



TVA Topic Brief

Comprehensive Plans

as a Tool to Guide Community
Growth, Preservation and Change



What are Connected Communities?

Connected Communities are towns, main streets, neighborhoods and cities that use data and technology-driven innovations to offer new and improved services to people and businesses. TVA’s Connected Communities initiative offers resources and connects communities with funding opportunities to help them leverage technology- and data-driven solutions to improve residents’ lives, deliver environmental benefits and scale economic opportunities.

For more information on Connected Communities, please visit tva.com/connectedcommunities or email: connectedcommunities@tva.gov

Purpose and Background

TVA set out to assess the preparedness of communities in TVA’s service region to pursue Connected Communities-related projects – those that enhance broadband and digital literacy, economic empowerment, energy and environmental justice and community resilience. The team found that a key success factor for communities seeking to pursue these types of projects is to have a solid foundation of policy and planning in place to aid in setting and achieving goals.

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Comprehensive Plans

What is a comprehensive plan and what does it include?

A local comprehensive plan, sometimes referred to as the general plan or master plan, is a foundational policy document for local governments that provides a framework to guide decisions about future growth, preservation and change within a municipality or county over a 20-to-30-year time horizon.¹ Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia and North Carolina all require communities to have comprehensive plans. However, some comprehensive plans are more robust and effective than others, which may reflect challenges with staff resource availability and variation in communities' prioritization of planning efforts.

A comprehensive plan covers topics that are central to establishing and achieving a community's vision. They traditionally focus on physical development, but communities are increasingly using these documents to address broader topics including economic, environmental and social topics that affect the sustainability of a community. Our research focused on a few select topic areas that relate closely to the Connected Communities areas of focus, such as housing, infrastructure and land use.

¹ American Planning Association, The Local Comprehensive Plan, Planning Advisory Service QuickNotes, No. 52. 2014.

Prevalence

TVA looked at comprehensive planning practices in 24 communities of varying size across the TVA service region. Of those communities, only five did not have a comprehensive plan. State-mandated comprehensive planning in four of the seven states served by TVA is a strong factor contributing to the prevalence of these plans. Areas that lacked comprehensive plans were those without state mandates. These areas may struggle to find the financial and staffing resources to pursue planning efforts.



79%

**of communities
sampled by TVA**

had a comprehensive
plan in place.

Georgia

Hiawassee, along with Young Harris and Towns County, created a joint comprehensive plan. By pooling their resources together, the communities were able to create a shared vision for the county and the two most populated cities.

A key strength of comprehensive planning efforts in Lookout Mountain, located in Walker County, is their effort to engage residents and businesses in creating its comprehensive plan. Specifically, Lookout Mountain utilized three methods as a vehicle for collecting public feedback regarding city planning: a citizen-based project steering committee, a public opinion survey and public input meetings.



Engaging residents and businesses in creating their comprehensive plan is a key strength in Lookout Mountain's comprehensive planning efforts.

Mississippi

Although many small (population 0 – 49,999) and medium (population 50,000 – 249,999) cities within Mississippi did not have comprehensive plans, Columbus has a plan which they use as a strategic tool to attract and support local businesses. The city focused on commercial development directed toward the downtown historic district and major intersections along Highways 45, 82 and 182. The second focus was on the recruitment of clean industries to add to Columbus' industrial history while expanding employment opportunities for residents.

Tennessee

Lebanon views their comprehensive plan as a living document to help guide the future of their community. In 2007, Lebanon created their first comprehensive plan, but in the subsequent years their original plan no longer reflected their changing conditions. In general, the plan was at odds with the evolving vision and goals of the community. Therefore, in 2020, Lebanon drafted a new comprehensive plan that aligned with the updated goals and vision of the community today and demonstrated that comprehensive plans can be malleable and adaptable to a community's needs.

Nashville's comprehensive plan encompasses many of the ideals of the previously listed communities. In addition, Nashville has created vibrant policies and regulations to ensure the success of the city's comprehensive plan. For example, one of Nashville's comprehensive plan goals is to provide affordable, accessible and available housing for residents. Over the past several years, the city has moved to make this a reality through supporting private, public and non-profit housing providers.



Providing affordable, accessible and available housing for residents is one of Nashville's comprehensive plan goals.

Conclusion

Key Takeaways

A strong comprehensive plan can be an effective tool in helping to attract and retain residents and businesses and in laying the groundwork for investments in key areas like broadband, workforce development, clean energy and resilience. Medium to large communities are best positioned to prepare robust, comprehensive plans given the staff resources available and the greater scale of development they need to manage. However, comprehensive planning is valuable for all communities, particularly those looking to make investments in Connected Communities-related technology solutions.

The first step toward developing a comprehensive plan is to engage residents and businesses to assess the priorities and needs of the community. Collaborating with other municipalities can be a valuable strategy to overcome limited resource availability for planning activities. After creating a comprehensive plan, the work is not finished. It is important to periodically review and update the plan to ensure the goals and vision still align with the communities' evolving circumstances. Finally, communities must implement policies and procedures to help ensure outcomes that align with their vision.



The first step toward developing a comprehensive plan is to engage residents and businesses to assess community needs.



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