

## **How Are Land Use Decisions Made?**

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### **Why I Taught These Sources**

Today's students will be tomorrow's decision makers. They should recognize how local officials determine the changes in the built environment, especially in the suburbs, and how interested citizens (currently not members of the "local elites") can get involved in the decision making process.

Through that awareness, students can understand better that land use changes do not just happen by chance or by predestination. Conscious decisions made by developers and government officials are shaped by socio-economic and environmental trends (though they often involve unintended consequences).

Understanding the land use planning process will affect the stereotype that residents affected by land use changes are victims of uncontrollable circumstances. Citizens can participate in the land use decision process, if they learn the rules of the game.

In a rural or farming area, family units shape the landscape through farming/forest management actions. In urban/suburban areas, that direct connection with how the landscape has changed through human action is opaque, and students are at risk of just accepting that the built environment just appeared "naturally" in some way (just like milk comes from a grocery store cooler and the role of the cow is not understood).

Students working with a county's Comprehensive Plan can discover how the local landscape was altered over time, and what comes next based on the current plan. Within the area familiar to a high school student, the local Comprehensive Plan will illuminate how an existing land use is supposed to be altered over the next 20–25 years.

Developers and elected/appointed officials have created the current mix of roads, subdivisions, shopping centers, parks, and school locations. Since such a tiny percentage of citizens are active in the land use decision process, even a single high school student has the potential to become a change agent when the Comprehensive Plan is updated every 5 years. The window to shape future land use may be open while a student is in high school, and the Comprehensive Plan will certainly be reexamined between the time a student enters 10<sup>th</sup> grade and graduates from college.

The experience of deciding how a place should change, writing letters to the editor, mobilizing others to advocate for a point of view, and/or speaking in front of the Planning Commission or Board of County Supervisors offers a rich opportunity to deepen a student's academic knowledge of government, history, geography, environmental science, and communications.

### How I Introduce These Sources

Local land use planning is a complex process. An easy starting point is to have students identify and describe specific local places with which they are familiar and find interesting in some way. Make sure the sites are physically accessible to the students (ideally, near their school or home). Initial discussion should start not with the Comprehensive Plan itself, but with the current (“as is”) type of development in a specific area. Students can be quite creative in using pictures, video/sound clips, and written narrative to describe current conditions.

After the description, the next step is more challenging: **analyze** what was described, exploring the “why do we see this form of development, why right here, and why is it here now” questions. Compare and contrast different locations, teasing out potential reasons why development is not homogenous. Students exposed to ecology may offer comparisons to biomes, ecoregions, and habitats. Expect a wide range of incomplete and incorrect answers, reflecting the limited experience of students in considering such questions.

Start by examining key maps in the Comprehensive Plan (primarily for Land Use, Transportation, Cultural, and Parks/Open Space/Trails chapters). Have students contrast existing development at their site to what is planned to change over the life of the Comprehensive Plan.

Text associated with the chapter for each map will be short, but not clear in its meaning (even to most adults). The teacher (or invited assistants with expertise in land use planning) will need to interpret key concepts, as well as deal with terminology.

Once students can describe how the “as is” setting is supposed to morph over the next 20–25 years, ask them to suggest **why** those changes were included in the final plan by the elected Board of County Supervisors.

Consideration of who will pay for the changes will enhance understanding of the political factors in land use decisions. In particular, have students consider who will absorb the public costs for infrastructure (roads, schools, fire/police stations, libraries, and parks) to support the modified land uses.

### Reading the Source

Working in small groups allows students to divide up the workload in preparing presentations about the current status of a location. Some students will gravitate to the technical tasks of producing videos or PowerPoint presentations (expect creative use of video/music), but all students should be encouraged to speak in front of the class to increase their comfort level with expressing views on a public policy issue.

The assignment to prepare “as is” descriptions before presenting them to the class will require one to two weeks to prepare. Exploring the Comprehensive Plan itself could be done over another one week period, allowing students time to physically visit the site being discussed.

Starter questions help students structure their initial description of a site: how does the height vary between structures, what is the pattern of stores/residences/offices, how do traffic conditions at rush hour vary from weekends, what is the percentage of impervious surface (roofs, parking lots, etc.) vs. natural vegetation, is parking encouraged between streets and front doors so that the development is more oriented to people who drive rather than walk, etc.

The Comprehensive Plan itself will require much vocabulary work. Since few teachers are land use planning wizards, this exercise offers a great opportunity to recruit the local Planning Commissioner, elected supervisor, county staff, or a cooperative developer /community advocate to visit the class in person once students have started to read the Comprehensive Plan. Anecdotes will spice up the tedium of reading the document and expert explanations can minimize the burden on the instructor.

More than one explanation will be required to clarify the jargon, before students can tackle the socio-economic and political forces that affect decisions. To make the repetition entertaining, vocabulary-building exercises can involve having each group create a secret decoder ring comparable to those in cereal boxes, or a Jeopardy or Wheel—of—Fortune game with the confusing words.

Finally, offering extra credit for attending at least 90 minutes of a Planning Commission meeting will get some students familiar with county offices and procedures, demystifying the process of government decisions. Pick a night when an agenda item involves the Comprehensive Plan, such as a public hearing on a controversial rezoning. However, do not require attendance through an entire Planning Commission meeting; they often run past midnight.

*NOTE: Knowledge of government requires reading materials written by others, but shaping government decisions requires sticking one's neck out as well as doing research. Public involvement as a citizen activist is a contact sport (history students know the signers of the Declaration of Independence put their lives on the line...), and not everyone will play fair. Students need to be prepared for negative feedback to their proposals if presented to the public.*

## **Reflections**

Students discover that they can understand, and potentially one day they can affect, local government decisions. Since most adults are clueless about land use planning, students also discover that they can be the “wizard” in their family/community regarding one aspect of local government, which can be empowering.

Getting familiar with the Comprehensive Plan and sitting through a portion of a public hearing, will increase most students' comfort level about participating in government decision processes. The passive “you can't fight city hall” stereotype can transform into student activism, if

challenged by asking “so what are you going to do about it, now that you know how to be a player?”

Students quickly recognize that they will be taxpayers in the workforce and funding a share of the public infrastructure costs in just a decade. They are slower to shift attitudes and think of themselves as future “owners” of the community, but some leaders will recognize they are entitled to join the debate today on how their place will develop in the future. Students interested in politics who traditionally get routed into routine envelope—stuffing assignments may also discover that asking questions regarding local land use can stimulate positive attention from others, and help them find mentors.

Planning future land uses requires critical thinking and integrating information from multiple disciplines. Sometimes land use constraints are based on environmental concerns, sometimes the issue is traffic, or sometimes immigration will be transforming a neighborhood... Due to the complexity of the issue, this learning experience may gestate for years until triggered by a later class in public administration, history, ecology, or political science.

### **Internet Resources**

- *Prince William County Planning*: <http://www.pwcgov.org/default.aspx?topic=040073>
- *Prince William County Comprehensive Plan*:  
<http://www.pwcgov.org//default.aspx?topic=040073001420000868>
- *Geography of Virginia – Land Use Planning*:  
<http://www.virginiaplaces.org/landuseplan/index.html>