

What is new in Lexington Comprehensive Plan 2040?

Presented @ Joint City Council / Planning Commission Meeting

Lexington, VA -- October 1, 2020

Lexington Planning Commission

Note: the following text, with minor editing, was presented to the Lexington City Council by Patrick Bradley on behalf of the Planning Commission. The Commission wanted to convey its perspective on the two-year process to develop the new and updated plan and highlight the plan's organization and content.

Re-Organization -- Textual / Conceptual

Perhaps the biggest change in this comprehensive plan from the previous one is a reorganization on both a textual and a conceptual level. As a text, as a document, a reader will see a quite different look, made possible in part, by the advances in digital production. There is more color, clearer graphics, greater variety of layout and formatting. It's all digital, of course, and easier to navigate as a whole. So, hopefully, much easier to read and use overall. Part of this also is that this comprehensive plan is a much slimmer volume. That is due, in part, to the changes on a conceptual level.

There was a deliberate attempt to craft a more cohesive vision that would be articulated in a more tightly structured document. There are nine Planning Elements that correspond to the nine chapters in the earlier plan with a few changes and additions. The difference is that the Planning Commission worked to develop a structure for the plan as a whole that would reflect our understanding of what we want for Lexington and how we conceive of the work of a Comprehensive Plan, and that would also, in turn, structure each chapter. The plan has a guiding vision statement:

“The City of Lexington will develop strategically and sustainably by diversifying economic opportunities, housing options, and transportation methods while protecting the City's rich historic and natural resources and preserving the quality of life enjoyed by its residents and visitors.”

This vision recognizes that the physical, economic, and social aspects of our city are all interconnected; all intertwined. This vision is then supported and guided by five values (Accessibility & Diversity / Sustainable Economy / Local Identity & Character / Citizen Engagement / Management & Collaboration). In each chapter there is a single, overarching goal that we conceived of in relation to the five core values of the plan, each of which are

reflected in the objectives we hope to achieve through the specific strategies that we fashioned. The analysis of where we are as a city in each planning element (our strengths and our needs) helped guide us in developing objectives and strategies that will align with the stated goals and values. This pattern is repeated in each chapter. The idea is that we want to always keep our community’s values and vision of itself as the guiding principles throughout. We hope that we have done justice to the extensive community input we received, with the result that this plan represents a true community vision. In short, the idea was not to have nine discrete chapters with no explicit guiding principles. We wanted each chapter to show how we recognize that there is an organic inter-connectedness among all the planning elements we chose to address.

One thing the reader will notice is that the main body of the plan has much less dense, technical material. Much of this sort of information was moved to the Appendices with the thinking that we want to make this document as accessible and user-friendly as possible, and, therefore, more relevant and used.

☐ **Re-thinking priorities / approaches**

Another big difference is in the re-thinking of our planning priorities and approaches. In comparing this new edition to the 2007 Comprehensive Plan, there is a fair bit of overlap, or revisiting of goals and objectives. This is to be expected: same town, same strengths, and challenges to a large degree. Thus, we have addressed some of the same persistent issues: e.g., need for affordable housing; updating the City’s infrastructure; and the necessity of strengthening the tax base. We also have had to grapple with emerging issues, such as an aging population, sustainable economic development practices, increasing the use of renewable energy, and improved pedestrian and non-vehicular connectivity among our neighborhoods. What we needed to do is build on the previous plan while broadening the scope and consider new chapters and new approaches to old problems.

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**Arts & Culture** was added as a new chapter. The fact that Lexington is a culturally vibrant city was not entirely absent from the previous plan. However, we came to feel that because arts and culture play such a central role in our area it deserved its own chapter.

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One of the biggest changes in approach, is in the **“Green Infrastructure & Natural Resources”** section, formerly simply “Natural Resources.” The previous plan stated plainly, “Green infrastructure planning should be integrated into this chapter when it is updated,” and it gave as a goal, “Encourage local environmental and community groups to work

together, with the assistance of City staff, to engage the community in a planning process to create a green infrastructure plan.” As the Planning Commission worked on this plan, we quickly realized that this was going to be too large a task to complete and incorporate into this completely rewritten comp plan. However, a green infrastructure plan and an environmental and climate action plan are two objectives that simply cannot be luxuries or extras. We have heard loud and clear that this is central to our community’s needs and vision, and this occasioned the foregrounding of the notion of Green Infrastructure. It signals a more intentional, active understanding of and approach to interacting with our environment.

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Another area in which we took a new approach is in **Land Use**. Since ours is a compact, largely built out city with largely set land use patterns, this chapter focuses on the future land use plan as a tool in guiding any future redevelopment or infill with an emphasis on form, connectivity, and character. An attempt is made, again, to talk about future land use in the context of the overarching goal and values of the plan, and to offer a vision or a picture of the city’s future. The Future Land Use Plan is structured around five main land use areas each with planning objectives and design principles. These are Gateways, Centers, Corridors, Opportunity Areas, and Pattern Areas – with the pattern areas basically mirroring the different zoning districts on the city’s zoning map.

One thing that we hope will be innovative is the use of small area planning for the five designated ‘opportunity areas.’ The idea is to use a process that works from significant public input and coordination with city government to take a holistic look at developing or revitalizing areas that might impact surrounding neighborhoods or vary from the underlying pattern area principles. In other words, we will need to be creative and flexible, but also sensitive to existing conditions.

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The Planning Commission also took a slightly different approach to dealing with our history. We have a planning element now entitled “**Historic Resources.**” Where the 2007 plan seemed to focus more on a bricks and mortar, historic preservation approach, this plan expands on our understanding of the role that history plays in our town. The goal of the chapter itself, in focusing on quality of life, cultural and recreational opportunities, and tourism, recognizes how deeply intertwined our history is in all aspects of our city’s life – the physical, economic, and social aspects mentioned earlier. Much of the historical narrative has been moved to an appendix. I think we have a clearer picture of just how deeply interconnected our past and present are. There was also an attempt to present a fuller,

more nuanced, more honest account of our city’s history, and to take a more proactive role in promoting inclusion and equity in planning, housing, and the delivery of services.

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The final planning element, “**Governance**,” has received a slight makeover as well. This can be seen first in the title, a change from “Government;” a subtle, but telling change. It conveys a more active tone. Whereas the “Government” chapter of the 2007 plan had a fuller civics lesson on the formal structure of our government, this chapter should show more the role that good governance practices can play in our city and how we can engage with our community.

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The hope is that the Planning Commission has crafted a plan that presents an explicit vision and set of values, in a cohesive, uniformly structured way that will make for a nimbler planning tool. In discussing how the previous plan was used, the Planning Commission observed the lack of a process on monitoring how that plan was used, what was accomplished or implemented, and what was left on the shelf and why. The new Comprehensive Plan has an annual review process to monitor and update the plan as well as a process to inform and propose projects for Lexington’s Capital Investment Plan.

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One last innovation to mention is the introduction of the idea of catalyst projects. These *Catalyst Projects* are strategies from the plan that will activate it once adopted and connect it to other departments in city hall, residents, businesses, and policymakers (primarily, City Council). The summary of catalyst projects will include an explanation of what category of implementation they are and how the outcome will be measured. The primary criteria for recommending a project or strategy are: that it can be initiated or undertaken within the year; will require little or no-cost or are a priority that can be initiated when funds become available; and that it engages existing resources among staff, boards, commissions, and active organizations.

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How well all these new approaches to planning and the crafting of a Comp Plan will work, of course, will be a function of implementation and keeping it as a living, working tool to guide Lexington’s future development

Thank You.