

Chapter 1

Making Great Cities: Why Planning Matters

In This Chapter

- ▶ Looking at how cities make and use urban plans
 - ▶ Identifying an urban plan's main components
 - ▶ Planning for new challenges and great places
 - ▶ Exploring new ideas and ways to improve your community
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An *urban plan* (sometimes called a *town plan*, *master plan*, or *comprehensive plan*) is a guide to the future of a community. Many different kinds of places — from small towns surrounded by farms and countryside to teeming metropolises that are home to millions of people — use urban planning to help sustain and improve their communities.

An urban plan shows what a place could be like in the future. Plans aren't just about what a place may *look* like in the future (the shape of its roads, the style of its buildings, or how many trees are in its parks); plans are also used to figure out how a city will *function* in the future (what kinds of jobs people will have, how much pollution will be created, or what kinds of transportation will move people from one part of the city to another).

This chapter offers an overview of how cities and towns use urban planning to come up with new solutions for their problems. I fill you in on the main components of an urban plan, such as land use, housing, and transportation. I also look at how urban plans get made and who's involved in making them, and tell you how you can get more involved in planning a great future for your community. All the topics in this chapter are discussed in greater detail in other parts of this book, so you can flip ahead when you come across something that grabs your interest.

The Three Ps: People, Places, and Plans

Urban plans help communities take stock of where they are and where they want to go. Every place is different, and different places change in different ways. Some cities have growing populations; others have declining populations. Some cities rely on subway systems to move people back and forth to work; other cities rely mostly on cars and highways for people to get around.

Urban plans look at current conditions in the community to figure out what's working well and what may need to be improved. Making a plan is also an opportunity to give members of the community a chance to express what they love about where they live and what kind of place they want it to be in the future.

Planning for changing places

Urban planning looks at what's good and bad about a community in the present, and plans ahead for how the community can maintain and improve itself in the future. A good understanding of how the community works and how it's likely to change helps make better plans for the future (see Chapter 2).

Population change

The most general type of population change is whether the size of the population is growing or declining. But the makeup of the population also can change, such as its racial or ethnic composition or changes in the number of young families in the community or the number of senior citizens.

Changing places

The geography of where people live is changing as an increasing number of people live in suburban areas rather than in centrally located urban areas. Many suburban areas are making plans to accommodate larger populations, while many existing urban areas are coping with declining populations and planning for revitalization to attract new residents and retain existing households.

Economic trends

A century ago, most cities were prosperous due to their ability to make things, from clothes and furniture to steel and sausage. In today's global economy, products can be made anywhere in the world, and successful local economies rely on lots of different types of jobs, including providing services and making products.

New technologies

Whether it's the continuing influence of the Internet or new ways of using clean energy to power our cities, a wide range of technological innovations will help shape the cities of the future.

Environmental concerns

Cities and towns are increasingly making plans that recognize a wide range of environmental concerns, such as unhealthy air quality and land contamination. Many places also are looking more closely at global environmental conditions and making plans for potential large-scale environmental problems, such as rising sea levels, which could eventually put many coastal cities literally underwater.

Making plans for making places

Most plans for cities and towns are prepared by local government agencies. An *official comprehensive plan* is the most common type of urban plan. It addresses the long-term future of the community, looks at all the different components of the community (such as housing and transportation), and is officially adopted by the community's local government.

In addition to long-range comprehensive plans, many communities also have specialized urban plans, such as a strategic revitalization plan for a specific neighborhood that aims for short-term results. A growing number of places also are making plans for metropolitan areas that help coordinate the future development of all the cities and suburbs in that metropolitan region.

In some cases, various government agencies and community organizations are involved in making informal plans for the community. For example, a nonprofit neighborhood association may develop a plan to renovate older housing in its neighborhood and work on establishing partnerships with residents, businesses, investors, and local governments to help carry out the plan (see Chapter 3).

From start to finish, the process of creating an urban plan goes through several steps (see Chapter 4):

- 1. Assess the community's current conditions.**
- 2. Create goals for the future.**
- 3. Decide on what planning strategies and actions will be taken.**
- 4. Determine how to implement, monitor, and update the plan.**

The resources needed to make an urban plan depend on the kind of plan being made. A small town may be able to produce a good comprehensive plan in a short period of time for a relatively small amount of money. But an official comprehensive plan for a large city may involve literally thousands of people, take a few years to complete, and cost millions of dollars. This may seem like a lot of effort just to plan ahead, but as the old saying goes, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Putting people in the plan

Ideally, an urban plan isn’t just a guide to the future *for* the community, but it’s also a guide to the future *by* the community. A plan can have a big impact on the people who live in the community, as well as other community stakeholders (such as business or property owners), so getting everyone involved in making the plan is a good idea. Urban planning uses a wide range of techniques to encourage public participation in the plan-making process, from public meetings and focus groups to networking with social media and old-fashioned door knocking to meet new people (see Chapter 3).

The Way Things Work: The Components of a Plan

An urban plan is sort of a blueprint for the long-term development of a community. A plan says what the community could or should be like at some point in the future, usually between 20 and 50 years ahead. But it’s a very complicated blueprint, because cities are made up of many related components, including (but not limited to) land use, housing, natural resources, public services, and transportation.

The exact components that are part of an urban plan depends on the place itself, because every place is just a little bit (or a lot) different. In some areas, economic issues may be very important to the community, whereas another place may need to make plans to protect a unique natural resource.

Urban plans take a detailed look at the current conditions of each component in the plan (such as housing or transportation) and look ahead for what the community will need in the future (such as more housing or better roads). Planning for each component also has to consider how different components are related — such as how automobile pollution can impact air quality — and figure out ways to plan ahead in a comprehensive and coordinated manner.

Land use

The land use component of an urban plan often is considered the most important part of a plan because everything that makes up a city has to be located somewhere. Different classifications are used to describe the ways in which land is used, such as for residential, commercial, and industrial uses. An urban plan looks at existing land uses by preparing an inventory of all the different types of land uses in the area and using maps that show how all the land in a city is being used, along with other important features of the city (such as roadways or rivers).

The land use component of an urban plan also illustrates the community's future land use pattern. General and specific maps show how all the land in the community will be used for different purposes in the future. One of the most important goals of planning for land use is to coordinate future land use with related planning components, such as transportation and housing, in order to make sure that these components work well together and provide enough space for future development (see Chapter 5).

Housing

The housing component of a plan looks at both the quantity and quality of housing in the community. An assessment of current housing conditions looks at a wide range of housing characteristics, including the mix of different types of housing in the community (such as single-family homes and apartment buildings), the age and physical condition of housing, and issues related to housing affordability and homeownership.

Information on how well the current housing stock is serving the community is combined with forecasts of population and economic trends to make plans for future housing improvements, including how much housing will be needed in the future and what types of housing will be needed. Plans for future housing are coordinated with other plan components, like land use and transportation, to help figure out the best locations for future housing development and to identify areas with existing housing that may require redevelopment. Chapter 6 takes a detailed look at housing.

Transportation

The transportation component of a plan looks at everything that keeps a city connected, ranging from roads and subways to rivers and sidewalks. An assessment of transportation conditions looks at how well the city is

connected (can people get from here to there?) and how well people are served by the transportation system (can they get where they need to go?).

Planning for future transportation involves looking at options for improving the management of the existing transportation system, as well as making future improvements. More and more, local transportation plans are trying to come up with ways to lessen the impact of transportation on the environment, plan for alternatives to the automobile (like mass transit, bicycling, and walking), and coordinate transportation options with land use changes (see Chapter 7).

Urban design

The urban design component of a plan addresses both aesthetic and functional issues. Cities are made of up many building blocks, including individual buildings, streets, and neighborhoods. The design of each of these types of places contributes to both the beauty and usefulness of the city. For example, a well-designed street is one that is attractive to the eye, allows for car traffic to move freely, and has good sidewalks where people can stop to talk to each other. Urban design helps the city look good and work well.

The urban design component of a plan examines the design characteristics of existing areas and makes suggestions for the design of future development. Urban design plans are coordinated with other plan components in ways that improve their aesthetic appeal and functionality, such as creating design guidelines for future housing developments that provide a community with a consistent look and feel.

Planning for urban design often involves getting ideas and opinions from the community through public participation in planning exercises. A variety of approaches, including design charrettes and community visioning, help community stakeholders identify how they want the community to look and function in the future. You can find more details on urban design in Chapter 8.

Environmental issues

Urban plans look at many different types of environmental issues, including preserving a city's natural elements (such as water resources or animal habitats), providing open space and recreational areas, and preserving nearby agricultural areas. The environmental component of a plan also looks at the city's own impacts on the environment, such as how pollution from factories or automobiles contributes to environmental degradation or negatively impacts human health.

A plan's environmental component often assesses a wide range of current conditions. These can include the amount of open space in a community, an inventory of its important plant and animal species, or an assessment of the city's air quality. Future plans for preserving and protecting environmental resources are closely coordinated with related plan components, such as transportation, infrastructure, and land use. An increasing number of communities have developed plans to minimize their global impact on the environment, including efforts to reduce local levels of greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global climate change (see Chapter 9).

Infrastructure and services

Some of a city's infrastructure, such as roadways and power lines, is obvious and easily seen. But the average person doesn't usually see a lot of what keeps the city running, such as sewage treatment plants, underground pipes, and power plants. Cities also provide lots of essential services to the community, such as schools, hospitals, and police and fire protection. All these things are addressed in urban plans, and their planning is closely coordinated with the city's land use patterns to figure out where to locate and provide needed infrastructure and services.

Planning ahead for future improvements to infrastructure and services is especially important because things like sewers, schools, and power plants are very costly and may be in service for 50 to 100 years. Careful planning for long-lasting and expensive upgrades helps ensure that cities can provide the essentials now and in the future. I cover this topic in detail in Chapter 10.

Building the Future: Urban Planning Challenges and Techniques

Today's cities and towns face unprecedented challenges, and many new approaches to urban planning are being used to help cities and towns deal with a wide range of difficult issues, including population loss, environmental degradation, industrial decline, urban sprawl, natural disaster, and even global population growth.

In some cases, cities and towns are incorporating these issues into their overall urban plans. Other places are developing strategic plans that propose short-term actions to address specific issues. Cities and towns are always changing, so no plan for the future will ever be perfect, but many communities around the world are making bold plans and taking big steps toward improving themselves and avoiding future problems.

Making cities sustainable

Communities around the world are taking steps to reduce their impact on the environment and make healthier places for people to live. By planning for sustainable development, communities are using new approaches that balance ecological concerns with the social and economic needs of communities. Planning for sustainable development also means looking at the big picture, such as how local pollution contributes to global climate change (see Chapter 11).

Here are some ways that cities and towns are planning for places that are more sustainable:

- ✓ **Protecting and preserving natural resources:** Cities and towns are making plans and taking steps to protect their important ecological resources, including land, water, air, plants, and animals. These efforts range from small-scale programs to conserve water during droughts to big plans for preserving large areas within cities as open space or nature preserves.
- ✓ **Going green:** Communities are increasingly looking at ways to reduce their environmental impact and promote new development that is more sustainable for people as well as the environment. These include efforts as simple as helping more people walk or use bicycles instead of cars, or creating complex plans for green buildings, which require less energy to operate and can significantly reduce pollution.
- ✓ **Seeing the big picture:** Many communities are looking at ways to reduce their global ecological impact, especially in how cities and towns contribute to global climate change. Many places are making plans that aim to reduce their environmental footprint in ways that make better use of local resources, consume less of the world's limited resources (especially fossil fuels), and reduce the amount of local pollutants that contribute to regional and world environmental problems.

Renewing older cities

Many major U.S. cities have fallen on hard times in recent decades. Places such as Buffalo, Cleveland, and Detroit have experienced significant population losses over the last few decades, as well as declining social and economic conditions for many of the people who still live there. And it's not just big cities that are experiencing decline. Many small towns and older suburbs also are coping with shrinking populations and other signs of distress, such as abandoned housing, increasing poverty, and rising crime rates.

Communities across the country are making plans and carrying out community development initiatives that are working to revitalize older areas, including efforts to improve specific places and build on existing strengths:

- ✓ **Improving downtowns, waterfronts, and other special districts:** Concentrating redevelopment efforts in existing areas can help older communities attract new businesses, create new jobs for existing residents, and attract tourists and new residents to the community.
- ✓ **Strengthening arts, culture, entertainment, and history:** Many communities are using their unique artistic and cultural resources — such as music festivals, museums, sporting events, and historic districts — in ways that both celebrate the heritage of existing residents and make older areas more attractive to new residents and tourists.
- ✓ **Supporting neighborhoods and families:** A wide range of community development initiatives are being used in places across the country. These include efforts to build new and affordable housing in urban and suburban neighborhoods, attract new businesses and stimulate job creation, and improve access to transportation to workplaces for households that don't own cars.

You can find more information on urban revitalization in Chapter 12.

Dealing with sprawling cities

Today's metropolitan areas are more spread out than ever, as cities and their suburbs continue to expand into rural and previously undeveloped areas. Roughly half of the U.S. population lives in a suburb. The U.S. population is growing, so it's natural that we need a little more space. But much of this growth is taking place at the outer edges of metropolitan areas in ways that use land less efficiently and encourage more car travel. Both of these situations have negative environmental, economic, and social impacts, and sprawling areas require increased public spending for new infrastructure and services (see Chapter 13).

Regional planning and *growth management planning* are planning approaches that help communities accommodate future growth while using their resources effectively:

- ✓ **Growing smart and sprawling less:** Many communities are successfully using planning approaches that aim to use existing resources more effectively and minimize the impact of development on the environment. For example, growth management planning may look at limiting new

development in undeveloped areas, or planning for the redevelopment of less costly existing areas that already have access to infrastructure and services.

- ✓ **Encouraging cooperation and coordination:** Regional planning for metropolitan areas can be a tough sell. Most communities make plans only for themselves and don't take a broader view of the region as a whole. But curbing the trend of sprawling cities will require communities to work together on regional solutions to regional problems, and find ways for communities to make better decisions about local land use that balance local growth with the overall health of the metropolitan region.

Helping cities before and after disasters

In recent years, many places have suffered high-profile disasters, from Hurricane Katrina's devastating impact on New Orleans in 2005 to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York City in 2001 to the 2011 tornadoes that killed hundreds of people and destroyed major portions of Joplin, Missouri, and Tuscaloosa, Alabama. However, many other cities and towns are located in places that face natural hazards (such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods), as well as manmade threats (such as terrorism and oil spills).

Communities are increasingly recognizing the risks they face and taking steps to both avoid the worst consequences of disasters and make sure that they're prepared when disasters occur:

- ✓ **Making communities less vulnerable to disasters:** An increasing number of communities are making plans to disaster-proof themselves and reduce the risk of known hazards in the community. Plans to make communities more resistant to disasters, also known as *hazard mitigation plans*, examine potential threats to the community and help put new programs or regulations into place, such as limiting the number of new buildings in areas that are likely to flood.
- ✓ **Helping communities recover and rebuild after disasters:** Many communities also have adopted disaster response plans that provide a blueprint for how the community will respond in the event of a disaster. Many communities that have been impacted by disasters have adopted post-disaster recovery plans to guide their recovery and rebuilding.

Cities and towns across the United States and around the world are working to become *resilient communities*, communities that are able to both avoid potential disasters and recover from calamities more quickly with minimal losses. Chapter 14 explores cities and disasters.

Supporting the local economy

A healthy local economy is essential to the success of any community, but maintaining a strong local economy can be a difficult feat. Many communities have experienced prolonged periods of business closings, job losses, and increases in poverty and hardship. Planning for local economic development helps strengthen the local economy by looking for ways to create more good jobs in stable businesses and industries (see Chapter 15). Economic development planning uses a wide range of approaches, including the following:

- ✓ **Building on local assets:** All communities have existing resources that can be used to promote economic development, such as helping existing businesses to expand or working with local colleges and hospitals to develop new products and services. Cities and towns also can work toward a healthy economic future by preparing people to work in good jobs and through land use planning that provides good places for businesses to expand their operations.
- ✓ **Attracting new businesses:** Cities and towns also try to bolster their local economies by attracting new businesses, from supermarkets to large factories to corporate headquarters. These efforts often involve a combination of land use planning to find good places for new companies and financial or tax incentives that can make a new location more attractive to potential investors.

In some cases, economic development programs may cost tens of millions of dollars in government support and involve not just cities and towns, but also state and federal government agencies. Many cities and towns have recently adopted economic development strategic plans that deal specifically with economic development issues and are intended to stimulate the economy in the short term (usually three to five years).

Growing globally

More than half the world's population lives in cities. That's more than 3.5 billion people. And that's just the beginning. Over the next 40 years, the number of people living in cities is expected to rise to more than 6 billion. Most of this growth will happen in the world's poorer countries, and planning for the future of the world's cities faces two big challenges:

- ✓ **More people, bigger cities:** In 1950, New York City and Tokyo were the only urban areas with populations of more than 10 million people. By 2025, there will be more than two dozen cities with populations over

10 million, and several of these are likely to exceed 20 million people, including Mexico City, São Paulo (Brazil), Dhaka (Bangladesh), Delhi (India), and Mumbai (India).

- ✓ **Rich cities, poor cities:** By 2025, the world's population is likely to reach nine billion people, and roughly five billion people are expected to be living in cities in poor countries. In modern times, cities have been places of wealth and comfort, but this may change in the future, because most future urban development will happen in places with limited economic resources.

In a global age, the world's cities are connected through vast social, economic, electronic, and political networks. Planning for the world's growing cities is likely to be a two-way street between rich and poor places. Wealthy cities may be able to share ideas and resources with poorer cities, while poorer cities may come up with inexpensive solutions for urban problems that can be used throughout the world. With the world's urban population set to nearly double in the near future, it's clear that we've only just begun to plan for the cities of the future (see Chapter 16).

Ready for More? Next Steps and New Ideas

You can contribute to the success of urban planning in your community in many ways. Your input can help professional urban planners craft better plans for your community. You can work with your local government or community organizations to help make decisions that will lead to a brighter future. You can use urban planning techniques to improve your community. You may even be thinking about a career in urban planning. This book is filled with practical information that can help you make great plans for yourself and your community.

Improving your community

You can get involved in the planning and development of your community in many ways. In Chapter 17, I talk about how to get more information about what's happening with urban planning in your community, and how to effectively participate in public meetings and hearings so that your voice is heard when plans are being made. I also tell you how you can get directly involved in making decisions about the future of your community by serving as a community representative or joining a planning commission.

Lots of urban planning opportunities are out there for action takers, including volunteering to help carry out the implementation of a plan or being an activist to make sure that your community's plan addresses important or neglected issues.



A good plan can open new doors for social entrepreneurship by raising new issues and setting new priorities for the community. If your community is planning to go green, maybe you can lead the way by starting a green business!

Considering a career in urban planning

A career in urban planning is a great option for people who want to make cities and towns that are more livable and sustainable. It's also a career choice that's hardly ever boring, and a good fit for those who like multitasking and working in situations that are always changing. Urban planning is a growing and rewarding field that offers many different employment opportunities, from working with small cities and towns in the United States to working abroad in the world's largest cities, from London to Mumbai.

The day-to-day work of an urban planner involves many different skills. Planners use a combination of “hard” skills that rely on analysis (such as conducting detailed statistical analyses of community trends) and “soft” skills that rely on communication (such as holding small meetings with residents to discover their concerns about the community).



Becoming a professional urban planner involves a significant amount of training. In Chapter 18, I point you to universities that offer degrees in urban planning and professional associations that specialize in training urban planners.

