GENERAL PLANS AND COMPREHENSIVE PLANS

Plans continue to be confusing documents in many communities throughout the United States. There is considerable variation from state to state in relation to mandated requirements as well as to the use and legal importance of plans. In states such as California and Florida, plans have become a legally enforceable mandate, a physical planning “constitution.” In some states, plans continue to be a feel-good exercise that, once adopted, can be ignored with little or no penalty.

Irrespective of where your state is on the legal continuum, there are approaches and format issues that can make your job easier and your plans more useful and effective.

WHY WORRY ABOUT THIS?

The lack of a clear format and approach to General Plans and Comprehensive Plans has created a waste of time and considerable confusion in many planning departments.

Each new plan, plan element or chapter, and topic takes on a format selected by the staff members involved. This is time-consuming, because debates take place about the appropriate format, and extra editing time is necessary to put various authors’ material into the selected format.

Changing formats also adds confusion for the public and policymakers. The effectiveness of the plan as a policy document is lost, because the plan becomes too cumbersome, hard to understand and hard to use.
Some planners contend that a uniform format will stifle their creativity. In reality, the opposite happens. Once a uniform format is adopted, creativity is directed to the content of the plan, rather than to format. This is similar to a phenomenon that affects architectural students. Give them a blank piece of paper and they become lost, with little creativity. However, give them a constrained site and limited budget, and creativity flourishes.

The actual plan format selected may be less important than the fact that you have a format. However, I have found the following format ideas to be highly effective.

**The Goal.**

Most plans are developed over a period of years or are amended many times after original adoption. The format and organization of the various topics, sections and elements often vary considerably. The document is often thick and cumbersome for citizens and policymakers to use.

A more user-friendly document that is easier to use, visually appealing, internally consistent and readily amendable is desirable. Because the plan may be updated on an element-by-element basis and because the elements may be amended periodically, it is essential that all future plan work follow the same format. While it is possible that an author of a specific element can demonstrate the desirability of a different format for that particular element, such an approach will not achieve the broader efficiency and user-friendly objectives. What is desired can be viewed as a "synergistic approach," where the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts. From this perspective, the precise nature of the format is less important than the need to adopt a format and stick with it.

Consultants and staff are encouraged to put their creativity into the plan content, rather than the plan format.

**What to Call This Thing?**

You should call your document whatever term is used in your state enabling legislation. Although I favor "General Plan," if your legislation calls it the "Comprehensive Plan," call it that. Confusion tends to occur at the next level down through the creation of neighborhood plans, sub-area plans or specific plans. In many communities, these plans are becoming as important as the overall General Plan. A uniform term and format should be selected for these plans as well.

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**Confusion tends to occur at the next level down through the creation of neighborhood plans.**

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**The Neighborhood Plan**

Although sub-area and neighborhood plans can create problems in implementation, they are here to stay. Through empowerment, each neighborhood wants to treat its area in a unique way. Overall, I see this trend as positive, or in any case, as being here to stay. To ease implementation concerns, a number...
of guidelines can be followed for neighborhood plans, including:

- Use a standard term for all these documents.
- Use the same format as the General Plan or Comprehensive Plan document.
- Consider these plans as a chapter or sub-element to the General Plan or Comprehensive Plan.
- Don’t repeat goals and policies included in the General Plan or Comprehensive Plan.
- Don’t create new goals and policies simply for the sake of being different. Often the minor differences are meaningless and simply add confusion in implementation.
- Try to carefully separate out the truly citywide issues from the local neighborhood issues. Address the citywide issues in the General Plan and the local issues in the neighborhood plan.

**Overall Format**

**Page Size**

Vertical 8½" x 11" is almost always the desired format. As with all good rules, there may be an exception. I violated this once when working with an extremely long and narrow community. In this case, as illustrated, I kept the 8½" x 11" format, but went horizontal in order to stretch the maps across two facing horizontal pages.
Another approach to the need for larger maps is the use of 11" x 17" foldouts as illustrated. This keeps the desirable vertical 11" direction but allows for larger maps. The foldouts do slightly increase the printing costs, but still are a good solution.

**Binders**

The preferred binder is a three-hole punch, standard-ring binder. These can be inexpensively printed, or notebooks can be purchased with the clear plastic covers to insert printed covers.

A second choice is the use of a plastic spiral binder. These may be less expensive than the three-ring binders, but they are more difficult to insert amended pages.

Even less desirable than the plastic spiral binder is the use of a glued back or various types of metal spirals. These are virtually impossible to insert amended pages and should be avoided.

**Dividers**

Smaller plans may not need tabbed dividers; they can simply consist of different-colored pages. Documents ½" thick or thicker can benefit from tabbed dividers. Be careful not to use too many dividers or they defeat their purpose and make the document difficult to use. For example, in a ¾"-thick document, six to 10 dividers should be sufficient. I've seen a few documents where dividers were used to separate only a few pages. These documents become awkward, and the purpose of the dividers is defeated.
Text Justification

Most experts believe that unjustified text is easier to read than justified text. While this may be true, justified text can be graphically more pleasing. I suggest you use your own preference on this.

Page Layout

Three basic approaches to page layout are shown in the illustration. A one-column layout is the easiest to use. Two columns are a bit harder to use and edit, but they make for easy reading. A good compromise is the one column plus a margin space. This space can be used to highlight and accentuate special features. I've recently seen a number of documents using this format and believe it offers numerous advantages.

Type Styles

Desktop publishing allows you to use a variety of type styles and headings. Time spent in developing these will pay off in better communication. Several good examples are shown below.

Solid Waste

Background

The City of Fresno Beach contracts with the Sanitary Services for weekly waste pickup from businesses. Waste is transported to the Cold C on State Route 277. The closest state-owned disposal site is in Cameron, near Lompoc, in San County. The 1986 San Luis Obispo County Solid agreement Plan indicates that the Cold Creek capacity by 1995. Thereafter, either the existing...
Graphics and Maps
Since the plan should be a working document for policymakers, citizens and staff, it should contain clear and readable graphics, maps and diagrams. The typing and titles should follow the general rules of good communication: i.e., going from the general to the specific, the known to the unknown, and the simple to the complex.

Maps, diagrams and other graphics should be formatted to the vertical 8½” x 11” whenever possible, or in selected cases to 11” x 17” foldouts. Larger maps can be accommodated on the 8½” x 11” pages by breaking them into several pages and using inserts or separate pages for highly detailed parts of the map. Should a larger map prove to be necessary, it should be folded and included within a pocket bound in the back of the plan.

Desktop publishing can highlight text with the use of bold and italic type as illustrated below.

NOISE ELEMENT

"Nothing marks the change from the city to the country so much as the absence of grinding noise. The country is never silent. But its sounds are separate, distinct and, as it were, articulate."

Henry Ward Beecher

BACKGROUND
The Noise Element is a required element under the California Planning Law.
**TOPICS**

**Subject Chapters**
Material should be grouped by appropriate subjects. If subjects are listed in the state enabling legislation, it may reduce confusion by simply using these same subject headings. Most plans will contain chapters on:

- Environment
- Health and Safety
- Housing
- Infrastructure
- Land Use
- Transportation

Other common topics include:

- Aesthetics
- Cultural Resources
- Economic Development
- Growth Management
- Neighborhood or Sub-Areas
- Parks or Recreation

**Revision Page**
When the plan is amended, the community should have a service to send revised pages to holders of the plan. All plans should include a revision checklist immediately behind the front cover. Of course, the plan document that is included on your web site should always be up-to-date.

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**Table of Contents**
A comprehensive table of contents should be used. As elements are amended or new elements added, the table of contents also should be revised. Several type sizes should be used to assist the reader in using the table of contents, as illustrated. This is particularly important when an expanded table of contents is used. It also should include a comprehensive list of tables and figures.

### Section 6 Public Health
- **Introduction**
- 6-1 Seismic and Geologic Hazard
- 6-2 Earthquake Probability
- 6-5 Geologic Hazards
- 6-6 Acceptable Level of Risk
- 6-12 Policy Recommendations
- 6-14 Fire Hazard
- 6-14 Fire Services
- 6-14 Fire Hazards on the Urbanized Valley Floor

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**Introduction**
A brief introductory chapter should be used to introduce the reader to the plan. For example, this chapter might include material on the purpose of the plan, how it relates to zoning and other implementation tools, the Environmental Impact Report, and any communitywide strategy or direction. Authors of each element might recommend material for the introduction.

**Acknowledgements**
Contemporary management stresses involvement of people, giving them identity and recognition. The plan should include a list of credits either at the beginning or end of the document. The list should include credits for everyone who has worked on the plan. The list includes the elected and appointed officials, planning department staff, other important departments, citizen advisory committee members and consultants.
Index

A comprehensive index of the plan should be prepared to facilitate its use. The preparer of each new element or of subsequent amendments should be responsible for preparing new index notations and purging old index references.

The difficult task of creating an index has been facilitated by new word-processing programs. A typical index is shown in the illustration.

Glossary

All terms should preferably be defined within the body of the plan text, rather than in a glossary. A glossary should be used only if it is determined that the definitions cannot be readily handled within the body of the plan, such as when the definition presents unusually troublesome problems, or when the reference is repeated many times within the text and requires a careful description. All glossary words should be printed in the text of the plan in **bold** type.

**B. Glossary**

**Acceptable**
Satisfactory or adequate.

**Acceptable Risk**
A hazard that is deemed to be a tolerable exposure in danger given the expected benefits to be obtained.

**Agency**
The department, office or administrative unit responsible for implementing regulations.

**Agency**
The examination of a subject, particularly its component parts and their interrelationships.

**Appropriate**

Annotated Bibliography

An annotated bibliography should be placed in the appendix. The bibliography should be revised each time the plan is amended. A typical bibliography is shown here.

**B. Bibliography**

Arler, Norman; Godschalk, David R.; Schneider, Devon M.; *The Carrying Capacity Concept as a Planning Tool*; December 1978.

Batra, Rajeev; Associate Civil Engineer, San Jose Department of Public Works; *Written Comments on Conservation and Safety Appendixes*; November 1983.

Brown and Caldwell; San Jose/Santa Clara Water Pollution Control Plant; *Design and Implementation of Wastewater Reduction Program*; April 1983.

Butler, JoAnn; Jaffe, Martin; Thurow, Charles; *Reducing Earthquake Risks: A Planner's Guide*; March 1981.

Cooper-Clark and Associates; *Technical Report: Geotechnical Investigation of the City of San Jose Sphere of Influence*; July 1974.

**Appendix**

Each element should be kept as concise as possible. It is recognized that, in some cases, state statutes require substantial supplementary background material. In these instances, a separate appendix document should be used. The key points of any such background material should be summarized in the plan. The appendix should be bound separately and kept on file for easy reference. Although the appendix will be available to the public, it will normally not be distributed with...
Plan Format

The plan. A typical technical appendix table of contents is shown.

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Technical Appendix
(Separate Document)

A. Circulation Element, Technical Report
B. Conservation Studies
C. Noise Impact Study
D. Air Quality Impact Analysis
E. Housing Element
F. Environmental Impact Report
G. Fiscal/Economic Study
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Organization

Each plan element or chapter should essentially contain only two sections: a background section and a goals and policy section. The chapter may be subdivided by topics. For example, the Circulation Element might have one subsection on roads, another on airports. In this case, each subsection would also contain a background section and a goals and policy section. Each of the subsections is defined below.

- **Background**
  
The background section should consist of an introductory narrative to help readers understand the element and to provide a frame of reference for the goals and policy statements. Some of this material might be considered "findings"; however, the word "background" should be used instead of findings, as the intent is not to develop refined legalistic findings, as used in some documents, but rather to keep the background section more informal.

The primary goal of this section is to be educational in providing a brief summary of significant background information and analysis that may be contained in other documents or reference material.

Clearly drawn charts, graphs or tables should be included in the background section.

The background section for any one topic should generally not exceed half a page to one and a half pages. An entire element or chapter should contain no more than one to six pages of background material. Unless this standard is adhered to for each element, the plan will become an unwieldy large document.

When extensive background material is required by state statute, it should be prepared as a separate appendix and summarized in the main body of the plan.

- **Goals and Policies**
  
All policy material should be encompassed within only two types of statements: goals or policies.

Although some planners have attempted to give precise definition to goals, objectives, principles, policies, criteria and standards, such a system is confusing and not necessary. All of these terms are part of a continuum, and any one of the six items could be rewritten to sound like any one of the other five. Goals and policies are defined as follows:

- **Goals – Broad Directions**
  
The goals should be direction-setters, not actions. They set ideal future conditions that policies implement. They are general expressions of community values and,
therefore, somewhat abstract in nature. They are often not quantifiable, time-dependent or suggestive of specific actions for achievement, but they should represent the uniqueness of the community.

**Policies – Specific Directions**

Policies set more specific directions and guide actions. They may include traditional objectives, policies, criteria, standards and principles. They are specific statements that guide decision-making, a clear commitment of legislative intent.

There is also a continuum between goals and policies. The drawing of a precise definition or precise line between the two is neither necessary nor productive. Goals and policies could be combined into only one statement: i.e., policies. However, the reason for keeping the two separate is to provide additional structure to the plan. The goals set forth the larger, more general ideas; the policies, smaller, more specific ideas.

The method for numbering goals and policies should be well thought out. I generally prefer to number goals sequentially throughout the entire document: e.g., the first goal is designated “Goal-1,” the second “Goal-2,” etc. The policies, on the other hand, are numbered by chapter. If, for example, the Circulation Element is chapter 3, the policies could be numbers “Policy 3-1, Policy 3-2, Policy 3-3,” etc.; or if an alpha system is used, the policies would be numbered “Policy C-1, Policy C-2, Policy C-3,” etc.

When an entire element is revised, its goals and policies should be renumbered in sequential order as amended. Should an element be only partly amended (e.g., a policy is deleted or a new policy added), an alpha designation may be used so as not to change all of the policy numbers and yet keep the text in a logical sequence. For example, a new policy appearing between old Policy C-2 and Policy C-3 could be labeled Policy C-2a.

**EDITORIAL style**

**Apple Pie**

Goals and policies that are so general that they have little or no meaning should not be used. These are the types of statements that Herb Cohen, author of *You Can Negotiate Anything*, calls “the equivalent of asking for apple pie, the flag, and a hot lunch for orphans.” To the extent that these types of statements are believed necessary for local or political reasons, they should be kept to a minimum. It may be possible to combine a large number of these into one or more combined statements. An example of the type of statement to avoid is as follows:

"Promote the provision of an adequate supply of housing by location, type and price."

A more useful statement would be:

"In order to accommodate housing for all economic groups that work in the community, higher residential densities should be distributed throughout the
Footnotes

Footnotes should not be used for policy language. Key goals or policy material should be included directly in the relevant goal or policy. An example of a typical footnote that should be included directly in a policy would be:

"In no event shall non-urban densities authorized by an adopted community plan exceed a maximum of one dwelling unit per acre."

Narratives, Maps and Diagrams

All policy should be contained within the specific numbered goals and policies. For example, narrative descriptions of land use categories should not be placed in a general narrative section but should be included directly within a policy. Maps and diagrams also should be discussed and referenced within a policy. The background sections should not contain any policy language.

Titles

Goals and policies should always be given a short two- or three-word title for ease of reading and reference.

For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LU- N-3</th>
<th>Energy Conservation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Energy conservation methods such as site planning and solar collection, either passive or active systems, shall be encouraged.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LU- N-4</th>
<th>Grading and Drainage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A grading and drainage report shall be required for any new development to ensure that adequate control measure are taken to protect downslope parcels.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LU- N-5</th>
<th>Oak Trees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provisions for the protection of native oak trees shall be incorporated into all development plans. See also: Conservation Element CO-11 Oak Tree Policy Design Element D-12 Special Tree Preservation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vision

Goal statements should provide a clear vision for the future of the community. Goals should be both motivational and realistic in expressing attainable results. The plan is only as good as the results it achieves. If a plan has too many goals, the vision will get lost. Each topic should have only a few goals.

Ordinances

Policies that virtually become ordinances should be avoided. These tend to lengthen the plan and include material that needs frequent amending.

Goal and Policy Background

Although goals and policies should be tightly drawn and succinct, there may be cases where an introductory phrase would substantially clarify the goal or policy. In these instances, short phrases headed by the words “because,” “in order to” or “to” should be used.
One- or Two-Map Systems

The debate concerning policy plans versus mapped plans may vary from community to community. If a map is used, a decision should be made as to how it relates to the zoning maps. In a two-map system, the plan map uses broad categories, and land uses are often shown as non-parcel specific blobs or diagrams. Lot-specific information is then shown on the zoning map. In a one-map system, the plan map and zoning maps are one and the same and at a parcel level of detail. For small communities that are mostly developed, I recommend use of the one-map system. Larger and underdeveloped communities may find the two-map system more usable.

OTHER DOCUMENTS

Environmental

Some states require a specific environmental analysis of the plan. For example, in California, the General Plan is considered a project under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and thus an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) or Negative Declaration is required. The same research should be used for both the EIR and the General Plan in order to avoid duplication and to reduce costs. Some communities combine the plan and the EIR into a single document; however, I do not favor this approach. The EIR should not be considered a part of the plan, and the plan should stand alone without the need of an EIR reference. The problem with combining documents is that it leads to additional bulk and repetition. The EIR, by nature, often results in a format that can be confusing. Once the plan is adopted, it should be the key document, not the EIR.

The same research should be used for both the EIR and the General Plan in order to avoid duplication and to reduce costs.
Coastal Commission or Other Special Requirements

Some states have special-purpose requirements that affect the plan. In California, communities along the Pacific Ocean must also prepare a Coastal Plan to be approved by the state. The existence of two separate plans can be confusing for both policymakers and citizens. One approach to this problem is to combine text into one document and distinguish which material relates to which plan. In the sample policies with numbers that are bold and in a shaded box apply only to the city. Policies in regular type and not bold apply in both the city and the coastal zone.

Implementation

There is a fine line between what should be included in a plan policy and what should be in an implementing action. Policies should be longer-lasting, with implementation actions more specific and with a shorter timeframe.

For example, a Circulation Element policy might be:

"Pedestrian walkways and bicycle paths shall have equal weight with facilities designed for motor vehicles."

An implementation action might be:

"As part of the Engineering Department's budget, the community should study the feasibility of removing parking on Elm Avenue between 20th Street and 48th Street to provide for a bike lane."

A separate set of implementation actions is often prepared for each element. Except where specifically required by state statute, these implementation documents should not be adopted as part of the plan, but should be adopted at the same time the plan or element is adopted, or shortly thereafter. The implementation actions should be reviewed annually for budgetary and work program commitment.