been reviewed prior to adoption, state review must be completed within 30 days of the close of the public comment period.

However, draft review provides many additional benefits to municipalities. RI SPP staff have a lot of experience crafting comprehensive plans, performing assessments, determining needs and creating user-friendly documents and we are happy to share our experience with you to strengthen your plan. Perhaps the most important benefit, though, is that draft review enables two-way discussions between RI SPP staff and the local comprehensive planning team about issues that may hinder approvability. During draft review, RI SPP staff can alert the local team to any unmet requirements of the Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act (“the Act”) or conflicts with State goals and policies and a conversation can be had about the various ways to address the issues. Addressing approvability issues prior to a Planning Board or Commission approval and City or Town Council adoption can limit post-adoption revisions, saving time and eliminating the need for additional hearings.

RI SPP is willing to review both individual chapters and the plan as a whole and can offer advice on both strengthening the contents of the plan and on resolving issues that may hinder approvability. The Rules and Standards of the State Planning Council (which can be found at http://www.planning.ri.gov/documents/council/SPC_Rule_%202014.pdf) detail five (5) types of draft review that RI SPP can undertake, as shown in Table 16-1, and provides mandatory time frames for RI SPP to complete each type of review.

When submitting draft materials to RI SPP for review (any type), municipalities must also submit Form A, found in [Section 7 - Submittal Forms](#), which will indicate which type of review is being sought.

To make the draft review process as effective as possible, RI SPP recommends municipalities take advantage of both of the stages of draft review outlined below. However, only review of a full, final draft of a comprehensive plan (not individual chapters) - review type 2B in Table 16-1 - will qualify a municipality for the reduced State review time that is allowed by the Act pursuant to RIGL subsection [45-22.2-9\(c\)\(3\)\(2\)](#).

TABLE 16-1 TYPES OF DRAFT REVIEW AVAILABLE TO MUNICIPALITIES

TYPE OF REVIEW		MANDATORY TIME FRAME FOR REVIEW COMPLETION
1A	Review of one or more draft chapters by RI SPP staff only	20 days for a single chapter, an additional 10 days for each additional chapter
1B	Review of draft amendments by RI SPP staff only	30 days
2A	Review of one or more draft chapters by RI SPP staff and the staff of other State agencies	30 days for a single chapter, an additional 15 days for each additional chapter
2B	Review of a full comprehensive plan draft by RI SPP staff and staff of other State agencies	120 days
2C	Review of draft amendments by RI SPP staff and staff of other State agencies	45 days

REVIEW OF DRAFT CHAPTERS

First, RI SPP recommends that municipalities submit draft chapters for review by staff at RI SPP (draft review type 1A, as shown in Table 16-1) We will do our best to give any advice that is applicable, including suggestions on:

- Satisfaction of the requirements outlined in the Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning Standards Manual;
- Any other major issues that might hinder the plan’s approvability;
- Other factors to consider in the existing conditions analysis;
- The appropriate use of terminology, including goals, objectives, policies and implementation actions;
- Any seeming inconsistencies in the plan’s text; and
- Making the document more user-friendly.

If, during the review of a particular chapter, RI SPP staff feels that the municipality would benefit from getting other agencies or entities involved in the review, we will suggest their involvement to the municipality and will assist in coordinating their involvement as may be necessary, but involvement of other State agencies will be at the discretion of the municipality. If municipalities wish to have other State agencies review draft chapters, the draft chapters can be submitted for Type 2A review, as outlined in Table 16-1.

REVIEW OF FULL FINAL DRAFTS

Second, we recommend that municipalities submit a full draft of the comprehensive plan for review by both RI SPP staff and the staff of other State agencies after Planning Board or Commission approval but prior to City or Town Council approval (draft review type 2B, as outlined in Table 16-1). This review can happen whether or not draft chapters have been previously reviewed, but must occur in order to qualify a plan for the reduced final review time.

During this review, the full draft of the plan will be sent for comment to all of the agencies that will be involved in the final review of the adopted plan. RI SPP will summarize all of the agencies’ comments, pointing out which comments present approvability issues for the plan, and will work with the municipality to address any problems that may arise. It can be expected that agency comments will be less extensive if the agencies have been involved in reviewing draft chapters and the municipality has addressed any preliminary comments that may have been brought forward.

This review can only occur if a full draft of the plan is submitted. RI SPP will need to review the plan as a whole in order to identify any major inconsistencies between the chapters and provide any final thoughts on major issues that could be an impediment to final approval.

SECTION 2. CRAFTING A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The steps of the comprehensive planning process are presented below. The process presented here has been developed by an advisory committee made up primarily of local planners and planning consultants and represents the collective best practice recommendations of the committee. Other than the requirements for plan adoption, the process outlined is in no way mandatory for State approval. Also, the components have been presented in a logical sequence by phase – preparation, assessment, plan development, and plan adoption – but the sequence by which each community undertakes the process is up to that city or town. In many cases it may be more effective for multiple steps to occur simultaneously or for the order of the steps to be changed, depending on the needs of the municipality.

This process has been crafted with a full 10-year comprehensive plan revision in mind, but it may also be applicable for a partial revision or an amendment.

PREPARATION

IDENTIFY THE TEAM

The complexities of a comprehensive plan revision require a lot of time and input from a large variety of stakeholders. One important step in preparing for the revision is determining the core comprehensive planning team and the leader of that team. Who will be responsible for seeing the project through to completion? Who is available to assist? These questions will have different answers for every municipality, but it is very important that they be answered.

Typical members of the team include:

- The City/Town Planner and/or the Planning Department staff;
- Planning Board/Commission members;
- Other department heads and/or their staff;
- An Advisory Committee; and/or
- Consultant(s).

Municipal staff should assess the internal capacity for completing the revision in order to determine whether an advisory committee, consultant or other entity will be needed. It is important to be realistic and to understand the technical capacity of those who will be involved so that any gaps that exist can be filled. For example, if no one on staff has experience with geographic information systems (GIS), then it may be necessary to hire a consultant.

In some municipalities, planning staff may find it most effective to draft a project work plan (described below) before identifying an Advisory Committee or project team. In other communities, staff may want to involve local officials or other department heads in creating the work plan.

DEVELOP THE PROJECT WORK PLAN

Tasks and Timeline

Project work plan development should begin with a listing out of the tasks that will be necessary to complete the revision. Once the tasks have been outlined, consider how long each task will take to accomplish. Time estimations should be reasonable and, as a rule, it is always better to allocate more time than is anticipated to be needed than not enough. Some project managers prefer to lay out the tasks and

timeline in a chart, others prefer a simple list. In the end, the work plan should give an idea as to how long the entire process will take, from preliminary review to obtaining State approval. If, once everything is scheduled, the process seems like it will take longer than the time allotted or it will cost more than the available budget, the team can decide which tasks can be shortened or deleted all together, but it is always best to lay out the ideal process first and then scale back if necessary.



Always anticipate more meetings than seem necessary and don't forget to include time to prepare for meetings, create presentations, coordinate logistics, perform document reviews, create post-meeting summary materials, etc.

Public Participation and Communication

The project work plan should also detail the plan for public participation and communication. Public participation and communication should be woven throughout every aspect of the planning process and should aim to include as many people and as broad representation as possible.

At this stage in the process, public participation efforts and communication materials should focus on setting the stage and advertising the project and process. The project team will also want to set up any social media outlets that will be used to get the word out, such as a specialized project website, blog, Twitter feed or Facebook page.

The Planning Board/Commission

One important thing to note is that the development of the comprehensive plan is technically the responsibility of the Planning Board or Commission. It is important that the Planning Board and Commission be involved throughout the project and that their role is clearly articulated in the work plan.

Funding and Budget

It is recommended that the Planning Board/Commission and the municipal planning staff start having funding discussions with the appropriate municipal entities well before the project commences. Some communities find it helpful to set aside a portion of the overall planning budget for several years prior to the expected comprehensive plan revision.

Other Types of Assistance

With the tasks and timeline laid out, it should be easier to determine any gaps that exist within the designated comprehensive planning team and to determine if additional assistance is needed. For many municipalities, some sort of help will be necessary to supplement existing internal staff and Planning Board/Commission capacity, and it can take the form of an Advisory Committee, interested citizens or consultants. For some tasks, such as data gathering and meeting facilitation, cities and towns can also call on staff of RI SPP for technical assistance.

Bring Local Officials Up to Speed

Once the project work plan is set, it is a good idea to share it with the project team, including the Planning Board/Commission and department heads. Reviewing the work plan at a meeting would be a good way to highlight their involvement, discuss their expectations for the comprehensive plan and review the requirements of the Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act ("the Act"), RIGL

TIPS FOR ENGAGING A CONSULTANT

To get the most out of a consultant, some planning is necessary prior to releasing a Request for Proposals (RFP). When a consultant is brought in, their expertise should be targeted to supplement the existing capacity of the municipal staff and/or the Planning Board/Commission. In some cases, a consultant can act as the project manager, the person who coordinates all of the activities of the plan and is responsible for bringing the plan to fruition. In other cases, a consultant may be brought in for specific tasks, such as data analysis, public participation or mapping.

DRAFT AN RFP

The first step in hiring a consultant is to draft the Request for Proposals (“RFP”), and particularly the Scope of Work. There isn’t one model Scope of Work for creating a comprehensive plan as each community will need a different level of assistance. To craft the scope of work, the municipality should look at the project work plan, determine gaps in capacity and make a list of any specific, pre-existing expectations. If the team would like to hold a series of public meetings for input, the scope should include an estimate of how many. If there are certain data sets that the municipal team wants analyzed, the data sets should be named. If there are specific topics, other than those required by the Act, that the consultant will be asked to consider, they should be identified. It is also helpful if the Scope of Work is tied to a project time line so that bidding consultants can better estimate cost.

Most consultants appreciate specificity in an RFP – the more specific the Scope of Work, the easier it will be for them to estimate the time commitment and the budget. However, include too much detail and there is a chance that all of the consultant proposals will read the same. RFPs should also offer some flexibility so that consultants have the ability to demonstrate why they are better for the task than their competitors.

If warranted, an RFP should include details about any pre-proposal meetings that the municipality will hold, and it should indicate that interviews may be conducted with shortlisted firms. The RFP should be clear that any sub-consultants must be identified in the proposal. The RFP can also ask consultants to provide hourly rates for extra work (outside of the scope) and it may be helpful to have consultants provide a “cost per meeting” for any meetings that are over and above those identified in the Scope of Work, along with details as to what the cost per meeting would include (logistics, advertising, preparation, etc).

The RFP should also include some information about the scoring criteria that will be used when reviewing the proposals. The scoring criteria lets the consultant know what aspects of their experience are most relevant and can lead to better, more thought out proposals. Some communities also choose to identify how many points will be allocated to each criterion..

The RFP should be reviewed with local leadership – the Planning Board/Commission, City/Town Manager or Administrator, department heads, etc – to keep them in the loop and make sure that nothing has been left out. Also, RI SPP staff would be happy to review the RFP prior to its release and provide feedback on how it could be strengthened.

If the project has any federal or state funding, make sure to review all of the procurement criteria associated with the funding source. More often than not, the rules associated with the funding source will present specific requirements for the RFP.

POST AND ADVERTISE THE RFP

Each municipality has its own rules for posting and advertising Requests for Proposals. Check with the City/Town clerk for more information about the community's posting and advertising requirements.

REVIEW THE PROPOSALS RECEIVED

Once the RFP has been developed and posted, the municipality will have to score the proposals received in an objective way. Typically, a review committee is formed, which consists of the Town Planner or the Planning Director, and other municipal leaders, such as the Town/City Manager or Administrator, some of the department heads and/or a member of the Planning Board. It is important to pull together a variety of perspectives for the review committee – different perspectives often see different strengths and weaknesses. If the municipal team would like an additional planning perspective on the review committee, a staff member from RI SPP could be involved, either by sitting on the committee and officially scoring the proposals or by providing input into the conversation.

EXECUTE THE CONSULTANT CONTRACT

Once a consultant or consultant team has been selected, a contract must be executed by both parties. To reduce the municipality's liability, it is recommended that the consultant not start work until the contract has been executed.

Depending on the scope of work outlined in the RFP and proposed by the consultant, it may be best to hold a project kick-off meeting with the consultant and the municipal team to work out the details of the contract and primarily the scope of work. The consultant will likely want the scope of work that is attached to the contract to be explicit in roles and responsibilities, and if the scope of work outlined in the RFP was not specific, this type of meeting may be warranted.

WORKING WITH THE CONSULTANT

Once a consultant is hired, it is important to work with them as a partner. The responsibility of developing the comprehensive plan belongs to the Planning Board or Commission and the municipal planning staff; engaging a consultant can supplement internal capacity but the municipal comprehensive planning team should stay intimately involved with the project. The team leader should be in constant communication with the consultant, articulating deadlines, obtaining feedback about potential issues and generally being aware of the project's progress. Constant communication also allows the team leader to determine how the municipal team can be inserted into the process in the most effective way. Building in bi-weekly or monthly conference calls between the internal project team and the consultant can open the lines of communication and keep everything moving.

Another concern that may arise when working with a consultant is the adequacy of final deliverables. In addition to being in constant communication with the consultant, the team leader or their designee should review all draft materials and provide feedback on the materials in a timely manner. The only way to manage final deliverables is to review interim products, be intimately involved with the project as it progresses and have a strong, open relationship with the consultant.

ENGAGE A CONSULTANT (IF NECESSARY)

A consultant may be a good choice for a municipality if existing staff capacity is limited. If a consultant will be used, the comprehensive planning team will need to go through the locally administered process of engaging a consultant.

PRELIMINARY REVIEW OF EXISTING PLAN

At the outset of the comprehensive planning process, it is important to review the existing plan to provide some context for the new plan. The preliminary review can help to determine the effectiveness of the plan, its strengths and weaknesses and its applicability to the changing context of the municipality, which can lead to a more insightful revised comprehensive plan.

Some questions to consider include:

- Is a clear vision presented? Is the vision still applicable?
- Is there a disconnect between what the plan says and the community's needs, concerns or desires?
- Are there any changing conditions within the municipality that are out of sync with the content of the plan?
- Have there been any legal challenges to the plan?
- What actions have been accomplished?
- What are the strengths of the existing plan? What are the weaknesses?
- Is the plan reader-friendly? Could it be more illustrative? Could it be written in more understandable language?
- Is the plan consistent with the requirements of the Act and the Standards Manual?
- Is the plan consistent with the State Guide Plan?

The results of this assessment can help to frame the new plan's development process and contents. The successes and strengths can be used in public meetings, Planning Board/Commission hearings or with other city/town officials to build support for the process. Understanding the plan's weaknesses allows for improvements. Assessing the plan's alignment with the changing context of the municipality can provide insight into new items that will need to be addressed.

BEGIN EDUCATION ABOUT THE COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING PROCESS

Throughout the project it will be necessary for local officials, department heads and the public to be educated about comprehensive planning. At this stage, education efforts should focus on comprehensive planning generally - What is a comprehensive plan? Why is it important? What is the process by which it gets updated? What is required by the Act? It is never too early to begin this education process, and, at this point, the mechanisms for providing education could include:

- A presentation at a Planning Board/Commission meeting;
- A presentation at a Town/City Council meeting;
- One-on-one discussions with city/town department heads;
- Discussion at an internal staff meeting;

- An internal memorandum to staff;
- A kick-off workshop with the public;
- Posting on the city/town website;
- Updating the city/town's official social media outlets; or
- Sending out an email blast to an existing stakeholder list.

For department heads and other municipal staff members, early education about the comprehensive plan could be crucial to the plan's success. The comprehensive planning team may lean on other municipal staff members for information and draft review throughout the process, and so it is important to get their buy-in at the beginning of the project.

ESTABLISH AN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

One way to supplement municipal capacity is to form an Advisory Committee or Committees. Advisory Committees may not be the right fit for every municipality, but they can help to fill gaps in capacity when utilized well.

Role of the Advisory Committee

The function of Advisory Committees can vary, depending on the municipality and the team's capacity. For some municipalities, the Advisory Committee serves only to provide input on content as it is developed. In others, Advisory Committees assist with assessments, writing and formatting the document. The role of the Advisory Committee should be customized to the municipal needs, but could include any of the following tasks:

- Reviewing the existing comprehensive plan;
- Reviewing existing goals, policies and implementation actions for relevancy;
- Crafting a vision statement;
- Organizing public meetings;
- Facilitating groups at public meetings;
- Performing targeted outreach to stakeholders;
- Gathering data and participating in assessments and data analysis;
- Writing and reviewing text; and
- Presenting the draft plan at public meetings and/or hearings.

Some municipalities find that formalizing the role of the Advisory Committee through the development of a shared set of rules and expectations is helpful. This could include rules for attendance, member roles, expected meeting frequency and other administrative concerns. And, depending on the capacity of the municipal team, it may be helpful to appoint a Chair, Vice Chair and/or Secretary who will be responsible for carrying out the meetings and recording meeting notes.

Advisory Committee Membership

For any group who is asked to perform a specific task, size is important. Too small and the perspective may be narrow; too big and the group may become unwieldy. For a comprehensive plan Advisory Committee, the target group size should be between 8 and 16 people. However, depending on the tasks

being performed, it is not necessary to have only one committee. If the tasks can be split among different groups, multiple committees may be beneficial.

There are two primary options for finding Advisory Committee members. The municipality can put out a public call for members and see who shows up, or the municipality can target specific people, groups or interests and ask members to join through invitation. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches and it may be that a municipality chooses to use a combination of the two.

Public Call for Members: This approach can bring in people not typically involved in the planning process. A public call can also help to advertise the process. However, with this approach, it may be difficult to turn people away if the group grows too big or if the committee seems to include a lot of people representing a specific interest. When using this option, the municipal team should consider whether it will accept all interested people, what to do if the group expands to an unmanageable size and the likelihood of strong representation from a single interest group. A municipality may also choose to require submittal of an application and/or conduct interviews to populate the committee.

Targeted Outreach: With a targeted outreach approach, the municipal team can consider what voices should be at the table and ask specific people to join the committee. This approach can also bring in people not typically involved in the planning process; the team can identify specific stakeholder groups that have been lacking from the process and ask a representative to participate directly. Also, if the team has fore-knowledge of an interest group that may have strong ideas about a certain aspect of the community, a representative from the group can be targeted for the committee. Engaging a variety of different groups early can increase awareness of the project and incorporate their perspective from the beginning. To form the list of potential members, the project team should consider what types of interests they would like represented – environmental, development community, businesses, families with children, students, affordable housing, etc. – and can share the list with other department heads and the Planning Board/Commission for input.

Cit/Town Council Commitment to the Committee

The use of an Advisory Committee will work best if the members are committed to the cause. One way to get the members buy-in to the plan is to show that they have the support of the municipality's Council. There are a number of ways to show City/Town Council commitment to the Advisory Committee:

- Have the Town/City Council adopt a resolution to form the committee;
- Have a Town/City Council member sit on the committee;
- Have the City/Town Council appoint some or all of the committee members;
- Have the City/Town Council send out the invitations to join the committee; and/or
- Give the Advisory Committee a formal spot on the Council agenda for reporting their activities.

SUMMARY

Some of the key points to remember during the preparation stage are:

- The comprehensive planning team can be comprised of more than just municipal staff. The available municipal resources, the desired time frame and existing work load will all play a part in developing the comprehensive planning team.
- A preliminary review of the existing comprehensive plan should be completed very early on to get a sense of the extent of the necessary revision and to integrate “lessons learned” into the new plan.
- Education about the comprehensive plan will be necessary, on a variety of scales and with a variety of stakeholders throughout the project.
- The comprehensive planning team should craft a work plan that can guide the work effort to completion. The work plan should include tasks, budget, time frame, and responsible team members, and should address things such as the public input and communications strategy, existing conditions assessments and public hearings.
- Advisory Committees can take many forms and can be responsible for a variety of tasks, depending on community needs.

ASSESSMENT

DETAILED REVIEW OF THE EXISTING PLAN

Using the Standards Manual as a guide, and the results of the preliminary review as a starting point, the existing plan should be thoroughly reviewed. This is where the team will put pen to paper, redlining the document to determine what text and data is still relevant and what changes are needed to meet the requirements of the Act and to fully embody the State Guide Plan. The end result of this review should be a to-do list: update this data; gather this new information; perform these assessments; replace these goals and policies; determine new implementation actions for this section.

If not engaged already, this may be a good point at which to bring in the other department heads. Have each department head review the sections that are applicable to their work and notify the team about significant changes, including any new data that may be available or any new needs of which they are now aware. In addition to being helpful for assessing the conditions of the municipality, this task can increase their awareness of the comprehensive plan’s applicability to their responsibilities.



Though this review is discussed after all of the Preparation steps, it could come much earlier in the process. If hiring a consultant, this review may need to be completed before the Scope of Work is developed to be able to include the correct tasks.

REVIEW OTHER RELEVANT PLANS AND DOCUMENTS

Municipalities often have existing plans on a variety of topics – plans about specific areas, plans about parks, plans about economic development, plans about streetscapes, plans about hazard mitigation, plans about sustainability, Water Supply System Management Plans, wastewater management plans, stormwater management plans, etc. – and it can be difficult to determine how the comprehensive plan relates to all of

the other plans that the municipality has adopted. A community's comprehensive plan is like a roadmap; it sets forth the community's goals and provides clear direction as to how to achieve them. If achieving the goals laid out in one (or more) of the municipality's other plans is important, the goals, and the recommended steps for achieving them, should be brought into the comprehensive plan. There are two acceptable ways that this can be done, as described on [page 18](#), and the community should determine which approach best suits their needs.

No matter which method the community chooses, the first step to integrating other relevant plans into the comprehensive plan is to review the plans. First, the comprehensive planning team should reach out to other municipal departments to collect the plans that the department heads feel are most relevant. Second, the contents of the plans should be reviewed for relevancy. If a plan presents a vision for the community that is no longer accepted, or if the main objectives of the plan have already been achieved, it may not be appropriate for inclusion within the comprehensive plan. Third, the relevant assessments, goals, policies and implementation techniques from each plan should be outlined or summarized, and discussed as part of the comprehensive planning process.



If during this review some plans are identified as being outdated, but the topic area or objectives seem to still be relevant to the community's present-day concerns, the updating of these plans could turn into action items for the implementation program of the comprehensive plan..

The Capital Improvement Program

One additional municipal document that should be reviewed during the assessment process is the Capital Improvement Program (CIP). The CIP typically lays out all of the anticipated municipal capital expenditures for the next 3-5 year period, which can help to determine any pre-identified infrastructure, service and facility needs in the community.

Other Plans and Documents that May Affect a Community

Each topical Guidance Handbook includes a list of statewide, local or regional plans and documents that relate specifically to that topic area, which should be consulted before embarking on the comprehensive planning process. Additionally, the comprehensive planning team should consider the specific types of plans outlined below.

Comprehensive plans are required to provide for coordinating land uses and demonstrate consistency with the comprehensive plans of contiguous municipalities. The comprehensive planning team should reach out to the planners and/or Planning Boards or Commissions from contiguous municipalities to have discussions around those topics which would benefit from coordination.

Additionally, some areas have regional planning councils that undertake studies and create plans around issues that affect the region. The contents of any regional plans should be reviewed and considered in the comprehensive planning process.

Finally, comprehensive plans must be consistent with the State Guide Plan and relevant State goals and policies. Each topical handbook includes references to the State goals and policies that are relevant to that specific topic and which should be considered when formulating local comprehensive plans.

WHAT TO DO WITH OTHER PLANS?

Once a municipality's other plans have been reviewed, the comprehensive planning team will have to decide how to incorporate them into the comprehensive plan. For this, there are two acceptable options: **integrate and reference** or **incorporate by reference**. A community can choose either option and can use both options within the comprehensive plan as it deems necessary.

INTEGRATE AND REFERENCE

One option for other plans is to integrate the relevant goals, policies and implementation techniques into the comprehensive plan and to simply reference the remaining background information, assessments and analysis. If the other plan is already set up with goals, policies and implementation techniques, the integration can be word-for-word. If not, the integration may require the development of goals, policies and implementation techniques that adequately cover the content of the plan.

If the goals, policies and implementation techniques are integrated into the comprehensive plan, it is important that the background information, assessments and analysis either be referenced or summarized within the text of the plan. Readers of the plan may want more information about how the goals, policies and implementation techniques were developed and, if not provided in the comprehensive plan, should be directed to where the information can be obtained. When referencing another plan, the plan title and date should be included (some plans have been updated many times).

If the "integrate and reference" option is chosen, it is important not to use the phrases "incorporated by reference" or "adopted by reference". These phrases have a much stronger legal connotation.

While it is the community's choice, RI SPP generally recommends this option.



If a lot of plans are referenced within the comprehensive plan, it may be helpful to include a list of the other plans as an appendix, along with a citation as to where they can be located, i.e. a hard copy in the Planning Department or on the city/town website. If just a few plans are referenced, this information may be appropriate as a footnote or within the text.

INCORPORATE BY REFERENCE

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. Special plans, such as a transportation corridor or neighborhood plan could fall into this category.

The terms "incorporated by reference" or "adopted by reference" mean that the plan legally becomes part of the comprehensive plan, and thus has all of the power of the comprehensive plan. If this option is chosen, all local land use decisions will need to be consistent with the contents of the plan. Before deciding if this option is the appropriate choice for a particular plan, the team should consider whether all of the contents of the plan should be used in this manner. Also, the team should consider whether the information within the plan is likely to become outdated or irrelevant at some point within the ten years for which the state-approval is valid.

If this option is chosen, the entire plan must be submitted to the state for review for consistency with the State's goals and policies.

Additionally, communities should keep in mind that if this option is chosen, the comprehensive plan amendment process mandated by the Act must be followed when revising the incorporated plan, as it technically has become part of the comprehensive plan.

All plans that are "incorporated by reference" must meet Standard 1.9 of the Standards Manual, which is described in more depth in Guidance Handbook #1 - The Comprehensive Plan 101.



For more information on assessing consistency with plans of contiguous municipalities, see Guidance Handbook #13 - Planning for Land Use.



See the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, [RIGL subsection 45-22.2-7\(d\)](#), [45-22.2-3\(c\)\(9\)](#) and [45-22.2-9\(d\)\(3\)](#).

GATHER AND ANALYZE DATA TO DETERMINE COMMUNITY NEEDS

Each of the topical handbooks contains information about determining a community’s needs related to each of the topical areas required by the Act. The topical handbooks will assist communities in identifying their current and future needs, as well as in setting goals and policies related to those needs and determining appropriate implementation techniques to reach their goals.



Municipalities are free to choose the data sources it believes are the best representation of the municipal conditions. However, if a data source is chosen other than the sources presented in this guidebook, an explanation must be given as to why the source was selected

Generally, though, points to consider when collecting and analyzing data include:

- When reviewing the plan, the team should determine whether the data presented is relevant , timely and/or necessary. Any data that seems irrelevant or unnecessary should be taken out of the plan.
- All projections and forecasts must extend through the 20-year planning horizon, except for school enrollment forecasts, as described on in Guidance Handbook #8 - Planning for Services and Facilities.
- The team may want to get a sense of what data is available at the local level from other municipal departments, before data collection begins, to avoid duplication of efforts.
- Data sources are included within each of the topical handbooks of this series.

ENGAGE THE PUBLIC IN DETERMINING NEEDS

During the need identification phase, the public can provide information to the comprehensive planning team and can verify that the needs identified match the community perspective. This type of public input can take the form of:

- Surveys
- Targeted, topical workshops
- Focus groups
- Key stakeholder interviews
- Web-based input mechanisms

Additionally, if there is an aspect of the community for which data is severely lacking, the public can be engaged to perform assessments of the physical infrastructure. For example, teams of two or three people could visit each of the community’s parks to assess the condition of the equipment or determine utilization rates. Citizens could also perform walk- or bike-audits to assess the municipality’s friendliness to bicyclists and pedestrians.

The public can also provide feedback as to how the needs that are identified through assessment match

the public perspective of need within the community. Acting as a type of reality check, the public can provide guidance to the team as to whether the assessments are on target or slightly off the mark.

SUMMARY

Some of the key points to remember during the assessment stage are:

- A detailed review of the existing plan will help to further develop the project work plan.
- Other municipal plans should be reviewed for relevancy to the comprehensive plan. The team must determine the best method for integrating other relevant plans, as described on [page 18](#).
- The municipality's Capital Improvement Program should be reviewed to identify any pre-determined infrastructure and facility needs that should be incorporated into the plan.
- Comprehensive plans must be consistent with the comprehensive plans of contiguous municipalities and the goals and policies of the State.
- The topical handbooks of this series provide detail on assessing the community's needs related to each of the topical areas required by the Act, including the identification of data sources and assessment methodologies.
- All data projections must cover the 20-year planning horizon mandated by the Act.
- If multiple data sources exist, the municipality is free to choose the data source that it feels is most correct, and, to limit confusion, should explain why the data source was chosen.

PLAN DEVELOPMENT

THE CONTENTS OF A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Guidance Handbook #1 - The Comprehensive Plan 101 presents specific information about the contents of a comprehensive plan, including:

- An outline of the topics that are required to be addressed by the Act;
- Definitions of common terms, such as assessment, inventory and need; and
- The distinction between goals, objectives, policies and implementation actions and the purposes of each.

This information should be referenced when determining and/or refining the process for plan development and when beginning to develop the comprehensive plan's content.

PLAN OUTLINE AND FORMATTING

The structure and format of a comprehensive plan is more important than most people realize. If a plan is very long, the contents may not be easily accessible; illogical organization may be less effective at guiding municipal decisions; and the use of planning jargon may be hard for the public and other municipal leaders to digest. Between the assessment phase and draft development, the comprehensive planning team should thoroughly consider the way that the information will be organized and presented. Having a structured outline from which to work will help the writing process go more smoothly. Considering the outline and format of the plan prior to the start of writing will prompt the team to think more holistically

about the plan's purpose and intent.



Today, a lot of documents are viewed electronically; don't be afraid to use pictures and colors to make the plan more graphically appealing. It is likely that full printing of the plan will be limited, and most printers automatically transition to grayscale when printing, which means that document drafters don't have to be as concerned about readability in black and white as in the past.

DEVELOPING A SHARED VISION

The assessments and analysis provide an overview of the existing conditions of the municipality, and in some cases, projections as to how the municipality will develop if things remain the same. In Guidance Handbook #1 - The Comprehensive Plan 101, the comprehensive plan was described as a means to achieving a shared vision for the community. The comprehensive plan sets the shared vision for the community and lays out the steps that will bring the vision to reality.

At a minimum, the community vision manifests as a compilation of the plan's goals. However, municipalities may also choose to include a single, overarching vision statement that puts forward a concise vision for the future of the municipality.

Whether the comprehensive plan includes a formal vision statement or not, setting the vision for the community during the comprehensive planning process can be useful. Once the vision has been developed, it forms the basis for the development of the comprehensive plan's goals.

The process of developing the community vision will be different for every municipality, though it typically involves:

- Reviewing any vision statements or documents that have been previously created;
- Revisiting the existing plan's goals;
- Reviewing the needs that were identified through the assessment process to shed light on the areas in which the community would like to improve; and
- Public input about what is important to the community.

Some communities hold multi-day workshops to craft the vision, while others hold public meetings or work solely through the Advisory Committee or the Planning Board/Commission. Whichever way a community chooses to figure out its vision, obtaining public input is a critical part of the process.



A vision statement should clearly articulate what the plan is trying to accomplish. An average citizen should be able to read the vision statement and be able to identify the community's priorities for the future.

SETTING GOALS

It is likely that the existing conditions, or the impending future conditions, do not match the community's vision for itself, necessitating the creation of community goals and the policies and implementation techniques that will help the goals become reality. As discussed in Guidance Handbook #1 - The Comprehensive Plan 101, the comprehensive plan's goals represent the end state toward which policies and actions will lead. The goals can also act as a system of checks and balances for the rest of the plan. For every policy or implementation technique that is developed, the team can compare it to the vision or the goals to determine if it will help the community get where it wants to go.

The comprehensive plan must include goals for each required topical area. Also, the goals within the comprehensive plan must embody the goals of the State Guide Plan. Guiding questions for the development of community goals related to the various required topics, as well as guidance on embodying State goals, are included within each topical guidance handbook.

DRAFT DEVELOPMENT, REVIEW AND REVISION

Many people and parties will be interested in the text of the comprehensive plan. Therefore, a lot of coordination and several rounds of review are often required to draft a plan that satisfies everyone. Integrating the many components of a comprehensive plan – narrative, assessments and inventories, need identification, goals, policies, implementation techniques, maps, etc. – takes a lot of writing, reviewing and revising.

Peer-to-Peer Review with RI SPP

As content is developed, RI SPP welcomes communities to send drafts in for review. In fact, RI SPP would prefer if communities don't wait until a full draft is ready to begin their review. RI SPP staff are happy to provide written comments on draft materials, which will make the final full draft review and approval process easier. See [Draft Review beginning on page 4](#).

Review With Local Leadership

The point at which the various local players are involved in draft review will vary by municipality. For some, the Planning Board/Commission and/or the City/Town Council will be intimately involved in drafting and review, while in other communities these entities will review only the final product. In some cases, department heads will want to have a lot of control over the portions of the plan that affect their work, in other instances, department heads will choose to review the plan when it is in the final stages. The level of involvement of local leadership depends heavily on the political context in which the plan is being revised, however, the review process can begin to take shape at the time of work plan development.

Review With the Public

Similarly, review of drafts by the public will depend on the municipality and the public's appetite for planning. The strategy for public review should be developed and refined as the project progresses. If the public is involved at multiple points throughout the process, review of draft content may not be as important, but only the comprehensive planning team can make that determination. In most cases, though, it is best to vet the content through some form of public process prior to the official public hearing, whether it is with the Advisory Committee, at a workshop, on the municipal website or with a targeted group of stakeholders.

FULL FINAL DRAFT REVIEW BY RI SPP

Once a final draft has been completed and approved by the Planning Board or Commission, RI SPP strongly recommends it be sent in for draft review before the required public hearing is scheduled with the City or Town Council. Full final draft review of the comprehensive plan reduces the State review time allowed by law after adoption as it gives the Division of Planning and other State agencies the opportunity to comment on issues that could affect State approval.



The involvement of RI SPP is optional, except for the final post-adoption plan review; options for involvement of RI SPP have been presented throughout this guidance as recommendations intended to cut down on post-adoption review time and to help the community develop the best possible plan.

SUMMARY

Some of the key points to remember during the draft development stage are:

- For more information about the required contents of a comprehensive plan see the topical handbooks of this series.
- The format, layout and graphic appeal of the comprehensive plan are important. Before any writing begins, the team should discuss the organization and format of the plan.
- With or without a set vision statement, the comprehensive plan sets the vision for the community through the identification of goals. The visioning and goal setting process is the first step in developing the plan and should involve the public.
- Draft development, review and revision is highly iterative. Drafts are continually being refined as they are reviewed by the project stakeholders, including the public.
- RI SPP staff is ready and willing to review draft content as it develops to provide early recommendations on the content and the satisfaction of State-approval criteria.
- To qualify for the reduced State review time after adoption, a full final draft must be sent to RI SPP for review prior to adoption by the municipality.

SAMPLE OUTLINE FOR THE CONTENTS OF A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Rhode Island General Law 45-22.2, the Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act (“the Act”), provides that comprehensive plans “may be organized and presented as deemed suitable and appropriate by the municipality” with the stipulation that the plan contain an individual section for Land Use and an individual section for the Implementation Program. The following outline represents a composite of features that have been included in many comprehensive plans in Rhode Island. Numbers III through XII are taken from Section 6 of the Act -- Required Content of Comprehensive Plan -- and are listed in the order as they appear in the Act.

Please note, this outline is merely one example of how a plan might be organized. It is not an all-inclusive listing of the required content of a comprehensive plan. Readers should consult the Act, the Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning Standards Manual, and the Division of Planning’s Comprehensive Planning Guidance Handbook series for a listing of information and analyses that are required to receive State approval of the plan. This outline is presented as a convenience to assist communities as they consider the organization of the community’s comprehensive plan in the manner that best suits the community’s needs.

I. Introduction

An introduction could provide the background of the comprehensive plan development process, a vision statement, community survey, or other material that transcends any individual topic.

II. Community Profile

A community profile chapter could provide an overview of the demographic and physical characteristics of the community. Alternatively, demographics and other community data could be provided in topical elements as needed.

III. Goals and Policies

While the plan must “identify the goals and policies of the municipality for its future growth and development and for the conservation of its natural and cultural resources” the municipality has the option of:

- 1) presenting them in a single chapter;
- 2) presenting them within each topical element included in the plan;
- 3) presenting them in the Implementation Program; or
- 4) any combination of the above.

Each option has its own advantages.

The “single chapter” could be a separate, stand-alone chapter simply listing the goals and policies. An advantage of this approach is that could allow the plan to present the goals and policies at the beginning, making it easy for readers to find them.

Including goals and policies in each topical chapter allows for a clear connection between the analyses presented in the text and goals and policies desired for the community’s future.

The advantage of including all the goals and policies within the Implementation Program is that it makes it easy for readers to quickly identify how the community plans to achieve the goals and policies.

Using a combination of the above approaches to present goals and policies in more than one section provides the greatest clarity and ease of use for readers. This is the approach that RI SPP recommends.

RI SPP also strongly recommends that each goal and policy be assigned a unique identifying number. The most common method used in comprehensive plans is alpha-numeric e.g. Land Use goals would be listed as LU-1, LU-2, etc. Housing goals would be listed as H-1, H-2, etc.

IV. Natural Resources

Include all of the content required for natural resources, listed in the Standards Manual, section 2.

V. Recreation

Include all of the content required for recreation, listed in the Standards Manual, section 3.

VI. Historic and Cultural Resources

Include all of the content required for historic and cultural resources, listed in the Standards Manual, section 4.

VII. Housing

Include all of the content required for housing, listed in the Standards Manual, section 5.

VIII. Economic Development

Include all of the content required for economic development and agriculture, listed in the Standards Manual, sections 6 and 7.

IX. Services and Facilities

Include all of the content required for services and facilities, energy and water supply, listed in the Standards Manual, sections 8, 9 and 10.

X. Transportation

Include all of the content required for transportation, listed in the Standards Manual, section 11.

XI. Natural Hazards

Include all of the content required for natural hazards and climate change, listed in the Standards Manual, section 12.

XII. Land Use *(required as a separate section of the plan)*

Include all of the content required for land use and growth centers (if applicable), listed in the Standards Manual, section 13 and 13A.

XIII. Implementation Program *(required as a separate section of the plan)*

Include all of the content required for the implementation program, listed in the Standards Manual, section 14.

SECTION 3. OBTAINING INPUT

Engaging the public in the comprehensive planning process can be difficult. Even communities with the best intentions sometimes struggle to get residents, business owners and other important stakeholders to the table for discussions. This chapter presents a variety of public engagement methods that can be used throughout the comprehensive planning process. Municipalities should customize their engagement process to meet their budget, time constraints, population characteristics, etc. For example, in some communities it may be more important to spend extra money on newspaper advertisements, while in others it may be more important to maintain a fresh Twitter or Facebook feed. No matter what techniques are chosen, it is important to involve the public throughout the entire planning process.

A NOTE ON SOCIAL EQUITY

Social equity in comprehensive planning is about both striving for an equitable planning process and achieving outcomes that increase equity. An equitable planning process is one in which people from every segment of the community have a voice. During the comprehensive planning process, every effort should be made to garner input from the entire community, including from people of diverse age groups, income levels, physical ability, races and ethnic backgrounds. Throughout the process, special considerations should be made for persons with hearing or vision impairments, those with physical disabilities, and those requiring interpretation in a language other than English.



See “An Equity Profile of Rhode Island,” available at http://www.planning.ri.gov/documents/sustainable/Rhode_Island_31May_FINAL.pdf, for additional information.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

The first step in public engagement is letting the public know that the comprehensive plan revision is happening. Getting the word out about the plan and the process is critical to building a constituency who is interested in the effort and who will then show up to meetings and other events to provide input.

There are several techniques for spreading the word about the comprehensive plan project. Whichever methods are chosen to alert potential participants to the project and the process, the following key points should be included in the message:

- Information about the process – when it will start, how long it is expected to be, what the final deliverable will be, etc.
- Information about the comprehensive plan – what it is, why it is important to the community, why it is important to residents, businesses and other stakeholders, etc.
- Ways that they can get involved – who they can contact with questions or ideas, the project website address (if there is one), dates of any events that have been scheduled, etc.

Some recommended techniques for getting the word out are listed below. It may be helpful for municipalities to use a combination of the techniques listed to ensure full coverage of the community.

- **Branding:** Creating a logo and tagline for the project and using a set color scheme and font can help the public more easily recognize that the events, posters, mailings and other media all belong to the same project. Branding a project helps the public to understand the magnitude of the project, while reinforcing the message in an identifiable way.
- **Project Website:** To give the project a face and to make the project as accessible as possible, it is

essential to set up a dedicated project website. The website can be located on the City or Town website, or if allowed, it can be a separate website altogether with an address that is recognizable to the brand. The project website should describe the project, list the key events, host documents for public review, and provide an email address or other means of accepting comments and questions. Community members should know that if they want information about the project, the website is the best place to look.

- **Personal Invitations:** One of the best ways to get key stakeholders to the table is to have members of the City or Town Council, Planning Board or Commission or the Advisory Committee give personal invitations. The invitations can take the form of letters or emails, or the project can simply be brought up in conversation. Sometimes a formal invitation from the Council makes a big impression on potential participants.
- **Partnering with Organizations:** Every municipality has a number of community-based organizations that can assist in outreach efforts. Rotaries, clubs, religious organizations, parent-teacher organizations, non-profits and social service organizations can all be sources of participants. If an organization feels like it has a lot to benefit from the comprehensive planning project, they may be willing to assist in outreach efforts. First, members of the comprehensive planning team should reach out to organization leaders to discuss the project. Also, the team can request 5-minutes on the agenda of a standing meeting to discuss the project. Once a connection has been made, the organization may feel comfortable sharing mailing or email lists or allowing the municipality to put information into existing mailings. When community-wide events happen, the leadership of partner organizations can alert the membership, or the team can hold focus groups with members or go to existing organization meetings to get the group's input.
- **Cable TV, Radio and Newspapers:** Mass media outlets should be thought of as free advertising during the planning process. Letting reporters know about the project and events might garner some free, far-reaching publicity.
- **Editorials:** In some communities, it may be beneficial to have someone involved in the project write an editorial for the local newspaper explaining the project, its purpose and benefits. An editorial from the City or Town Manager, the Mayor, members of the City or Town Council, the Planning Board or Commission Chair, or even a local champion, could help to bolster awareness and appreciation of the project.
- **Mass Mailings:** Mass mailings can ensure that a large proportion of the community knows about the project. Though it can be costly, some communities find it helpful to send out a mass mailing to property owners. Other communities may send out brochures with customer gas, water or other utility bills.
- **Email Blasts:** Some of the departments within a municipality maintain email lists that can be used to advertise the project. Alternatively, the municipality may be able to partner with a few community-based organizations to send email blasts to their membership.
- **Social Media:** Many segments of the population now use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media outlets to keep track of what is going on in the world. The municipality may need to use social media to reach people who don't read the newspaper and those who don't normally participate in municipal events. Once social media feeds are set up, they are relatively easy to update and maintain.
- **Attending Existing Community Events:** Setting up an information booth at an existing community event can be a good way to increase visibility. Farmer's markets, little league games, community festivals and Town meetings can all bring in a lot of people who may not already be aware of the project. Be sure to have copies of any flyers or handouts that have been prepared to distribute to

interested people.

- **Paid Advertisements:** A paid advertisement, on a local TV station, the radio, a billboard, or a bus shelter, can help to increase project visibility. If the community is looking for large turn-out for a particular event, this may be the way to go.
- **Flyers and Handouts:** Sometimes traditional approaches are still the best option, perhaps with some new twists. Posting or distributing flyers or handouts about the project and project events can be effective, especially if they are posted in high traffic locations, such as the library or the local YMCA, or distributed to a large audience, perhaps through stuffing them in bags at the local grocery store or sending them home with school children.
- **Large Format Signage:** For big events, sometimes a larger than life sign is appropriate. A banner sign hanging across a main street or an illuminated sign at the local football game can draw a lot of attention, bringing a lot of people to events.

EVENTS AND ENGAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Once the word is out about the project, the municipality holds events at which engagement techniques are utilized to gather input. There are a number of different types of events that a community can hold, at which a variety of engagement techniques are used to garner input. However, some techniques don't require formal events, such as surveys and participatory assessments, as explained below.

Engagement is most effective when a variety of events are held and techniques are used throughout the process. Some people may feel more comfortable filling out an anonymous survey, whereas others like to be able to ask questions during a group discussion. When deciding which engagement techniques to use, municipalities should consider the type of input that is being sought. Asking the community to provide guidance on the goals of the plan would generally take a different technique than asking for an evaluation of community recreational facilities.

The list below is split into events and engagement techniques, with the understanding that the techniques are to be used during the different events.

EVENT TYPES

- **Public Meetings:** A public meeting is an event that is held at a set date and time, where the entire public is invited. The focus of a public meeting is typically to give information to the public, with limited opportunities for public response. Public meetings typically last 2 to 3 hours and follow a set agenda.
- **Workshops:** A workshop is an event held at a set date and time, with the focus of gathering input. Workshops are highly interactive, hands-on events, aimed at getting a lot of input in a short amount of time and can last anywhere from 3 hours to a whole day.
- **Charrettes:** A charrette is a multi-day public engagement session that consists of multiple, interactive engagement techniques and brings together a variety of subject-matter experts who work with the public to solve problems. Charrettes provide an opportunity for consultants, department heads, and other interested parties to work through tough issues in collaboration, while providing multiple opportunities for public review of products and feedback.
- **Educational Workshops:** An educational workshop is a topic or issue specific event that focuses on relaying important information about a topic or issue to the public. These workshops typically begin with a presentation and end with group discussion or other engagement exercises to gain

input about the specific topic or issue as it relates to the municipality.

- **Focus Groups:** A focus group is a targeted work session with a limited number of attendees. The discussion of a focus group is typically related to a specific topic or issue. Focus groups are a good way to get input from community-based organizations, key stakeholders in different sectors of the community, department heads and other municipal officials.
- **Key Stakeholder Interviews:** Key stakeholder interviews are one-on-one discussions about a specific topic. Key stakeholder interviews are sometimes used to garner honest responses on hot-button issues as participants may feel more comfortable speaking their minds in a one-on-one setting.
- **Open House:** An open house is a gallery-style event in which information is hung on walls and displayed on posters. Participants are encouraged to casually read through and comment on the information presented.
- **Public Hearing:** A public hearing is a legally required meeting held by a board/commission of Council prior to a decision being made. The hearing includes public comment and public discussion by the deciding body related to the decision the body is making.



There are different notice and open meetings requirements for different types of events related to a comprehensive plan. The comprehensive planning team should check with the City or Town solicitor to ensure the appropriate laws are followed.



Before a comprehensive plan can be adopted by a municipality, the plan has to be heard at a public hearing before the Planning Board or Commission and at a public hearing before the City or Town Council, or at a joint hearing of both bodies.

ENGAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

- **SWOT Analysis:** A “strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis” can help the community assess its situation in relation to important topic areas. For comprehensive planning, it may be helpful to perform a SWOT analysis for each of the required topic areas. Typically, SWOT analyses are performed in a small group setting, with a facilitator leading discussion. The product of a SWOT analysis is a list of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to the subject matter.
- **Visioning Session:** A visioning session is an activity where a facilitator leads a small group through the exercise of envisioning what the municipality, or certain sections of the municipality, will be like in the future. Participants write their thoughts down on individual pieces of paper, then share with the group. To finalize the visioning session, some facilitators choose to have the group craft a single vision statement based on the group members’ combined ideas.
- **Survey:** A survey is an input gathering tool that asks respondents a specific, formalized set of questions around a topic area. Surveys can be administered through the mail, in person or online, depending on the audience and number of participants desired. Surveys can be helpful in assessing community needs, resident satisfaction, quality of life, etc.
- **Visual Preference Survey:** A visual preference survey is a special type of survey that uses pictures to invoke responses from participants. The visual preference survey organizer selects a large number of pictures, representing different forms of development, natural areas, recreational opportunities, housing types, etc., and asks participants to rate the pictures for their community. Visual preference surveys can be a very effective means of understanding the community’s desires for development, especially when targeted to specific areas of the community (e.g. a downtown area, or a specific neighborhood). Typically, a visual preference survey is administered to a group during

a meeting, but can also be done online.

- **Interactive Presentations:** An interactive presentation is a type of survey that uses computer-based controls to obtain audience input on-the-spot. Interactive presentations can be a good way to create a fun environment at a public meeting while also getting some real input on important issues or topics. Also, since responses are anonymous and immediate, this approach can be a useful way to provide an accurate sense of participants feelings on a issue, especially if the issue under consideration is controversial.
- **Mapping and Drawing Exercises:** There are a variety of mapping and drawing exercises that can be part of the comprehensive planning process. A mapping and drawing exercise is usually performed with a small group, sitting around a table with a map in the middle. Participants are asked to highlight things on the map, for example, specific areas where they'd like to see growth occur, areas in which they do not feel safe, places in the community that they love, properties or areas that should be preserved, dangerous traffic intersections, streets where more pedestrian amenities are needed, etc. At the end of the exercise, a summary is given of all of the input received.
- **Brainstorming Sessions:** Just as it sounds, a brainstorming session is simply a way to get a lot of ideas from participants in a short amount of time. During a brainstorming session, a facilitator will provide "guiding questions" to participants to garner a list of ideas. Brainstorming sessions can happen in small or large groups and should generally be planned for short amounts of time. The most important aspect of a brainstorming session is that no idea is a bad idea.
- **Participatory Assessments:** A participatory assessment is an analysis of the community, or some segment of the community, in which the participants take an active role. Typically, a participatory assessment looks at a physical aspect of the community, such as whether streets are pedestrian friendly or recreational areas are well maintained. Participants are given a survey tool, with a set of specific questions, and asked to visit a site and fill out the survey. The results are then compiled and used as part of a larger assessment of community needs.
- **Small Group Discussions:** A small group discussion can be formal or informal, depending on the subject matter to be covered and the feeling of the group. To begin a small group discussion, a facilitator will come up with a list of thought-provoking questions and ask participants to respond to the questions. Facilitators then move through the questions depending on how the conversation goes and how engaged the participants are.
- **Simulations:** A simulation is a tool that can be used in surveys, interactive presentations and visual preference surveys. A simulation is an image that represents a future condition. Simulations can include before- and after-images of development patterns and forms, estimates of damages or rising water levels due to natural hazards and sea level rise, or scenarios for things like transportation improvements or park master plans.

FOLLOW-THROUGH

One of the most important aspects of the public engagement process is following through with participants to let them know that their participation was incorporated into the plan. It is essential that participants feel that their input was valued, that their ideas were not ignored and that they had a genuine say in the future of their community. Also, follow-through is critical to make sure that the ideas provided were accurately captured by those leading the meetings and compiling the plan.

One of the most critical aspects of following-through with participants comes before any input is garnered. Before any meetings are held or surveys are administered, the comprehensive planning team should

discuss and determine how the input provided will be used in the formulation of the plan. At the end of the day, the way the input is used may change, but going through the process of setting up a plan for incorporating the input will help to ensure that the input obtained is relevant and applicable.

Some of the best ways to follow-through with participants include:

- Having email sign-up lists at each meeting and sending out email blasts to participants to let them know what is happening with their input along the way;
- Putting draft materials on a project website for review; and
- Holding follow-up meetings with participants to review materials as the comprehensive plan progresses.

It is also critical that the comprehensive planning team follow-through with the Planning Board or Commission, the City or Town Council, and department directors at key points along the way. The Planning Board or Commission and department directors will assist the comprehensive planning team in keeping the plan “real,” that is, they will likely be able to help determine the feasibility of proposed ideas and to prioritize accepted strategies. Following through with local leadership is also important in giving them ownership of the comprehensive plan and its implementation.

SECTION 4 - STANDARDS FOR THE FORMAL ADOPTION PROCESS

STANDARDS FOR THE FORMAL ADOPTION PROCESS

- 16.1 Comprehensive plans must be adopted as an ordinance by the City/Town Council.
 - 16.2 Prior to adoption of a comprehensive plan, the City/Town Council must hold a minimum of one (1) public hearing, which may be a joint meeting with the Planning Board/Commission.
 - 16.3 Comprehensive plans must be submitted to the Division of Planning within thirty (30) days of adoption by the City/Town Council.
 - 16.4 Prior to adoption of a comprehensive plan by the City/Town Council, the Planning Board/Commission must:
 - a. Disseminate information to the public about the plan revision;
 - b. Solicit both written and oral comments during the preparation of the plan;
 - c. Hold a minimum of one (1) public hearing, which may be a joint meeting with the City/Town Council; and
 - d. Submit a recommendation to the City/Town Council regarding adoption of the plan.
 - 16.5 Prior to all hearings of the City/Town Council and the Planning/Board at which the comprehensive plan is to be considered, the municipality must publish notice of the public hearing at least once each week for three (3) successive weeks prior to the date of the hearing in a newspaper of general circulation.
 - 16.6 All public notice of hearings at which the comprehensive plan is to be considered must:
 - a. Specify the place, date and time of the hearing;
 - b. Indicate that adoption of the comprehensive plan is under consideration;
 - c. Contain a statement of the proposed amendments to the comprehensive plan or summarize and describe the matter under consideration;
 - d. Advise those interested where and when the matter under consideration may be obtained, examined or copied; and
 - e. State that the plan may be altered or amended prior to the close of the public hearing without further advertising, as a result of further study or because of the views expressed at the public hearing.
 - 16.7 Notice must be mailed to the RI Statewide Planning Program.
 - 16.8 Municipalities may not adopt comprehensive plan amendments more than four (4) times per calendar year.
-

CITY OR TOWN COUNCIL

(Standards 16.1, 16.2 and 16.3)

A comprehensive plan is officially adopted when it has been incorporated by reference into the municipal code of ordinances by the City/Town Council. For sample language that can be used when adopting a comprehensive plan as an ordinance, see [page 46](#).

Prior to adoption, the City/Town Council must hold at least one (1) public hearing, noticed according to the requirements outlined below. Comprehensive plans must be submitted to the Division of Planning within thirty (30) days of adoption by the City/Town Council.



See the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, [RIGL subsection 45-22.2-8\(b\)](#).

PLANNING BOARD OR COMMISSION

(Standard 16.4)

The Planning Board or Commission is legally responsible for the development of the comprehensive plan, except in instances where municipalities have chosen to conduct a joint planning effort and have therefore established a joint planning committee to bring the plan to fruition.

As part of this responsibility, the Planning Board or Commission is required to:

- Disseminate information to the public about the plan revision;
- Solicit both written and oral comments during the preparation of the plan;
- Hold a minimum of one (1) public hearing; and
- Submit a recommendation to the Town or City Council regarding adoption of the plan.

All public hearings of the Planning Board or Commission and the Town or City Council at which the comprehensive plan is addressed must be noticed according to the requirements outlined below. Municipalities have the option of holding one, joint hearing of the Planning Board/Commission and the Town/City Council rather than two separate public hearings. For a sample procedure that can be followed when holding a joint hearing, see [page 43](#).



See the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, [RIGL subsection 45-22.2-8\(a\)](#) and [45-22.2-8\(c\)](#).

NOTICE REQUIREMENTS

(Standards 16.5, 16.6 and 16.7)

According to the Act, public hearings of both the Planning Board/Commission and the City/Town Council, or joint hearings of both bodies, at which the comprehensive plan will be considered, require three (3) weeks of notice. The city or town must publish notice of the public hearings at least once each week for three (3) successive weeks prior to the date of the hearing in a newspaper of general circulation. The notice must:

- Specify the place, date and time of the hearing;
- Indicate that adoption of the comprehensive plan is under consideration;
- Contain a statement of the proposed amendments to the comprehensive plan or summarize and describe the matter under consideration;
- Advise those interested where and when the matter under consideration may be obtained, examined or copied; and
- State that the plan may be altered or amended prior to the close of the public hearing without further advertising, as a result of further study or because of the views expressed at the public hearing.

If the document under consideration is lengthy, it may be necessary for the municipality to set a policy, upfront, about any fees for making copies, how and when the public may request copies and that allows staff a certain amount of time to produce the copy. Once promulgated, the policy should be referenced in the required notice so that residents are aware.

Written notice, which may be a copy of the newspaper notice, must be mailed to the RI Statewide Planning Program (RI SPP). Fulfillment of all of the notice requirements is a condition for receiving State-approval; therefore, while notice to RI SPP may be done concurrently with the newspaper advertisement, RI SPP advises municipalities to provide RI SPP with a draft copy of the newspaper notice for review in advance of publishing. The advantage of doing so is that RI SPP will notify the municipalities of any possible flaws in the notice. This review would allow the notice to be modified before any funds are expended and would reduce the chances of needing to repost.



Municipalities are free to adopt their own standards in excess of the requirements outlined in the Act. It is also recommended that municipalities post hearing notice on the municipal website, or use other methods to ensure that the public is aware of the hearing.



The final requirement for hearing notice implies that comprehensive plans can be altered prior to, but not after, the close of the public hearing. If additional revisions are necessary, another public hearing must be held with full notice.



See the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, [RIGL subsection 45-22.2-8\(c\)](#).

ADOPTING COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AMENDMENTS

(Standard 16.8)

Amendments to a comprehensive plan follow the same process and timing requirements as full comprehensive plan revisions. A municipality may not amend its comprehensive plan more than four (4) times in any one calendar year. Amendments that are required to address the findings of the Division of Planning, changes to the State Guide Plan, or changes to the Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Act are not counted as part of the four (4) allowable amendments.



See the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, [RIGL subsection 45-22.2-8 \(b\)\(3\)](#).

SECTION 5 - RESOURCES FOR THE FORMAL ADOPTION PROCESS

SAMPLE LANGUAGE FOR NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARINGS

Notice of public hearings of both the Planning Board or Commission and the City or Town Council at which the comprehensive plan will be considered is required to contain specific information. The below sample language is provided for use by municipalities to assist in complying with the notice requirements. The bracketed text shown in blue, below, is to be customized to the municipality.

[Insert municipality full name, Planning Board or Commission or City/Town Council]

Notice of Public Hearing of a Proposed Comprehensive Plan [Amendment, Adoption]

Notice is hereby given of a public hearing before the [Planning Board or Commission or City/ Town Council] of the [insert municipality full name] at which the proposed [amendment, adoption] of the [insert municipality name] Comprehensive Plan will be considered. The public hearing shall be held on [insert date] at [insert time] at [insert full address of location of hearing].

[Insert a statement of the proposed amendments to the comprehensive plan or summarize and describe the matter under consideration.] These amendments are made in accordance with the provisions of chapter 45-22.2 if the General Laws of the State of Rhode Island.

The proposed text to be considered is available for public review, and copies may be obtained, at [insert full address of location at which documents can be reviewed] during the hours of [insert hours during which documents can be viewed] and can also be found on the [City/Town] website at [insert web address].

The proposed amendments may be altered or amended prior to the close of the public hearing without further advertising as a result of further study or because of the views expressed at the public hearing. Any such alteration or amendment must be presented for comment in the course of said public hearing.

The municipality may also wish to include information about access to the documents and/or public hearing for persons with hearing impairments or those requiring interpretation in a language other than English.

SAMPLE PROCEDURE FOR HOLDING JOINT HEARINGS ON COMPREHENSIVE PLANS

Municipalities have the option of holding joint hearings of the City/Town Council and the Planning Board/ Commission for matters related to the comprehensive plan. Below is a sample procedure for the conduct of joint hearings that may be helpful if this route is chosen.

	CITY/TOWN COUNCIL ACTION	PLANNING BOARD/ COMMISSION ACTION	JOINT ACTION
1	President/Chair calls joint meeting to order		
2			Pledge of Allegiance

	CITY/TOWN COUNCIL ACTION	PLANNING BOARD/ COMMISSION ACTION	JOINT ACTION
3			City/Town Clerk calls roll for Council and Planning Board and notes that a quorum of each body is present and eligible to vote
4	President opens joint public hearings on Comprehensive Plan or Amendment		
5			City/Town Clerk reads newspaper advertisement into the record, states for the record the dates the ad ran and the name of the newspaper in which it ran, as well as the names of those who did not pick-up their certified mailing
6			City/Town Clerk introduces any correspondence on the subject of the public hearing, to be incorporated by reference into the record. (NOT necessary to read each letter.)
7			City/Town Planner and other staff comments are made and any written comments or documentation made part of the record.
8	City/Town Council President invites applicant/consultant to present proposed		
9	City/Town Council President invites public comment		

	CITY/TOWN COUNCIL ACTION	PLANNING BOARD/ COMMISSION ACTION	JOINT ACTION
10			Joint discussion of issues raised by the public, and direction to staff (if necessary) to research or draft amendment errata. (1)
11			Dates are chosen for the Council and Planning Board work session(s) on the Comprehensive Plan or Amendment (if needed). (1)
12			A time and date is chosen to which to continue the joint public hearing (if needed).
13		Planning Board/Commission moves and votes to either (1) close the public hearing on the comprehensive plan or amendment, or (2) recess and continue the public hearing until the date, time and location selected.	
14	City/Town Council moves and votes to either (1) Close the public hearing on the comprehensive plan or amendment or (2) recess and continue the public hearing until the date, time and location selected.		
15			Deliberation by members of the City/Town Council and Planning Board/Commission; decisions are made on any open issues. (2)
16		Planning Board/Commission moves and votes by roll call on comprehensive plan or amendment.	

	CITY/TOWN COUNCIL ACTION	PLANNING BOARD/ COMMISSION ACTION	JOINT ACTION
17	City/Town Council incorporates by reference into its record the Planning Board/Commission vote and recommendation, including the Planning Board/Commission findings. City/Town Council moves and votes on comprehensive plan or amendment. Adoption as an ordinance.		
18		Planning Board/Commission moves and votes to adjourn their meeting.	
19	If no other business is to come before the City/Town Council, it moves and votes to adjourn meeting.		

(1) If further review and discussion is not needed Steps 9 and/or 10 may be skipped.

(2) If the City/Town Council and Planning Board/Commission have not continued the public hearings to another date, deliberations begin.

SAMPLE LANGUAGE FOR ADOPTION OF COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AS AN ORDINANCE

As described in earlier in this section, comprehensive plans must be adopted by the legislative body of the municipality as an ordinance. The following sample language is provided as a reference for municipalities to use during the adoption process. The bracketed text shown in blue, below, is to be customized to the municipality.

AN ORDINANCE IN AMENDMENT TO CHAPTER [insert #] OF THE ORDINANCES OF THE [insert municipality full name]

WHEREAS, the Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Act, Title 45, Chapter 22.2-2 requires that all Rhode Island communities adopt a Comprehensive Plan to be in conformance with the Act, and

WHEREAS, the [Town/City Planning Commission/Board] held the necessary public hearing with the required advertising, and forwarded the plan with a recommendation for [Town/City Council] adoption, and

WHEREAS, the [Town/City Council] held the necessary public hearing with the required advertising;

IT IS HEREBY ORDAINED by the [Town/City Council of Municipality Name, Rhode Island], that the Code of Ordinances, of the [Town/City of Municipality, Rhode Island], is hereby amended by adding

a section, to be numbered [insert section #], which reads as follows:

Section [insert section #] Comprehensive Plan Incorporated by Reference.

The Comprehensive Plan of the [insert municipality full name], as duly adopted and updated from time to time, and as most recently updated [insert date of Planning Board/Commission recommendation], is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

The Comprehensive Plan shall take effect for the purpose of conforming municipal land use decisions and for the purpose of being transmitted to the Rhode Island Director of Administration for State review upon public hearing and passage.

The Comprehensive Plan shall not become effective for the purposes of guiding State agency actions until it is approved by the state of Rhode Island pursuant to Chapter 45-22.2 of the General Laws of Rhode Island, a/k/a the Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Act.

I, [insert name of municipal clerk, title of clerk], hereby certify that on [insert date of adoption], the [Town/City] Council of the [insert municipality full name], after a public hearing which was advertised not less than [insert # of days the public hearing was advertised prior to the hearing] days prior thereto, did vote to adopt said updates to Comprehensive Plan.

SECTION 6 - OFFICIAL STATE REVIEW OF LOCALLY-ADOPTED COMPREHENSIVE PLANS

Land use planning in the State of Rhode Island has been set up as a reciprocal system, where State goals and policies are reflected in local plans and local plans have the ability to guide State actions. Therefore, the Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act (“the Act”) requires that adopted comprehensive plans be submitted to the Division of Planning for review and that the Division of Planning review adopted comprehensive plans for consistency with the goals and intent of the Act and the State Guide Plan.

THE REVIEW PROCESS AND TIMELINE

The submission to and review of comprehensive plans, or amendments to comprehensive plans, by the Division of Planning is required to follow the process and timeline outlined below.

1. Comprehensive plans or amendments are to be submitted to the highest ranking officer of the Division of Planning. At the time of this writing, this person holds the position of Associate Director. For simplicity, the tasks that are prescribed to this officer by the Act are listed here as tasks of the Division of Planning.
2. Comprehensive plans or amendments are to be submitted to the Division of Planning within thirty (30) days of adoption by the municipal legislative body.
3. Within fifteen (15) days of receipt of the comprehensive plan or amendment, the Division of Planning must solicit comments from the public, regional and State agencies and all contiguous municipalities.
4. The public comment period, including State agency review, must be open for thirty (30) days and notice of the comment period must be posted on the Division of Planning website.
5. Division of Planning comments on the results of the review must be forwarded to the municipality within:
 - One-hundred and twenty (120) days of the end of the comment period for plans or amendments that were not reviewed as full drafts prior to adoption; or
 - Thirty (30) days of the end of the comment period for comprehensive plans or amendments that were reviewed as full drafts prior to adoption.
6. The review time period may be reduced or extended if the municipality and the Division of Planning both agree to the new timeframe.
7. Municipalities then have sixty (60) days to address any concerns identified by the Division of Planning in the initial comments. The response time may be reduced or extended if the municipality and the Division of Planning both agree to the new timeframe.
8. The Division of Planning must review all corrections and related material submitted by the municipality in response to the comments and render a final decision on the plan. In the event of disapproval, the Division of Planning must notify the municipality by registered mail, and issue findings describing the deficiencies in the plan or amendment.
9. The municipality may appeal the decision of the Division of Planning within thirty (30) days of receipt of the decision, according to the provisions laid out in RIGL subsection [45-22.2-9.1](#).



See the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL subsection 45-22.2-9(c)



Only review of a full, final draft of a comprehensive plan (not individual chapters) will qualify a municipality for the reduced State review time post-adoption that is mandated by the Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL subsection 45-22.2-9(c)(3)(2).

FIGURE 16-1 THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN REVIEW PROCESS



WHEN RE-ADOPTION MAY BE NECESSARY

In some cases, the concerns presented by the Division of Planning in its final review of the locally-adopted plan may require major revisions to the plan. In these instances, the municipality has the option of drafting revisions based on the changes requested by the Division and resubmitting the plan for review. If the revisions bring the plan to a point where state-approval may be granted, the Division of Planning will issue a letter to the municipality stating that the revised plan is “ready” for approval and requesting that the municipal solicitor make a determination as to whether re-adoption of the plan by the City/Town Council may be necessary. If re-adoption is necessary, the municipality and the Division of Planning will agree to a new deadline for re-submittal of the re-adopted plan. If necessary, this deadline can be extended by mutual agreement.

STATE REVIEW CRITERIA

State review of a comprehensive plan assures that the following requirements are complied with:

1. The intent and goals of the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act have been met.
2. All required content as stated within the Act is complete and the plan is internally consistent.
3. The plan or amendment is consistent with, and embodies the goals and policies of the State and its departments and agencies as contained in the State Guide Plan and the laws of the State.
4. Municipal planning activities have been conducted and coordinated according to the provisions of the Act.
5. The plan or amendment has been officially adopted and submitted for review in accordance with the Act and other applicable procedures.

6. The plan or amendment complies with the rules and regulations adopted by the State Planning Council.
7. Adequate, uniform and valid data have been used in preparing the plan.

This handbook series is intended to make it easy for municipalities to meet all of the above listed criteria, by making explicit the content that will be required for approval, including identification of the State laws, goals and policies with which the plan must be consistent.



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

PROVISIONS OF STATE APPROVAL

State approval of a comprehensive plan expires on the tenth anniversary of the Division of Planning's approval and cannot be extended. To maintain continuous approval, comprehensive plans must be revised, locally adopted and State approved prior to the expiration of the existing plan's approval. However, State approval of plans that were based on the requirements of the Act prior to 2011 will expire on June 1, 2016. For these plans to maintain continuous approval, they must be revised, locally adopted and State approved prior to June 1, 2016.

If the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act is amended, or an amendment is made to the State Guide Plan, comprehensive plans must be updated within one year to conform with the amendments.

If an amendment to a comprehensive plan is submitted for review and is denied approval, the denial of approval applies only to the amendment and has no effect on the approval status of the previously approved plan.

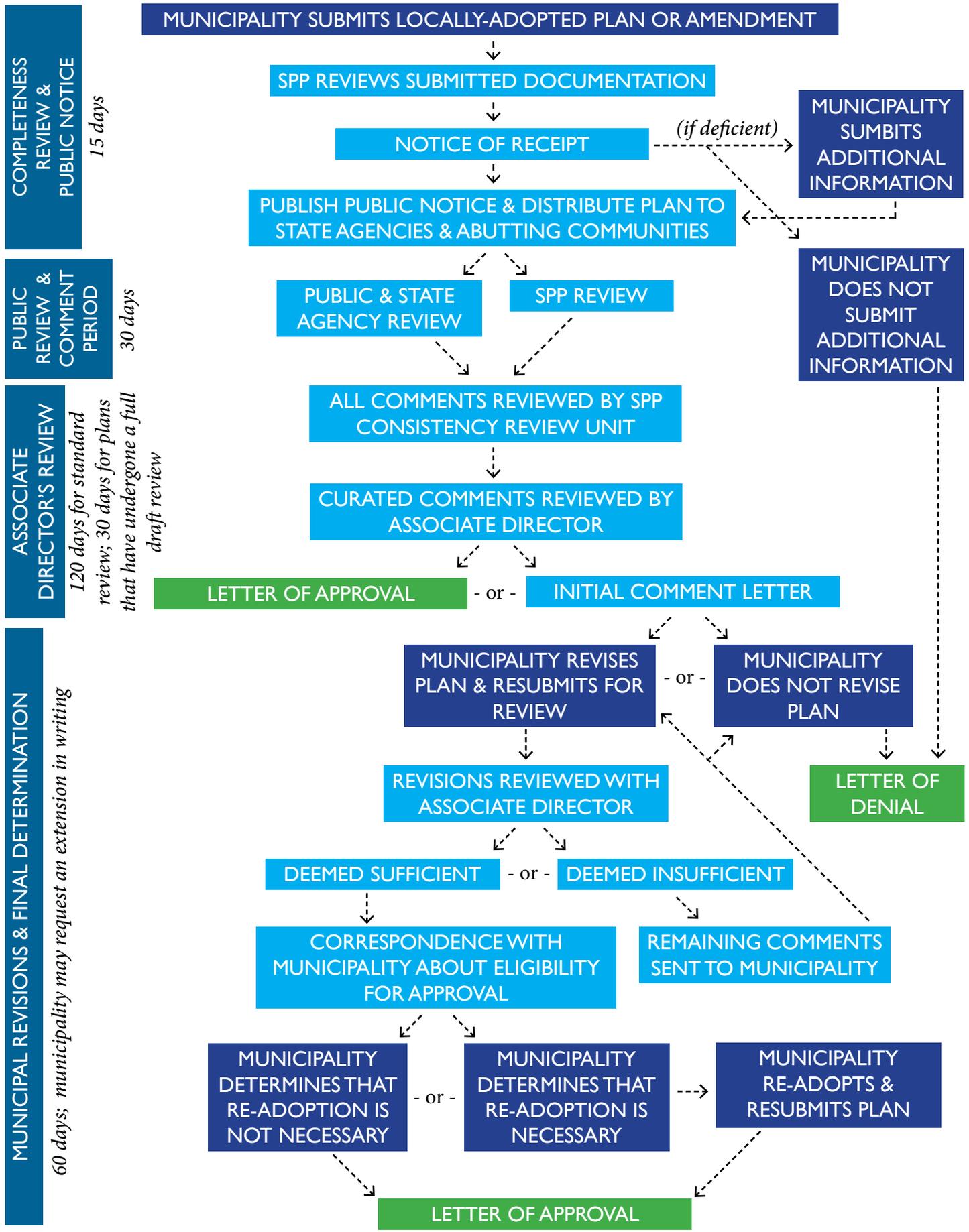


See the RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, [RIGL subsections 45-22.2-9\(e\), 45-22.2-9\(f\) and 45-22.2-9\(g\)](#)

THE ROLE OF STATE AGENCIES IN THE APPROVAL PROCESS

At the outset of the public comment period, the Division of Planning solicits comments on the plan from other State agencies. The State agencies are asked to provide an opinion as to whether or not the plan is consistent with that agency's goals and policies and, if found inconsistent, provide the reasons for the opinion. The final determination on approval of a municipal comprehensive plan is made by the Associate Director of the Division of Planning and the findings of the other State agencies are considered in the determination.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN STATE REVIEW PROCESS DIAGRAM



COMPLETENESS REVIEW & PUBLIC NOTICE
15 days

PUBLIC REVIEW & COMMENT PERIOD
30 days

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR'S REVIEW
120 days for standard review; 30 days for plans that have undergone a full draft review

MUNICIPAL REVISIONS & FINAL DETERMINATION
60 days; municipality may request an extension in writing

Key: STATE ACTIONS MUNICIPAL ACTIONS FINAL DETERMINATION

SECTION 7 - SUBMITTAL FORMS

MUNICIPALITY:

DATE OF SUBMITTAL:

CONTACT INFORMATION

NAME:

TITLE:

EMAIL:

ADDRESS:

PHONE:

SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS (all of the below)

- ✓ One (1) electronic copy of the draft materials (*in one of the following file formats: .doc, .pdf, .pub*)
- ✓ Three (3) paper copies of the draft materials (*3-hole punched or unbound preferred*)

TYPE OF REVIEW REQUESTED (select one)

TYPE 1: REVIEW BY DIVISION OF PLANNING STAFF ONLY

1A: One or more draft chapters of a comprehensive plan

1B: Draft amendments to a comprehensive plan

TYPE 2: REVIEW BY DIVISION OF PLANNING STAFF AND STAFF OF OTHER STATE AGENCIES

2A: One or more draft chapters of a comprehensive plan

2B: A full draft of the comprehensive plan

2C: Draft amendments to a comprehensive plan

GROWTH CENTER DESIGNATION

THE DRAFT PLAN OR AMENDMENT DESIGNATES A GROWTH CENTER:

Yes

No

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

PUBLIC INPUT HAS BEEN SOLICITED IN THE FORMULATION OF THIS DRAFT:

Yes

No

IF YES, PUBLIC INPUT WAS SOLICITED BY MEANS OF (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY):

A Citizens Advisory Committee

Meetings with civic or other organizations

Public hearings and workshops

Other:

Public survey(s)

The Planning Board/Commission held (#) of public hearings and/or workshops on this draft.

AMENDMENT DESCRIPTION (required for review types 1B and 2C only)

Amendment title:

Amendments were made:

Within a single chapter:

Within several chapters, including:

Provide a general summary of the amendment(s) to assist in the review (*attach another sheet if necessary*):

SIGNATURE

PRINTED NAME OF AUTHORIZED MUNICIPAL OFFICIAL

TITLE

SIGNATURE

DATE

SUBMIT FORM TO:

RI Division of Planning
c/o Supervising Planner, Consistency Review Unit
1 Capitol Hill
Providence, RI 02908

MUNICIPALITY:

DATE OF SUBMITTAL:

CONTACT INFORMATION

NAME:

TITLE:

EMAIL:

ADDRESS:

PHONE:

SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS (all of the below)

- ✓ One (1) electronic copy of the plan or amendment (*in one of the following file formats: .doc, .pdf, .pub*)
- ✓ Three (3) paper copies of the plan or amendment (*3-hole punched or unbound preferred*)
- ✓ Planning Board/Commission minutes showing approval and recommendation to the City/Town Council
- ✓ City/Town Council minutes showing adoption of the comprehensive plan
- ✓ If not specified in the City/Town Council minutes, evidence that the plan or amendment was adopted as an ordinance (e.g. copy of the ordinance)
- ✓ Copies of all public hearing advertisements

MATERIALS TO BE REVIEWED (select one)

A FULLY UPDATED AND RE-ADOPTED PLAN
(as required by RIGL subsection 45-22.2-12(b))

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AMENDMENT(S)

GROWTH CENTER DESIGNATION

THE PLAN OR AMENDMENT DESIGNATES A GROWTH CENTER:

Yes

No

AMENDMENT DESCRIPTION *(required for review of amendments only)*

Amendment title:

Amendments were made:

 Within a single chapter:

 Within several chapters, including:

Provide a general summary of the amendment(s) to assist in the review *(attach another sheet if necessary)*:

SIGNATURE

PRINTED NAME OF AUTHORIZED MUNICIPAL OFFICIAL

TITLE

SIGNATURE

DATE

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RHODE ISLAND
STATEWIDE
PLANNING
PROGRAM

