

What is a Comprehensive Plan?

A Comprehensive Plan is a statement of a community's goals and a conceptual road map for how to achieve them. Its purpose is to present, in an easily accessible and readable format, a guide to decision making on important land use issues. This Comprehensive Plan starts with background information (Chapter 1), including an overview of the process, local history and a look at current issues and conditions, to establish a context for the Plan recommendations. The Plan's goals and strategies in Chapter 2 express a clear intention and sense of direction, derived from the shared views of a varied cross-section of the community. The process by which the Plan was formulated was designed to build consensus and understanding of planning issues in the community. In order to ensure that the Plan comes to life, it also contains action recommendations to achieve the goals and vision in Chapter 3, Implementation. This Comprehensive Plan is intended for use on the desks of Town officials and citizens, and not to sit idly on a shelf.

The main principles guiding this Plan include:

- 1) that it clearly articulate the Town's goals and strategies for achieving them;
- 2) that the goals and strategies reflect common agreement among the town's population;
- 3) that clear and concise implementation recommendations show how to fulfill the Plan's goals and assign responsibility for their fulfillment.

What the Plan is not

In reading and using this Comprehensive Plan, it is also important to understand what it is not. It is not a detailed instruction manual that tells exactly what to do or what will happen. It does not predict the future, although it does look ahead and express the Town's goals for the future. It does not prescribe exact courses of action, because these must be developed with care in response to a wide variety of situations that may arise. It would be short-sighted to mandate only one way to accomplish a community's goals in a Comprehensive Plan, when creativity and responsiveness to public input and evolving community needs may result in better solutions.

A Comprehensive Plan is not the law. It is an understandable and common mistake for citizens to confuse a Comprehensive Plan with the zoning code that implements it. They are two different things. The Comprehensive Plan sets the direction and goals for the community and recommends in a general way how these can be accomplished. In contrast, the zoning code is a detailed document that translates the goals into law. All too often, communities think they have gained control over their future merely by adopting a Comprehensive Plan. Although they have taken a major step in the right direction, the adoption of a plan does not change anything.

Putting the Plan in to action

A Comprehensive Plan is an important first step but to have effect its recommendations must be translated into zoning laws, budget allocations, public investments, and other actions that have the force of law. That is why it is so important that the Comprehensive Plan accurately reflect community consensus, because without strong community support a Town Board will be reluctant to pass implementing legislation. While changes to the law must be consistent with the guidance provided by the Comprehensive Plan, the Plan is not by itself a legally enforceable document. Citizens and public officials need also to be aware that whatever they adopt in their implementing laws must not only be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan, but also with the requirements of state and federal law.

Although Chapter 3 of this Comprehensive Plan is called "Implementation," it is important to understand that the implementation section of a Comprehensive Plan is different from the actual implementation documents and process that make things happen. This Plan provides guideposts to observe as the Town conducts the complex process of implementation, but it does not provide the details of the implementation process. The Plan is like a sketch of what a house will look like when it is built, not the house itself or the blueprints that tell the builder exactly what to build. The zoning code is the document that actually says what is and is not allowed, and it is the day-to-day decisions of local boards, officials, and citizens that determine what is actually built and what land is preserved. The zoning should reflect the guidance in the Comprehensive Plan, but should not be confused with the Plan.

A Comprehensive Plan must leave flexibility for those who will be doing the implementation, rather than locking them into only one way to accomplish the Plan's goals. If this Plan recommends certain types of changes to zoning, the details of those changes must be worked out in the process of writing and reviewing the zoning amendments. Such amendments require significant give and take among various stakeholders, as well as public input and public hearings at several stages.

This Comprehensive Plan is comprehensive in its scope, not its detail. It is intended to integrate many related issues so that their connections are clear and understandable. The community should, however, have realistic expectations of what a Comprehensive Plan can and cannot accomplish. It can guide the future, but not determine it. It can recommend actions, but it cannot ensure that they will occur. Only the people of the Town of Philipstown and their elected and appointed officials can chart the future course of the Town. Their commitment to fulfilling the goals of the Plan through specific actions will be the chief determinant of its success. This success depends upon the willingness of the citizens of the Town to work together to make it happen.