

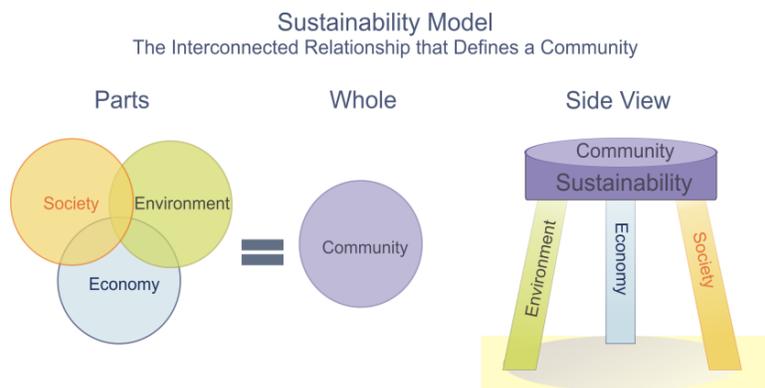
INTRODUCTION

What Is a Comprehensive Land Use Plan?

A comprehensive land use plan is an inclusive yet broad-based method for identifying the interconnected relationship of parts that together influence the function of the whole, and includes a set of actions necessary to reach a desired outcome. The City's Comprehensive Land Use Plan, hereinafter referred to as "the Plan", is based on a sustainability model that suggests that all parts must balance so that the whole will flourish as it continues to grow and evolve. The plan, while addressing many parts that influence the whole, focuses on the balance between three essential elements that include society, environment, and economy. As seen in Figure 1-1.1, utilizing the analogy of a three-legged stool to illustrate the importance of an interconnected relationship that each part or leg can have on a whole or stool, if one leg fails the whole stool will collapse. Similarly, if a community ignores one of its interconnected parts a negative outcome is likely to occur.

Planning ahead for sustainability allows decisions to be made with the best available information to create most optimal outcome and long-term community balance. This Plan is a community-based tool, which provides the best available information and guidance for reaching long-term goals while maintaining social, environmental, and economic balance as day to day decisions are being made that result in growth in and around the City.

Figure 1-1.1: Sustainability Model



This Plan replaces Marion's Land Use Plan adopted in 1972 and subsequently revised in 1978. Like the preceding plan, this Plan is long-range, and intended to serve the community for the next twenty years or as it no longer represents the future but becomes a reflection of the present. It focuses on physical development in and around the city, anticipates changes that are likely to occur, and provides specific guidance for decision-making and administrative actions. It is the reflection of civic engagement, technical analysis, and stated commitment by the community's governing body.

This plan explores the type of growth that is likely to occur in and around Marion over a long period of time based on societal, environmental, and economic changes that can be anticipated through current information and knowledge. For the purpose of this plan, growth is simply defined as the community's evolution over time. That process can result in the increase, decrease, and/or modification of any characteristic that shapes or defines the community. Growth is certain to occur at variable rates over time. Therefore, it may not be easily discernible how daily individual societal, environmental, or economic decisions are impacting the long-term success of achieving the Plan's goals. As such, the success of this Plan relies on the continual evaluation and modification of goals, objectives, and administrative policies to stay on course or to modify the course in order to carry out the community's vision for Marion.

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this Plan is to formulate a comprehensive overview of changes that are likely to occur within the community based on existing and future growth patterns and provide guidance for informed-decision making and effective management.

The Plan is an official public document, adopted by Marion City Council who serves as the chief legislative body for the community. State statute provides the enabling power for the City of Marion to plan for future growth and for shaping how that growth will occur through infrastructure improvements and other public services that are provided community-wide. The document contains a collection of policies that guide land use and development decisions that have an impact on the health, safety, and general welfare of the public. The policies of the Plan provide the private sector, municipal staff, and elected officials with guidance in making informed decisions that will guide growth and development overtime. Deviation from a policy within the Plan should always be possible – although should require thoughtful discussion to insure that such change will not be in conflict with the long-term vision and goals. This Plan is not a zoning plan, although it does contain policies that recommend changes to existing zoning regulations within the City Code that if enacted would bring the necessary changes needed to achieve the community vision and sustainable growth.

The Plan serves as a guide for those who make decisions on behalf of the City of Marion every day; a tool for private industry who are interested in the City's desired path towards future growth and development; and a commitment to the public for how and when anticipated changes are likely to occur within their community.

More specifically, this Plan provides:

- (1) A summary of the public's desired path for future growth and development;
- (2) The community's vision for Marion and recommendations to achieve that vision;
- (3) An evolutionary account of the community's growth and development over time and anticipated changes that will occur in the future;
- (4) An analytical tool for estimating future infrastructure facility and service needs;
- (5) A geographic reference for organizing and balancing competing interests for future land use needs;
- (6) A set of goals, objectives and policies to direct action that will have the greatest positive impact on the future; and
- (7) Supporting documents within the appendices including terms and acronyms used throughout the Plan.

Plan Focus and Organization

Environment and Natural Resource Protection. This focus area identifies the natural resources located within and immediately adjacent to the City of Marion. Highlighting the specific resources that are essential to public health and well-being, provide a source of recreation and enjoyment to the public, and contribute the community's overall economic stability.

History and Heritage. This focus area provides a summarization of Marion's unique history and the heritage that continues to define the community. As the community grows, the protection, conservation and enhancement of the community's historic resources and the preservation of its traditional small southern town character, which is valued by both long-standing residents and newcomers alike, can provide a secure and familiar foundation while other aspects of the community change overtime.

Economic Development. This focus area provides a brief summary of the major industry groups in Marion, commercial property values by industry, and occupation by industry for those who live in Marion. The new land use designations (LBCS Codes) and planned future infrastructure improvements that will both support and attract commercial and industrial development, tourism and hospitality-based development, workforce readiness, and economic renewal by directing growth to targeted cluster areas is considered in both the future land use categories and recommended zoning changes.

Housing. This area focuses on the mix and diversity of housing types ranging from duplexes to upper-floor residential in the downtown area. It considers access to housing and other needs as the aging housing stock diminishes, the stabilization and protection of neighborhoods that have been well-maintained overtime, and future growth of housing within Marion and within the study area.

Parks and Open Space. This is a recap of the recently adopted City of Marion Parks and Recreation Plan, and integrates new parks and recreational facilities and programs, greenways, and other open space and recreational amenities that enhance the city by making it a more enjoyable place to work, live, and play.

Public Services and Facilities. This focus area highlights existing infrastructure and capacity to serve the current need and future development growth, and services that are and will be required to provide effective and efficient public services that contribute greatly to the community's public health, safety, and general well-being.

Transportation. This focus area highlights key recommendations made to the North Carolina Department of Transportation to keep pace with the growing demand for improvements and expansions needed as a result of community growth and development. This focus area also provides tools that can be used by the City to address access and capacity on local streets, as well as recommending land use improvements that improve the integration between land use and the city's multi-modal transportation system, including access for pedestrians and bicycles, transit, rail, and automobiles.

Land Use. This focus area considers all of the focus area to better project future growth and development. It also makes recommendations to zoning changes that will help to address needs and carry forward the goals of this Plan in a well managed way so that as new growth and redevelopment occur, it does so in a logical and functional manner that does not erode the foregoing elements essential to being a sustainable community.

Plan Implementation

Adopting the Plan is the first step toward achieving the Community's vision. The City's zoning code, along with other City policy documents and plans should be revised accordingly to insure the Plan's implementation. The policy recommendations included herein go beyond identifying future areas of growth, it includes strategies to protect the environment, preserve historic resources and existing community character, design guidelines to improve transition between land uses, and strategies that will improve economic viability.

The final chapter provides a timeline of implementation, which is set based on resources, funding, and the building blocks of preceding achievements. Updates to the Plan will occur to address emerging needs and opportunities, as state law requires, and as local conditions change. Such updates will be presented to the City of Marion Planning Board, who will in turn provide recommendations to the Marion City Council for review and adoption.

The Planning Process

The Plan evolved under the umbrella of the North Carolina Small Towns Economic Prosperity (NCSTEP) program. The program was part of an initiative by the North Carolina Rural Center to help bring greater prosperity and improved quality of life to small towns throughout North Carolina. The program provided both financial and technical assistance to help communities plan and implement strategies for greater economic prosperity. In March 2006, Marion was one of 33 communities chosen to participate in the three-year program.

In entering into the STEP program, Marion identified downtown revitalization as the primary catalyst for economic prosperity. The City also recognized that the success of downtown could not be achieved independently, but rather through a cohesive and interconnected plan that was tied to the entire community. Given the technical and financial resources provided by the Rural Center through the STEP program, the City saw a unique opportunity to join the program together with the revision of this Plan. The intent was to strengthen and affirm the purpose of each initiative through an interconnected set of goals, objectives and policies that would provide a clear direction for achieving a prosperous future community-wide.

The planning process gave the public the opportunity to consider and express what kind of community it would like to have by anticipating what changes might occur, capitalizing on opportunities, and determining the actions that must be taken now in order to minimize unwanted or unforeseen outcomes in the future.

Citizen Engagement

The Plan was developed through the collaborative effort of citizens, civic organizations, leadership members, consultants, advisory boards, elected officials and city staff to fashion a reliable guide for future decision-making to effectively and efficiently manage changes over time.

A diverse group of citizens representing all ages, ethnicities, and income levels established a leadership team and engaged in activities that helped identify a vision for the future, and determine the goals that

needed to be accomplished in order to make that vision a reality. The leadership team worked effortlessly to identify important elements that needed to be included in the Plan and organized them into ten specific focus areas. These focus areas established the organizational framework for this document.

Once these areas were established, each member facilitated a number of community workshops and activities to obtain citizen input on the ten focus areas. Citizen involvement and participation was impressive. Information was collected from over 30 workshops held around the community, and has helped to formulate a solid foundation for drafting the policies included in this Plan. It is the intent of this Plan to articulate the community's collective voice within the vision and goals and develop policies and objectives that reflect that voice. A complete list of the goals, objectives, and policies are located in Chapter 4 and can be referenced back to the input provided by the community.

Community Survey

As part of the planning process, the leadership team organized a group of over forty citizens to participate in an activity to document their thoughts on Marion's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Citizens representing a cross-section of the community participated in the activity. Each person, equipped with a disposable camera, was asked to take pictures and document their thoughts about the community based on one of the four areas. Their comments and visual references were collected and compiled into the following summary:

Good Design and Architecture

Citizens appreciated and valued the historic buildings of the downtown area the most. "good design" and "historic architecture" were the commonly noted references. Also mentioned were buildings that are beautiful in their historic nature but are underutilized and/or not being utilized to their full potential. Newly constructed buildings were appreciated for their effort to fit into the context of the community and the historic character of downtown. Modern structures were welcomed as a sign of progress and economic growth. Several participants commented on examples of well-designed signage as well as other elements that make businesses look more attractive. A few comments related to applying design standards and façade grants to help guide and improve commercial areas. Other vacant buildings were noted as opportunities for adaptive reuse.

Vacant & Underutilized Buildings

On the same level of concern, participants expressed the need to address problems with vacant and underutilized buildings. Citizens noted that several businesses were not an appropriate use in their current location and especially noted that industrial uses should not be located in commercial areas.

Quality Housing

Many participants commented on good quality housing as well as safe and attractive neighborhoods noting that this fosters a strong sense of community.

Dilapidated & Poor Housing Conditions

Dilapidated housing and poor housing conditions were commonly referred to as "eye sores". Some noted that mobile homes and mobile home parks did not fit into the community.

Public Improvements

Citizens noted many public improvements that have taken place including the evening and weekend music events, upgraded street lighting and underground utilities downtown as well as recent renovations to the Marion Depot, which now serves as the Downtown Economic Development Office and community building.

Downtown Revitalization

There were multiple responses regarding the appearance downtown and the need for revitalization. Many citizens commented on the need to paint street light poles to match decorative lampposts, repair sidewalks and potholes, improve traffic circulation in problem areas, improve parking, and pedestrian safety.

Community Assets & Amenities

Many citizens identified several important community assets and amenities including outdoor dining, the YMCA, Hospice Center, the McDowell Senior Center, and the Chamber of Commerce. Other citizens identified churches as good examples of describing community assets. Many also commented on their design, place of importance, and a place to gather with like-minded people. Several citizens commented on educational training opportunities provided within Marion including the McDowell Arts Council, Ford Miller Training Center, the Library, and the Marion Elementary School.

In addition, citizens took pictures of people within the community with statements such as civic mindedness, good neighborhoods, safe community, positive and friendly atmosphere.

Desirable Businesses

Each citizen commented on the need for more desirable businesses, more restaurants and retail in downtown, and more locally owned businesses. Of all the photographs taken an overwhelming majority identified Wine Ruelz (now under new ownership as Low Country Dining) as an example of a desirable business for the downtown and an asset to the community.

Lack of Economic Development

Many of the citizens had very strong opinions about economic development. Lack of economic development was portrayed in a variety of ways from a loss of jobs to limited economic opportunities as well as a lack of economic activity to bring people to the downtown. Lack of public infrastructure along Sugar Hill Road and poor entrances into the City Limits were indicated as barriers to economic growth. Lack of retail businesses and quality restaurants were noted. It was suggested by many of the citizens to develop design guidelines for the downtown area and make façade grant money more available in order to spur economic growth. “Trashy” auto repair businesses, abandoned vehicles and too many car lots were specifically noted as negative attributes of the City and discouraged new auto-related businesses from being permitted within the City.

Public Spaces and Public Buildings

Based on the pictures returned, many citizens appreciate the many public spaces Marion has to offer including the gazebo downtown, the skate park, courthouse lawn, the community building, the Depot, Oak Grove Cemetery (for walking), the community ball field and Main Street. Several citizens commented on the attractive appearance of several public building including the Marion City Hall, Marion Police Department, County Courthouse, Marion’s Community Building, and the Depot.

Many commented on several public spaces that were in need of improvement such as traffic circulation downtown and the Marion Post Office parking lot. The power station on Rutherford Road was listed as not appropriate location. The McDowell County Administration Building was noted as “ugly” and looked out of place among the historic buildings in downtown.

Undesirable Signage & Trash

Citizens expressed concern with outdated and worn signage, and signs for closed businesses. Pictures included a range of signs, but generally referred to each as “ugly” and “unattractive”. A problem with trash and blight were also commonly referenced in many of the pictures taken.

Landscaping

All of the citizens commented on well-maintained landscaping and provided examples of beautiful landscaping suggesting the need for additional landscaping throughout the community. Many examples

included private plant beds at the entrance to neighborhoods and businesses as well as the decorative hanging baskets that line the downtown during the spring and summer months.

Poor Landscaping and Overgrown Vegetation

Equally as important as good landscaping, citizens commented on poor landscaping and inappropriate landscaping. An overwhelming majority commented on how much they disliked the holly trees downtown and suggested shade trees as a replacement. Better pruning was suggested for the Crepe Myrtles. More landscaping was suggested for parking lots. Many photos of vacant lots and buildings overgrown with vegetation were taken suggesting that the City appears unclean and an unsafe place to visitors.

Community Values: A Prologue to the Vision Statement

After 30 community workshops and a wealth of citizen input, the leadership team whittled the information down into fifteen central values that were of the most interest to citizens, and categorized those components into four core themes, which were used to create a vision statement for the community.

Community Values:

Preservation

- Protect community assets
- Preserve small town values
- Maintain and improve historic downtown & mill villages
- Conserve natural resources

Civic Involvement

- Build diverse citizen participation
- Allow open-minded discussions and be receptive to new ideas
- Create public and private partnerships to build a stronger community

Economic Prosperity

- Create development guidelines to protect and strengthen property values
- Be small business and entrepreneurial friendly
- Reduce barriers to sustainable growth
- Encourage more mixed-use throughout the community

Government Resolve

- Build stronger tax base to better the community
- Engage in strategic investments that better the community
- Support and participate in public and private partnerships
- Promote the "Main Street" philosophy community wide

Community Vision Statement

Marion's vision is to preserve, enhance, and sustain the best qualities of the built, social and natural environment, and effectively and efficiently address our community needs, giving positive direction to the changes and growth we can anticipate, and finding knowledge-based solutions to overcome future challenges.

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