

EDITOR'S PICK

County's Comprehensive Plan Nears Adoption

By Vince Conti

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COURT HOUSE - The Cape May County Planning Board presented a draft of its 2021 Comprehensive Plan for public review Nov. 18. Presenting the report were two members of the external planning consultancy of T&M Associates and Leslie Gimeno, director of the county's Planning Department.

Cape May County produced its first Comprehensive Plan in 1962 and updated that with a second plan in 1976. Further updates followed in 1985 and 1996, with the most recent version of the plan adopted in 2002. That plan, at 39 pages, is a fraction of the length of the current draft, which sports 165 pages, and with appendices comes in at 294 pages.

The current draft reflects an enormous amount of data gathering with expanded demographic analysis not attempted in earlier versions. Yet, for all the data, the plan is devoid of specifics on future projects, schedules, and funding opportunities.

Gimeno pointed out that the plan is not a strategic plan. It is rather a statement of the county Planning Board's

values and goals. It is not meant to direct countywide efforts as much as it is meant to inspire them.

To fully grasp the reason for such a plan, one must understand the reason for its existence and the location of real power concerning many of the goals contained within it.

Why have a county Comprehensive Plan? The simple answer is that state statutes say the county must have one. There is an element in this process of completing a required assignment, although the draft plan goes well beyond that.

In New Jersey, land use law places most of the power for the development and regulation of land and associated resources with local municipalities. Counties have a small role vested in county planning boards. Cape May County established its Planning Board in 1954.

Counties are not required to have planning boards, but all 21 New Jersey counties have established one. Once established, state regulation requires that the board develop and adopt a "Master Plan for the physical development of the county." This document is called a Master Plan in some counties and a Comprehensive Plan in others.

Since it is required by state regulation, the document has several elements it must contain and flesh out. Beyond those requirements, the county planning boards can embellish the plans with additional features and goals, but they always need to be aware that for many, if not most, issues, the county plan is seeking to guide by persuasion the work of the municipalities, their governing bodies, and their state-mandated master plans.

All of the county plans are concerned with the future development of the county across a series of specific elements like streets and roads, bridges, forests, open space, environment, farmland preservation, waterways, and the like. This is where Gimeno's use of the term 'inspire' comes to the floor.

In many of these areas, the county is seeking to articulate a set of values and general goals it hopes will inspire and support actions by municipal bodies where the real control resides.

What this all means is that the term 'Comprehensive Plan' is likely to lead members of the public to expect a document they will not find. The Comprehensive Plan will not spell out a specific vision for what the county should look like in five, 10, or 20 years. It will not present a series of projects with schedules by which the public can measure the success of the plan.

The reader will not find a discussion of the extension of Route 55. There is no account of how to bring affordable housing to the county. Economic development strategies are not laid out. Sea level rise gets a mention, but this is not the plan for how the county and its municipalities will respond to it.

Where other more specific plans exist for hazard mitigation or bridge replacement, the entities that produce those plans are incorporated in the Comprehensive Plan by reference.

For the reader who can put aside the initial connotations of the term Comprehensive Plan, there is much in this almost 300-page document to recommend wading into it. The demographic analysis is broad and more detailed than any encountered in earlier versions of the plan. The goals and objectives, while general, still provide reference points for the public as municipal plans are debated and adopted.

The plan is informative and frustrating at the same time since it invites the reader to consider the potentially beneficial impact of its goals while lacking the specificity that many would like to see flowing from those statements of goals.

The draft plan continues to be available for public access and comment. The Planning Board agenda at the Nov. 18 meeting called for a vote to adopt the draft as the county's new Comprehensive Plan. The lack of a quorum of Planning Board members forced that vote to be postponed to Jan. 20.

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