

## **CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION**

The Comprehensive Plan is the official statement of the Town Council and Planning Commission of Denton, setting forth policies concerning desirable future growth and serving as a general guide to public and private development decisions. Once adopted, it becomes the basis for the preparation of specific policies, programs, and legislation; such as zoning and subdivision regulations; and other actions which implement the growth policies set forth in the Plan.

The Plan is comprised of several major elements that are prepared in such a manner that they form an integrated, unified document for guiding future growth and development. As a policy document it is general, comprehensive, and long range in nature. It is comprehensive in that it encompasses the entire geographic area of the Town as well as projected growth areas outside the current corporate limits. The Plan includes all functional elements that bear upon its physical development, such as transportation, land use, and community facilities. It is general in that it summarizes policies and proposals but does not establish detailed regulations or indicate precise locations. It is long range in that it looks beyond current issues to problems and opportunities related to future growth over the next twenty years.

### **A VISION FOR DENTON**

By characterizing local resources, identifying local values and needs, and developing a strategy to ensure that the needs and values of the community are met, the Town of Denton has developed its Comprehensive Plan. The Plan represents the Town's strategy for addressing growth and development issues that are important to the Town's future quality of life. Although there are goals and objectives in each of the Plan's elements, the overall vision for the Town is an integral unifying element. The vision underscores the key community expectations reflected in the Comprehensive Plan and provides a conceptual benchmark for future Town decisions. The Town has developed the following vision statement to guide growth and development in a manner that supports the values of the community and the goals and objectives of the Comprehensive Plan.

### **DENTON'S VISION**

Denton will be an innovative, healthy, safe, well-balanced community that protects its historical integrity, preserves its unique natural resources, enhances its economical vitality and maintains its unique small town character. Denton's population will increase at an acceptable rate consistent with the ability of the Town and County to provide basic services and facilities.

The following, *Small Town Bound*<sup>1</sup>, helps put the notion of "small town" as used here into an appropriate perspective.

“What is a small town?”

Ask five people to define a small town and you'll probably get five different answers. (Ask the Census Bureau to define a small town and they'll refuse to answer: a population of 25,000 constitutes a "city," they say, and 2,500 to 25,000

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<sup>1</sup> Small Town Bound, John Clayton, Copyright © 2005 John Clayton  
2010 Comprehensive Plan  
Town of Denton, Maryland

is a "place," but a small town has no official definition.) To one of the seven million residents of New York City, a population of 100,000 residents may constitute a small town. On the other hand, Wyomingites see Cheyenne, with a population of 50,008, as not just a city but a metropolis.

Some urbanites use the terms "small town" and "country" interchangeably. Either is simply a place with fewer people than the city or its suburbs. On the other hand, some people make an important distinction: a "small town" (the term "village" is frequently used in the Northeast) is a place with businesses, shops, and residential neighborhoods; "the country" is simply farmland or forest or desert, perhaps with a residence every mile, or every twenty miles.

Nevertheless, when you think about moving to a small town, you're probably not thinking about a specific population figure. You're thinking about the benefits of a relative difference in population density, intangibles such as neighborliness, community, or a perceived simplicity of life. This book uses the term "small town" in that sense -- as a difficult-to-describe atmosphere, rather than a strictly-defined product of population or architecture. Perhaps the best summation of this state of mind was offered by a resident of my town, trying to define the most valuable characteristic of our friendly, close-knit community, who said, "Only in a place like this can you have a conversation with a misdialed phone number."

It's a quality of life you seek, rather than a population figure. You may find that quality of life in a town with 50 people or 50,000; you may find it "downtown" or in place where your nearest neighbor is seven miles up a dirt road. It depends on your personality, and that of the surrounding community. But regardless of how you define the small town, it's far different from the city or suburb you're leaving."

## **THE FRAMEWORK FOR PLANNING**

As Denton and the surrounding environs grow and change over the next twenty years, this Comprehensive Plan will serve as a guide for making public and private decisions regarding the Town's growth and development. This Plan presents a future vision of Denton into the year 2030 along with recommendations for beginning to bring that vision to fruition. The ideas of the Plan are a distillation of the community's many desires, tempered by what seems feasible and reasonable. This Plan is not intended to be a static document. It will be reviewed and updated periodically to reflect new development trends, shifts in the economy, or changes in the community's goals and objectives.

Many significant changes have taken place since 1997 when the current Denton Comprehensive Plan was adopted, and depending on one's perspective, those changes can be labeled anywhere from dramatic to heartening or disheartening, depending on one's perspective. Denton has grown by over 1,909 acres by last count. The more than doubling its size in a period of thirteen years is dramatic. But it is important to point out that dramatic growth in size does not necessarily mean "Smart Growth."

In 1999, the Town encompassed approximately 1,382 acres. Today, Denton has grown its land area by 138 percent, and currently encompasses approximately 3,291 acres distributed upon approximately 2,047 individual parcels of land. Most of the annexations have been properties located in the future growth areas identified in the *1997 Denton Comprehensive Plan*.

The 2010 Comprehensive Plan reflects Town-sought changes from a review of various iterations of the then proposed draft Plan (2006 and 2007). The decade-long series of annexations reflected Town Council's aspiration to incorporate most of the area the Town had designated for growth. When confronted with the 2006 Draft Plan, it became evident to the Town Council that the probable residential growth due to the annexations was untenable: 1) ultimate population was projected to reach in excess of 30,000 individuals, a ten-fold increase from the then current population, and 2) plans, policies, legislation and regulations were insufficient and perhaps naïve as to how to best address growth. As a consequence, the Draft Plan was not adopted and a major rework effort was undertaken. This Plan is the product of the extensive re-visitation of what constitutes "Smart Growth" for the Town of Denton.

To better ascertain the opinions of the community on numerous matters of importance that would guide appropriate changes to the Draft Plan, the Planning Commission undertook a town-wide survey in 2009. The responses (based on a 38% response rate) gave clear insight on many issues the residents felt were vitally important (Appendix I). Of specific note, is the overwhelming opinion expressed by the residents that the preferred maximum population size at build-out should be 10,000 residents or less. This Plan now reflects the overwhelming majority view of the Town residents.

Indicators of real growth portray a picture of slow growth moving toward moderately rapid growth and most recently, due to the current economic environment, no growth for a period of time. Consider the following:

- Since 2000, the Town has issued an average of 54 building permits per year, which equates to a population growth of approximately 123 persons (average of 2.29 persons per dwelling unit) per year. Permits peaked in 2006 at 147 and have dropped dramatically to just 2 in 2009.
- The rate of residential building accelerated mid-decade, averaging 140 units per year. This building permit data implies a population growth of approximately 321 persons per year.
- In 2009, the last full year of building permit data, the Town issued 2 residential unit building permits. This building permit data implies a population growth in 2009 of approximately nearly zero. In fact, although unsubstantiated by hard data and due to bank foreclosures, the population may have decreased.
- There are currently 776 new residential units planned (under construction, pending preliminary or final approval). Of these, 519 are either recorded and platted or pending recordation. Of these 519, 66 are not recorded and may never come to fruition due to developer decisions not to proceed or bank foreclosure. 157 units are in effect considered platted because of a Development Rights and Responsibility Agreement. The net residential lot inventory at this time is between

710 and 776 lots, which possibly may account for a population growth of 1,626 to 1,777 persons.

- Since 1997, the Town has issued 20 building permits for industrial buildings, 19 permits for commercial buildings, and 9 permits for institutional buildings.
- Over 100,000 square feet of new commercial floor area has been added, and another 155,000 square feet has been approved.
- 30,000 square feet of industrial building has been added, and over 60,000 square feet are in the permit approval process.
- Planning has begun for a new 16,000 square foot Town Hall to accommodate the needs of a growing population.
- Interest in redevelopment in older portions of the Town has increased, including an Arts and Entertainment District, the Gay Street residential redevelopment between Fifth and Sixth Streets, and other redevelopment projects.
- Twenty four acres of park and open space have been added.

Denton was in the midst of a building boom until 2007. Like others, it must now await the return of demand pending a nationwide economic recovery. While fluctuations associated with economic cycles will likely be a significant determinant of the future pace of growth, the indication is that the Town is poised to achieve many of its stated objectives, including strengthening its role as a regional center of commerce and employment and encouraging re-investment in older parts of the Town. The challenge for comprehensive planning is to establish a blue print for the future that integrates the best of the old Denton with the new Denton.

## **LEGAL BASIS FOR COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING**

Article 66B of the Annotated Code of Maryland is the Zoning and Planning enabling legislation from which the Town of Denton derives its powers to regulate land use. Article 66B has been recently codified to include the changes from HB 1141. Section 3.05 which sets forth the minimum requirements for a comprehensive plan which shall include, among other things:

- A statement of goals and objectives, principles, policies, and standards;
- A land use plan element;
- A transportation plan element;
- A community facilities plan element;
- A mineral resources plan element, if current geological information is available;
- A water resource plan element;
- An element which shall contain the Planning Commission's recommendations for land development regulations to implement the plan;
- A municipal growth plan element;
- A sensitive areas plan element; and
- Other elements, such as community renewal, housing, conservation, and natural resources, at the discretion of the Commission.

## MARYLAND ECONOMIC GROWTH, RESOURCE PROTECTION AND PLANNING ACT OF 1992

The context for planning in the Town of Denton must also take into consideration the role that the Town will play in implementing the overall growth management policies established by the State of Maryland in the Planning Act of 1992. These policies, stated as "visions" for the future, were:

1. Development is concentrated in suitable areas;
2. Sensitive areas are protected;
3. In rural areas, growth is directed to existing population centers and resources are protected;
4. Stewardship of the Chesapeake Bay and the land is a universal ethic;
5. Conservation of resources, including a reduction in resource consumption, is practiced;
6. Economic growth is encouraged and regulatory mechanisms are streamlined;
7. Adequate public facilities and infrastructure under the control of the Town are available or planned in areas where growth is to occur; and
8. Funding mechanisms are addressed to achieve these "Visions."

The Maryland Economic Growth, Resource Protection and Planning Act of 1992 also added the requirement that the comprehensive plan contain a Sensitive Areas Element which describes how the jurisdiction will protect the following sensitive areas. Denton's plans and development codes were amended to provide protection for the following:

- Streams and stream buffers,
- 100-year floodplains,
- Endangered species habitats,
- Steep slopes, and
- Other sensitive areas Denton has determined require protect from the adverse impacts of development.

The 2009 Smart, Green, and Growing Legislation passed by the Maryland General Assembly, outlined twelve Planning Visions toward a more sustainable, more livable, and less costly future. The Visions address quality of life, public participation, growth areas, community design, infrastructure, transportation, housing, economic development, environmental protection, resource conservation, stewardship, and implementation approaches. These twelve Planning Visions are addressed throughout the Comprehensive Plan:

1. **Quality of Life and Sustainability:** A high quality of life is achieved through universal stewardship of the land, water, and air resulting in sustainable communities and protection of the environment.
2. **Public Participation:** Citizens are active partners in the planning and implementation of community initiatives and are sensitive to their responsibilities in achieving community goals.

3. **Growth Areas:** Growth is concentrated in existing population and business centers, growth areas adjacent to these centers, or strategically selected new centers.
4. **Community Design:** Compact, mixed-use, walkable design consistent with existing community character and located near transit options is encouraged to ensure efficient use of land and transportation resources and preservation and enhancement of natural systems, open spaces, recreational areas, and historical, cultural, and archeological resources.
5. **Infrastructure:** Growth areas have the water resources and infrastructure to accommodate population and business expansion in an orderly, efficient, and environmentally sound manner.
6. **Transportation:** A well-maintained, multimodal transportation system facilitates the safe, convenient, affordable, and efficient movement of people, goods, and services within and between population and business centers.
7. **Housing:** A range of housing densities, types, and sizes provide residential options for citizens of all ages and incomes.
8. **Economic Development:** Economic development that promotes employment opportunities for all income levels within the capacity of the State's natural resources, public services, and public facilities is encouraged.
9. **Environmental Protection:** Land and water resources, including the Chesapeake Bay and its coastal bays, are carefully managed to restore, and maintain healthy air and water, natural systems, and living resources.
10. **Resource Conservation:** Waterways, open space, natural systems, scenic areas, forests, and agricultural areas are conserved.
11. **Stewardship:** Government, business entities, and residents are responsible for the creation of sustainable communities by collaborating to balance efficient growth with resource protection.
12. **Implementation:** Strategies, policies, programs, and funding for growth and development, resource conservation, infrastructure, and transportation are integrated across the local, regional, State, and interstate levels to achieve these visions.

The passage of House Bill (HB) 1141 during the 2006 Maryland General Assembly session mandated a change in the content of comprehensive plans and is now codified in Article 66B. The changes require all municipal comprehensive plans to include additional elements or chapters. Two new elements are the “Municipal Growth Element” and “Water Resource Element. The Growth element incorporates information that was previously contained in the 1997 Land Use Chapter plus new, more detailed information of the Town’s anticipated growth. The Comprehensive Plan’s land use and community facilities elements now become three: municipal growth, community facilities, and land use. Some material that formerly resided

exclusively in the land use and community facilities elements are now shifted to the municipal growth element. Consequently, the Land Use Plan will have a narrower framework than the 1997 Comprehensive Plan. Links among these three elements are necessary and all the chapters of a Comprehensive Plan are connected by incorporating a county and municipality visions for the future and how to achieve it. Most of the growth projections and discussion will be contained in the Municipal Growth Element. The Water Resource Element addresses the availability and adequacy of water supply sources and the capability of water bodies to incorporate wastewater and stormwater. The ability to support the growth discussed in the municipal growth element will depend on the adequacy of water resources.

## **COMPONENTS OF A GROWTH MANAGEMENT PROGRAM**

This Comprehensive Plan provides the basic framework and direction for all components of what may be considered the Town's overall Comprehensive Planning Program. It is not a stand-alone document but is supported and, in turn, supports related Planning Program documents such as the ones listed below.

- Zoning Ordinance
- Subdivision Ordinance
- Capital Improvements Budget

These documents and others, when used concurrently, are the basis for directing and managing growth in Denton. Since 1997, Denton has revised these growth and development management tools to reflect current conditions and needs.