

<b>CITY OF NORWALK REPORT TO THE NORWALK PLANNING COMMISSION</b>
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**ITEM:** Comprehensive Plan & Zoning Ordinance Discussion

**MEETING DATE:** September 14, 2015

**STAFF CONTACT:** Luke Parris, AICP  
City Planner

**GENERAL DESCRIPTION:** On September 3, 2015, the Planning and Zoning Commission and the City Council heard a presentation regarding density, economic development, comprehensive plans, zoning, and the relationship between them. Staff has attached the discussion guide for the presentation and will provide a brief overview of the presentation and subsequent discussion at the meeting.

The end result of the September 3<sup>rd</sup> presentation and discussion was guidance that staff should develop an RFP for an update to the Comprehensive Plan. That RFP is currently being drafted and will be provided to the Commission prior to the September 14, 2015 meeting.



## DISCUSSION GUIDE

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### ***Presentation: Zach Young, Senior Transportation Planner, Des Moines Area MPO***

The connection between land use development patterns and the costs of providing public infrastructure and services has long been a topic of study, particularly since *The Cost of Sprawl: A detailed analysis* was published in 1974. Since that time, dozens, if not hundreds of studies have been conducted relating to this topic. Most of these have concluded that more compact patterns of development is associated with reduced local government spending on a per capita basis relative to lower density development.

Smart Growth American (SGA) completed an analysis of development patterns in the City of West Des Moines in May 2015. This analysis is part of an overall study to develop a fiscal impact methodology that not only accounts for the increased cost efficiencies associated with denser development patterns, but can also be easily adapted and used by local practitioners across the country. The MPO staff will provide an overview of the SGA's findings.

### ***Economic Development Considerations; Wade Wagoner, City of Norwalk***

Economic Development, planning, and zoning are all closely related topics. How the City grows and the type of development occurring has a direct impact on the City's ability to grow its commercial base. The City's Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance are the tools that guide the development of the community. A variety of development patterns and densities can create the diversity that many commercial businesses need when locating into a new community. This not only provides a population base to support the businesses, but it also provides the workforce needed to support service sector industries.

### ***The Comprehensive Plan and its relationship to Zoning; Chris Shires, Confluence***

#### What is the purpose of the Comprehensive Plan?

It is a document designed to guide the future actions of the City. The Iowa Supreme Court stated that the legal purpose of the comprehensive plan is to "direct use and development of property by dividing it into districts according to present and potential uses." Comprehensive Plans also serve to present a vision for the future with long-range goals, objectives, and potential policies for all activities that affect local government. This includes a variety of topics, from land use, to transportation, to public facilities. Comprehensive Plans are typically designed to provide guidance for 20+ years, however, review and potential update of plans is typically done every 5 years.

#### What function does the Comprehensive Plan serve?

- The plan provides continuity across time, providing successive public bodies a common framework for addressing land use issues.
- It is a means by which the community can balance competing private interests. The plan intends to strike a balance between many competing land interests by creating development patterns that are orderly and rational, and provide the greatest benefits for the community as a whole.
- It is the means by which the community can protect public investments. Planning out the community in an orderly and rational fashion can help avoid duplicative efforts when new public infrastructure is needed.
- It allows communities to identify and protect valued resources. The plan identifies critical environmental features that can then be planned around.
- It can provide guidance for the appearance of the community by proposing policies that foster a distinct sense of place.
- It provides justification for decisions. The plan provides a factual and objective basis for zoning decisions that are defensible if they are challenged in court.
- The plan and the planning process provides citizens the opportunity to have input on the future of the community.

### What is the purpose of the Zoning Ordinance?

The Zoning Ordinance is the primary mechanism for implementing the policies of the comprehensive plan. The Zoning Ordinance assigns compatible land uses to defined districts throughout the community and provides controls for the placement, height, bulk and coverage of buildings and structures. The Zoning Ordinance consists of a text document and a map. The text document provides all the information related to land uses, bulk regulations, and other policies. The map defines which areas of the community fall into specific zoning districts.

### What is the relationship between the Comprehensive Plan and the Zoning Ordinance?

The Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance work together to provide a means for the development of the community. The Comprehensive Plan sets policies and makes land use decisions for the long-term development of the community. The Comprehensive Plan also provides a rational basis for the decisions related to a rezoning of a specific property. The Zoning Ordinance contains the rules and regulations to ensure proper implementation of the Comprehensive Plan. It is important that the Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure that they both work together to achieve the desired outcomes for the community.

### ***Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Challenges; Luke Parris, City of Norwalk***

The current Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 2013 after a two-year planning period that started in the spring of 2011. The planning process directed by a steering committee of community stakeholders and held many public input events, including a Planning 101 educational meeting, a virtual town hall discussion forum, youth participation, town hall meetings, key stakeholder interviews, and formal public hearings.

The current version of the Zoning Ordinance has been heavily amended over the years, but the base ordinance dates back to 1998. It is not uncommon for a Zoning Ordinance to see a variety of amendments as new policies are adopted and new Comprehensive Plans are approved.

As the City has grown the past two years, we've seen increasing requests for rezonings of various properties. As Staff, we are charged with making recommendations on rezoning requests, and the main staff review relates the requests compatibility with the Comprehensive Plan. It is important to remember that the Comprehensive Plan was developed through a public process, and in an ideal world, the Comprehensive Plan would be a policy guide for the future that accurately reflects the desires of the residents of Norwalk. However, the reality is that public input is very difficult to achieve on such long-term plans. Therefore, the City leaders are often left to interpret the Comprehensive Plan and make decisions that impact the development of the community.

Lately, rezoning requests have raised questions among City leaders regarding their appropriateness in specific areas. Knowing that the public input process for the Comprehensive Plan isn't perfect, these questions from City leaders would indicate that the Comprehensive Plan might not be accurately representing the desired development of the City. The Comprehensive Plan is such an important document in influencing and legitimizing the decisions of the City leaders that it is important to ensure that the policies and development spelled out in the Comprehensive Plan reflect the desired future development of the community. If there are significant concerns with rezoning requests and the land use decisions shown in the current Comprehensive Plan, then it would be wise for the City to initiate a process to review and update the Comprehensive Plan.

### ***Develop an RFP for the Comprehensive Plan update; Wade Wagoner, City of Norwalk***

If the City were to decide to move forward with a Comprehensive Plan update, a Request for Proposal (RFP) would need to be developed. That RFP would detail the process and include a proposed budget.