Comprehensive Planning for Family-Friendly Communities

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WHY COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING?

Comprehensive planning involves evaluating the current social, demographic, and economic state of a jurisdiction, projecting future trends for the area, and developing a physical plan that will guide that area's development for the near and distant future. Families with children face issues related to housing, transportation, child care, and recreation that may not be identified by other segments of the community. Their needs include affordable, family-sized housing, on-site or nearby child care that is both affordable and high-quality, transportation routes that recognize the trip chaining behavior of parents, and housing design elements that allow accessibility for both children and the elderly.

Communities are increasingly incorporating families with children into the planning process and including or addressing their needs in comprehensive plans. The discussion and toolkits below will provide guidance for planners in considering the needs of families with children.

DO COMMUNITIES CONSIDER THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN?

A 2008 APA/Cornell University national survey of 944 planners reveals several trends in the inclusion of families with children in the comprehensive planning process. Of the communities that considered themselves family-friendly, more than half include the needs of families with children in their Goals and Objectives (56%), Existing Conditions and Trends (54%), or Recommendations and Action Plans (54%). However, in communities that do not label themselves family-friendly, only one third make these same considerations (27%, 32% and 31% respectively).

Communities that incorporate family needs in their comprehensive plans are more likely to implement programs. For example, according to the survey results, communities considered family-friendly are more likely to have zoning regulations that allow for family-sized housing (65% vs. 55%) and the siting of community facilities near to residential areas (61% vs. 39%), as well as the co-location of schools with parks, recreational areas, libraries and community centers (52% vs. 38%) than communities not labeled family-friendly (Israel and Warner 2008).

The City of East Lansing, MI Comprehensive Plan focuses on advancing family and senior needs. Plans include increasing the size, diversity, and tenure of available housing units, developing pedestrian-friendly walkways and bikeways, and creating a large downtown-based redevelopment project (the Avondale Square Project) designed with walkability and affordable housing in mind.

Aerial view, Avondale Square Project, City of East Lansing, Michigan

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HOW CAN FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN BE INCLUDED IN COMPREHENSIVE PLANS?

The needs of families with children can be addressed in neighborhood design and housing design.

Neighborhood Design

Creating neighborhoods that best accommodate changing needs of families means many things. Mixed-use, walkability and mobility are major issues with social and economic consequences for families.

Families today are rethinking their decisions to live in the suburbs based on increasing housing and transportation costs. Young married couples with children are as open to moving to urban neighborhoods close to downtown (51%) as to suburbs or small towns (Florida 2008). Additionally, children in ethnic families are more likely to live in a household with a grandparent, extending the nuclear family (US Census 2008). The AARP reports that Baby Boomers are seeking to maintain a higher quality-of-life for years to come, with a commitment to lifelong education and health, as well as a strong attachment to place (Kochera et al., 2005).

Smart neighborhood design such as transit-oriented development and mixed-use development oriented towards the needs of families can help alleviate costly housing and transportation burdens and fulfill housing and community needs.

Many elements of neighborhood design that address the housing, transportation, and recreation concerns of families with children also enhance the quality of life for a community's senior citizens. A recent report issued by the AARP entitled *Beyond 50.5* defines a "livable community" as "one that has affordable and appropriate housing, supportive community features and services, and adequate mobility options. Together these facilitate personal independence and the engagement of residents in civic and social life (Kochera et al., 2005)."

The *AARP* report also suggests that planners perform evaluate and expand settings for social involvement, such as public spaces in town centers, community and recreation centers, and people-oriented parks and plazas.

In the City of San Francisco, CA, several elements of family-friendly neighborhood design have been incorporated into the General Plan. The Area Plan for Market and Octavia focuses on developing a land use plan that captures the neighborhood's potential as a mixed-use urban neighborhood. To accomplish this, the plan's fundamental design features include individual entries to residential units and street furniture to promote "eyes on the street" and a sense of neighborhood connectedness. Additionally, multiple-bedroom units, which would likely be occupied by families, should be no more than three stories away from common space, to allow access to children's play spaces without compromising adult supervision.

Housing and Zoning

Housing design and zoning regulations often exclude the needs of families with children and the elderly, but planners can also use these elements to improve their quality of life through the implementation of universal design standards and family-friendly zoning. In most communities single-family housing is the most common housing type. Multi-family units are more common in cities, but these are often sub-par and/or overpriced (Hermans and Hoch, 1996). Housing stock in central cities has tended to favor singles, and smart design, particularly that with green elements, is often more expensive than most families can afford (Feldman and Chowdury, 2002).

According to the 2008 APA/Cornell survey, only 45% of planners believe their community has an adequate stock of family-sized housing, and few zoning regulations allow for family child care in residential units by right (34%) (Israel and Warner, 2008).

Universal design for the entire life cycle enables accessibility for family members of all ages, and enhances the "visitability" of the residence. Zoning regulations can impact the accessibility and connectivity of residences with other areas of the community by mandating sidewalks for new developments and allowing for mixed-use developments. This can promote independence for youth as well as the elderly.

Miramar, Florida has incorporated family-friendly initiatives into its zoning regulations. Its Comprehensive Plan mandates that four acres of local level parks must be zoned for every 1,000 city residents (Policy 5A.6). Additionally, the city maintains an expedited review process, as well as fee waivers, for developments which incorporate affordable housing. Finally, city regulations encourage mixed-income residences in mixed-income developments.

Other zoning elements that are considered family-friendly allow for family-sized housing, child care in residential units, and mandatory sidewalks. Based on the AARP *Beyond 50.5* report and Kristen Anderson's *Planning for Child Care in California* (2006), the following housing design features are elements of universal design that are beneficial to both families with children and the elderly.

- Street-level or ramp access to accommodate wheelchairs and/or strollers
- Full bedroom on the first floor
- Full bath on the first floor with extra space for wheelchair maneuverability or counter space for diapering
- Nonslip floor surfaces
- Wider doors and hallways
- Raised electrical outlets and lower light switches
- Play areas both inside and outside the residence that are safe and accessible
- Accessible storage for belongings

DOES INCLUDING FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN IN THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN HAVE AN IMPACT?

Including the needs of families with children in the vision and goals of a comprehensive is an important first step. However, an equally important step is to translate the needs of families with children into tangible plans and programs. This does not always happen, but the following recommendations can help planners to ensure goals are implemented (Center for Land Use Education, 2005):

- Prioritize the action items from your plan that meet your goals
- Educate elected officials and plan commissioners on the plan, its content, and its legal requirements to ensure consistency in decision-making
- Use many implementation tools, including non-regulatory, voluntary, incentive-based and regulatory tools

Implementation of comprehensive plans is not always easy. As discussed in the next section, consensus-building amongst stakeholders is extremely important, as NIMBYism can be a concern in implementing many family-friendly initiatives.

ADDITIONAL ISSUES TO CONSIDER WHEN INCLUDING FAMLIES WITH CHILDREN IN COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

The comprehensive planning process is highly political, and can be contentious. According to the APA/Cornell survey, 71% of planners encountered NIMBYism when trying to initiate family-friendly programs or plans, and over 60% reported lack of voice for families and lack of political or community interest (Israel and Warner 2008). Over two thirds of responding planners reported financial constraints, developer driven interests that do not prioritize family housing, and complexity of the issue as challenges encountered when trying to become family friendly. Although planners in communities branded family friendly were more likely to include family concerns in plans and programs they also were slightly more likely to face resistance to programs such as affordable housing. However, they overcome this by involving youth and families more in the comprehensive planning process.

Planners need to develop political skills to successfully develop and implement comprehensive plans that consider the needs of families with children. By promoting public input from as many community members as possible, a sense of ownership of the plan will be developed. However, more diverse input can also make negotiations more difficult to achieve. Conflict and emotions are strongly tied to the planning process, but active listening, strong communication, and transparency in the process can help to reduce these tensions.

Sketches exemplifying "eyes on the street" from the San Francisco Market and Octavia Plan

Skills that planners can use to better navigate the political aspects of planning include (adapted from Sandercock, 1998; Baum, 2000):

- Identify common goals and values between all stakeholders involved, so that power shifts may be better understood and addressed.
- Develop defensible definitions of issues, and think strategically about how to promote your position.
- Facilitate communication between groups involved in the planning process.
- Listen to what others say carefully and critically.
- Look for less explicit forms of communication, such as symbolism, artistic expression, and body language, as other methods by which community values and concerns are communicated.
- Help people (particularly disadvantaged groups) articulate what they already know. Have them describe their experiences to incorporate their knowledge into plans. For example, talking to children about their experiences in parks and how they would want a park to look will enhance the design of recreation space in the community.
- Shift perspectives in the planning process. Consider your community from the perspective of many of its residents.

- Assess the political context of the plan from the start by consulting knowledgeable parties to identify not only current issues in the community, but also the agendas, benefits and costs to all parties involved.
- Engage in strategic action by developing coalitions and consensus during design and implementation of the comprehensive plan

A photograph taken by a child during the Children's Perspectives on Road Traffic Safety Photovoice project.

The Photovoice concept, a participatory tool in which children are given cameras to document their views of the community, has been instrumental in addressing traffic concerns in states across the country.
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