

Creating Healthier Suburbs

A Glossary of Planning Tools



ChangeLab Solutions

Law & policy innovation for the common good.

A Glossary of Planning Tools

Though public health advocates are not traditionally involved in city planning, they can ensure that planning policies and development projects protect residents' health.

In fact, planning and environmental review processes typically require that projects consider social and health impacts, so health departments can play an essential role in highlighting their community's most pressing health needs.

This glossary is designed to give health advocates a basic overview of planning concepts and institutions that help shape the way neighborhoods look and feel. It first introduces basic land use planning principles, and then more specific tools and topics. For more resources on how advocates can get involved in creating healthier communities, visit www.changelabsolutions.org.

Planning 101: Basic Tools

Land use planning	A general term describing all regulations and policies that define what uses are allowed or not allowed on a given property. Common categories include residential, commercial, industrial, and open space.
Comprehensive plan (also known as general plan or master plan)	A long-range document of regulations that outline how a community wants to grow or develop in the future. Comprehensive plans are organized into “elements” that address different aspects of planning, such as transportation, housing, safety, and open space. Planning agencies generally write a new plan every 10 to 30 years (though individual elements may be updated more frequently) and are typically required to provide opportunities for public input.
Zoning	If the comprehensive or general plan represents the long-range goals of a community, zoning is the specific tool that planners use to implement this vision. A zoning code denotes exactly how a specific parcel of land can and cannot be used – for instance, a parcel zoned as single-family residential may not be used for industrial facilities or high-rise apartments.
Mixed-use development or mixed-use zoning	In contrast to traditional zoning in many suburban communities, in which residences, businesses, and stores are completely separated from one another, mixed-use zoning encourages development of neighborhoods in which diverse uses are accessible and adjacent to one another. A street with shops at ground level and dwelling units above is an example of a mixed-use development.
Design guidelines	In addition to zoning regulations, communities may choose to adopt design guidelines that ensure new developments meet certain standards of quality and fit in with the existing character of a neighborhood.
Other local & regional plans	Local government agencies may also oversee a variety of other plans with the potential to impact public health. Some examples include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bike & pedestrian master plan ▪ Park facility master plan ▪ Project or area plan ▪ Redevelopment plan ▪ Regional transportation plan ▪ Regional housing plan

Local Partners for Healthy Planning

Public health advocates can work with a range of local agencies to make healthy suburban communities a reality. The names of these policies and institutions may vary, but generally you can find local agencies that occupy these roles.

Planning department	The agency responsible for updating comprehensive plans and zoning codes, administering building permits, and ensuring the compliance of new and existing properties with existing land use laws. As part of their duties, planning departments are generally required to incorporate public input when drafting new or modifying existing regulations.
Planning commission	Oversees the strategic direction and mission of a planning department. Commissioners can potentially have a lot of influence over planning decisions, and are usually appointed by elected officials.
Economic & workforce development	Refers to a wide variety of activities that contribute to creating and sustaining a strong economy, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Creating new jobs ▪ Recruiting and training new workers ▪ Small business support ▪ Improving a community’s access to necessary products and services ▪ Financial or administrative incentives to encourage business development in desired sectors
Redevelopment agency (also called <i>community renewal</i> <i>or urban renewal</i>)	Though similar to economic and workforce development departments, redevelopment agencies have a more specific focus: to generate growth in economically struggling, “blighted” neighborhoods. Redevelopment agencies provide financing, incentives, and technical assistance geared towards overcoming the specific barriers to investment in these communities.
Housing authority (or <i>housing agency</i>)	Responsible for building, maintaining, and managing housing units that are affordable for low- and moderate- income residents. Increasingly, these agencies have been encouraged to build mixed-income communities that are diverse and livable.
Departments of public works & utilities	Oversee the maintenance and expansion of infrastructure, such as roads, sewers, traffic signals, and power lines.
Transportation agencies and transit providers	Communities may have several local agencies that oversee transportation planning and public transit. Examples of typical projects include planning transportation options for a specific neighborhood, or planning to improve efficiency and accessibility systemwide.
Department of parks & recreation	Designs, builds, and maintains parks, open spaces, and pedestrian and bicycle facilities within its jurisdictions.

Other Planning Concepts

Sprawl	Development that is uncontrolled and does not take into account the negative impacts caused by undue expansion of the built environment, which can include: higher vehicle traffic, pollution, over-consumption of resources, loss of agricultural land, and a diminished sense of community.
Infill development	The targeted reuse of vacant and underutilized land within a community. This is one way of constructing more residential units to accommodate a growing population without having to expand the geographical footprint of the city, thereby avoiding a variety of negative environmental and economic impacts.

Transit-oriented development (TOD)	Moderate or high-density neighborhoods that have housing concentrated in mixed-use developments, with convenient access to public transportation.
Active transportation	Transportation modes that involve physical activity, such as bicycling and walking. Studies show that public transit also encourages more physical activity than driving, since users must usually walk or bike to and from transit stops.
Walkability	The concept that streets and neighborhoods should be safe and pleasant for pedestrians to walk through, maximized in the following ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Streets free of trash and other blight ▪ Intact sidewalks and well-designed streetscape infrastructure ▪ Businesses open with attractive storefronts ▪ Presence of other pedestrians ▪ Slower vehicular traffic
Complete streets	The idea that roads should be designed so that people of all ages and abilities (including children, youth, seniors, and people with disabilities) and any type of user (pedestrians, cyclists, public transit passengers, and vehicles) can travel safely and conveniently. A growing number of communities have passed policies encouraging complete streets, either as a stand-alone ordinance or as part of existing transportation plans.
Inclusionary housing & fair share requirements	Communities facing a shortage of affordable housing can adopt policies requiring that a certain amount of new housing be made affordable to low- and moderate-income buyers. Requirements can be placed on an individual developer – for instance, requiring that she set aside 15% of homes in a multi-unit project for affordable housing – or it can refer to all future housing in a city, town, or region.
Joint use agreements (JUA)	A legal agreement between two separate entities spelling out the terms and conditions for shared use of public property or facilities. For instance, a city’s parks and recreation department might enter a joint use agreement with a local school in a neighborhood with few parks so that community members can use the schoolyard on weekends.
Transfer of development credits (TDC)	A program that “transfers” development rights from an area that a community wishes to preserve to a district slated for growth. For instance, a landowner on prime agricultural land might sell his development rights to a developer who is building housing in a community’s central business district, thereby allowing him to build extra floors on his building.
Farmland preservation programs	A variety of policies and programs communities can use to protect agricultural lands. For instance, farm owners can put their property into a conservation easement – a permanent agreement with a government body, under which the land cannot be converted to nonagricultural uses, even upon sale. Often there are financial advantages to placing land into an easement, such as reduced taxes.

ChangeLab Solutions is a nonprofit organization that provides legal information on matters relating to public health. The legal information in this document does not constitute legal advice or legal representation. For legal advice, readers should consult a lawyer in their state.

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