

Washington Association of REALTORS
Quality of Life
Action Guide

Government Actions Will Affect Your Success
(and You can affect Government Policies)

There are critical questions affecting your livelihood that must be considered as local governments update comprehensive plans.

- τ *Do you have enough homes to sell in your town?*
- τ *Are there enough jobs in your community?*
- τ *Are your client's homes too far away from their jobs?*

You may think these problems are too big, and that you are too busy to do anything about them. But who better to be involved than real estate professionals who understand and deal with these issues every day?

And we have good news! You don't have to fix these problems by yourself.

In most cases, simply taking the message to the right person can make a big difference.

Let us help you make a difference in your community. We can have a major impact if we get involved and work together.

We're providing the resources to help you build better communities. Now, here's what you can do:

- τ **Discover how you can help with as little investment as one hour per week.**
- τ **Thirsty for more? Leverage your efforts using our gold mine of issue papers, policy briefs and model policies for comprehensive plans.**
- τ **Want training? Land use education and advocacy training are available.**

The “Quality of Life” project was developed to help all of us have an affect on local government decisions – decisions that will impact our livelihoods.

Decisions will be made on updating local land use plans – decisions that will affect how we all do business.

We’re going to communities across the state to help you learn about what you can do. We want you and others in your community to get involved.

Quality of Life

Washington has experienced more than a dozen years of unprecedented growth and change. The Growth Management Act mandates policies that communities must use to respond to these changes. Under the Act, local Comprehensive Plans are being reviewed and updated right now. As REALTORS, we want to offer our special expertise to help update these plans in ways that build better communities where we live and work.

What is Quality of Life and Why Do REALTORS Care

Quality of life is determined by many factors. Is the community safe and attractive? Are there homes to buy where I want to live? Can I afford to buy a home near where I work? Are there jobs available now and for the future? Can I get to and from work safely and quickly or are the roads jammed with traffic? Are there good schools? Are good doctors and good medical facilities available? Are there good places to buy the things I need? Are there good parks, play fields, and open spaces? Are there good recreational opportunities? Is the air, water and soil clean?

As a REALTOR, you already know that you’re selling much more than homes – you’re selling the livability of your community – you’re selling Quality of Life. Everyone wants economic vitality, affordable housing, a safe and attractive community and a healthy environment. But these things don’t just happen.

Quality of Life Project

The Washington Association of REALTORS Quality of Life Project is a balanced approach to accommodating growth and building better communities. The project is comprised of *Research, Principles* and *Recommendations*.

Research

Here’s what Washington voters told us when we asked what they want in their communities.

- Traffic, not growth, is their major concern.
- Safe neighborhoods and good schools are top priorities.

- Housing costs are too high, particularly for first-time homebuyers.
- There is strong support for revitalizing communities.
- Parks, open space and sidewalks should be a planning priority.
- Both our environment and private property owners must be protected.

Principles

We have identified five principles that, *when used as a guide in public policy decisions*, will nurture better Washington communities regardless of size or location. Those principles call for:

Building Better Communities: Quality of life means living in a robust community with a wide variety of local employment opportunities and commercial enterprise, good schools, safe neighborhoods, high-quality public services, efficient transportation systems, and an infrastructure that keeps pace with growth.

Ensuring Economic Vitality: Quality of life starts with a good job. Economic development increases the number of jobs, the tax base, purchasing power, diversity and the availability of goods and services. These factors make community improvement and revitalization possible.

Providing Housing Opportunities: Quality of life means having a roof over your head. All citizens should be able to find safe, decent and affordable housing near where they work, shop and play.

Preserving Our Environment: Quality of life means having access to parks and open space. Conservation and wise use of natural resources and critical areas lead to more parks, open space and preserve our unique natural environment.

Protecting Property Owners: Quality of life means you are protected. A strong economy depends upon preserving the right to freely own, use and transfer real property, a cornerstone upon which this nation was founded.

Notice that these *Principles* depend on one another. A community plan that ignores one *Principle* will struggle to achieve its aims, and may fail in several other areas. Specific policies will undoubtedly vary according to local circumstances, but the *Principles* of good community are the same throughout Washington.

Action Plan

The following outlines a proposed action plan for local REALTOR® involvement in comprehensive plan updates. The answers to the questions asked provide a framework for

local activists to get the information they need to become informed and involved. Answers to the questions may be obtained from planning staff members, planning commission members and elected officials and their staffs.

A lot of this work will be building and maintaining relationships, something that REALTORS do every day in their work with clients.

Strategy and Tone

There are several fundamental recommendations to set the strategy and tone for local involvement.

- ◆ REALTORS® should get involved in the plan update process immediately. The goal is to get the comprehensive plan update proposal to reflect the REALTORS® policy objectives prior to it being brought forward for public debate and decision.
- ◆ Another underlying goal is to position REALTORS® as a thoughtful and positive force in getting the local plans updated in ways that avoid public conflict and controversy, as well as advocates assisting in obtaining community support for the plan. Local REALTORS® should make it clear that they are getting involved to offer some of their insights into the community and are committed to ongoing involvement in the update process. (Meetings with local officials, planning commissioners, and staff members should not be complaining sessions about what is wrong in the community and with the current plan – but to offer assistance to make things better.)
- ◆ Local REALTORS® should develop local examples of projects that accomplish the objectives of the planning elements they want to see included in the plan update. If no examples exist in their own communities, ones from neighboring communities may be appropriate. (REALTORS® should offer examples of what works and recognizes local officials and planners needs, not just comments about what won't or isn't working.)

Get Involved Early and Often

The sooner you learn about and get involved in the process, the better off you'll be.

- ◆ It is often better to have your concerns addressed before the proposed comprehensive plan update is brought forward for debate and approval – and to defend favorable provisions – than it is to try and change the direction of the plan after it's proposed.
- ◆ Having the staff on your side and advocating for your provisions is also much better than having them oppose their inclusion after the plan is put forward.
- ◆ Advise elected decision makers as soon as possible about what you're doing and why. Keep them updated as the process and your involvement continues.
- ◆ If staff members are not receptive to your involvement, have sympathetic elected officials make proposals to them for you and encourage staff to make sure you're at the table.

Getting the Lay of the Land

You wouldn't dream of trying to sell a house without knowing it's location, size, the number of bedrooms and its amenities. Educating yourself on the issues and people involved in the comprehensive plan update is just as important.

Identify and educate yourself about the existing comprehensive plan policies.

- ◆ Do the existing policies include the policy elements supported by REALTORS?
- ◆ If they do, how are the existing policies working and what changes might make them better?
- ◆ Which elements are not included in the existing plan?
- ◆ Is there draft language available from other communities that might work in your area?
- ◆ Are there examples in your community or neighboring areas of policies that are working well and that should be encouraged?

Identify the local elected officials and staff who will be involved in the update process.

- ◆ Will a county or city council committee approve the update before it goes to the full council? If so, who is the committee chair and who are its members? If a three-member county commission is involved, which commissioner, if any, will head up the process and which are most interested in planning issues?
- ◆ Will a planning commission be involved? Who are the chairman and members?
- ◆ Which local REALTORS® have good relationships with specific officials and can talk with them about the plan update?
- ◆ Which city or county department will be conducting the update? Who is the head of the department and which staff members are doing the work?
- ◆ Do any local REALTORS® have good relationships with the planning staff and can talk with them about the update?

Identify the update process and schedule

- ◆ Will there be workshops to discuss the plan?
- ◆ When will it first be brought forward for public review and comment?
- ◆ Will a planning commission or other similar body do the initial review? If so, what will their process and schedule be?
- ◆ When and where will public hearings be held?
- ◆ How and when can you and your allies and supporters make comments on the proposed plan?
- ◆ Who will you get to attend any workshops, review sessions, meetings and hearings to speak in favor of the plan elements you support?

Identify Your Allies

- ◆ Who in the local real estate community would be effective in discussing your effort with specific elected officials and staff?
- ◆ What other local groups or organizations might support your positions? Natural allies may include chambers of commerce, builders, economic development councils, rotaries and other business organizations.
- ◆ How can they and their members be mobilized to become involved in the process and express their support for your efforts to staff and officials?

Consider Non-traditional Partnerships

- ◆ Are there low-income housing advocates, labor unions, neighborhood groups, parks advocates or environmentalists who may share views about elements of the comprehensive plan update?
- ◆ What issues do you have in common? How can you work together to address those issues?
- ◆ Who in your community has contacts with those groups and may be able to explore common ground?

Identify Any Potential Opponents

- ◆ Are there local neighborhood, conservation, environmental or other groups likely to be involved in the update process?
- ◆ What types of positions and actions have they taken in the past regarding land use issues?
- ◆ Have they been involved in prior comprehensive plan updates?
- ◆ Do they have good contacts with staff who will develop the plan and decision-makers who will adopt it?
- ◆ Can you find room for agreement? What issues? Can you agree to move forward on areas of agreement?

Identifying Media

- ◆ What members of the local media (talk and news radio, television, newspaper) might be interested in the comprehensive plan update?
- ◆ What local REALTORS® have good relationships with them?
- ◆ What local REALTORS® will handle media inquiries?
- ◆ What local REALTORS® and allies might be available to brief editorial writers at appropriate times?

Taking Action

Attend local hearings

It is imperative for REALTORS® to attend local hearings when important issues are discussed. Remember this:

A poorly planned attendance could result in a missed opportunity.
A well-orchestrated attendance by REALTORS® and homeowners in large numbers can make a strong impression on local officials.

Follow these steps to make the most of your attendance:

Have REALTORS® meet beforehand to agree on a strategy and message.
Designate a spokesperson(s) to communicate the REALTOR® position.
Develop talking points.
Anticipate the attendance of local media and incorporate this into your strategy. It could mean valuable “earned media time” for your message.

Stay informed

REALTORS® absolutely must stay informed about local issues. There are a number of steps you can take to stay on top of things:

Read local newspapers
Subscribe to and monitor local agendas and minutes. Some of this can be assessed over the internet.
Subscribe to W.A.R.’s local government affairs contacts service.
Attend local council and planning commission hearings.
Develop strong relationships with local government officials and staff.
Attend local civic events hosted by allied industry groups such as the Chamber of Commerce and Building Industry Association.
Invite local officials to speak to your Association on specific issues.

Get involved early

If you wait until the last minute to speak up on an issue, it will be too late! Here’s what to do:

Stay informed
Attend meetings
Communicate regularly with local officials
Participate on local commissions and task forces

All of the above will allow you to influence the kinds of proposals that are considered, and may help detour an issue before it gets adopted, or even proposed.

Participate in local commissions and task forces

You can influence the debate about local issues by having REALTORS® sit on local commissions and task forces.

If your city government has not created such a commission or task force, take the initiative and suggest that one be formed.

Participation in these forums is the best way for REALTORS® to get involved in the dialogue early and counter the influence that local government staff and opposition forces may have over elected officials.

Get REALTORS® elected and appointed to local office

Having REALTORS® appointed to planning commissions or elected to city council provides the best assurance that your voice will be heard on important issues.

Develop relationships with local officials

It is important to develop relationships with local officials before controversies reach their high point to ensure that you will have an open ear. Ways to develop productive legislative relationships are:

Hosting a “meet and greet” reception for local officials at your Association office.

Host fundraisers for candidates and elected officials.

Invite government officials to speak to your membership on particular issues.

Have a regular presence at local government meetings.

Place your Association on local elected officials’ mailing lists.

Place your local elected officials on the Association’s mailing lists.

Follow-through with officials after a decision has been made, especially if the decision was favorable.

Don’t forget about staff

Government staff influences elected officials as much, if not more, than anyone else.

Staff prepares reports, studies and analyses of important issues.

Elected officials often educate themselves by reviewing the information they receive from staff.

REALTORS® must maintain open lines of communication with staff to ensure that it provides objective information to elected officials.

Similarly, it is important to have open lines of communication with elected officials, in the event that staff does not share the REALTOR® point of view.

Identify Your Objectives

Growth issues manifest themselves in many forms – ballot measures, zoning ordinances, project approvals, or comprehensive plan updates, to name a few. Regardless of the type of situation you are facing, it is important for you to identify your objectives first, before you develop a strategy.

Determine your goals

What do you hope to accomplish in relation to this issue? Anticipate different level scenarios.

Be prepared to compromise and to accept something less than your ideal outcome.

Evaluate Your Resources

What resources do you have at your disposal to achieve your goals?

Are volunteers organized and ready to mobilize?

How much money does your Association have, and how much are they willing to spend?

What mediums of communication can you use?

Do you need, and can you afford, to hire a professional consultant?

What relationships do your members have with local officials?

Map out the political dynamics

Know what the political feasibility is of achieving your goals.

Do you have the votes and what will it take to get them?

Identify Targets

Who you are targeting will help you determine what approach to take. Who are you attempting to influence?

Policy-makers (legislators, councilmembers, commissioners, etc.)

Local government staff

Planning commissioners

Homeowners

Voters

All residents

Potential contributors

Develop a message

This is the most important part of the process!!! Follow these simple steps to make sure you get your message across in a way that benefits your ultimate objective.

Determine how you want to convey your position to the target audience.

Keep your message succinct, simple and easy to understand.

Your message should convey the positive points of your position.

Stick with your message.

Tactics

How will you convey your message? Consider these scenarios:

If you need to lobby the city council on an ordinance proposal, you will need to work with staff, meet with policy-makers, attend hearings, testify, and make sure you have the votes necessary to achieve your objective.

You may want to conduct a public education campaign, including letters to the editor of the local newspaper or maybe a town hall forum with elected leaders.

Your tactics will depend primarily on what your target audience is and what it is that you are trying to communicate.

Build Coalitions

Allied industry groups can help you communicate your message with added resources.

Homeowners

Voters

Builders

Associations

Local Businesses

Chambers of Commerce

Economic Development Councils

Port District officials

Schools and PTAs

Labor Unions

Environmentalists

Any or all of the above may share the same position as REALTORS® on housing, economic development, growth management or property-related issues. They can be enlisted in a variety of ways for a common purpose.

Adopt a strategy for achieving your goals

Here are some of your choices, depending on your goals and how you have evaluated all of the other issues mentioned above.

Grassroots campaign, mobilizing REALTORS®, property owners and others

Public education campaign. This might include target mailings, earned or paid media.

Coalition building

Lobbying city council or staff

Your ultimate strategy will depend on your goals, your target audience and how you intend to reach it. For example, if the city council is considering an ordinance, then you will want to lobby the council.

Your tactics will depend primarily on what your target audience is and what it is that you are trying to communicate.

Use Earned Media

You may find it useful to conduct a public education campaign. The best way to do this without spending valuable resources is by using earned media:

Editorial boards
Letters-to-the-editor
Opinion editorials

Once the answers to these questions are obtained, you should be well equipped to get involved and begin advocating for comprehensive plan update policies that align with the Quality of Life project.

Cautionary notes: In some jurisdictions it may be relatively easy to obtain favorable policies. In others it will require sustained, diligent and well-planned advocacy, particularly if there are organized, well-connected groups that propose negative policies or oppose REALTORS® proposals.

Throughout the advocacy process, strategic and tactical decisions will be required based on local circumstances. An example of the type of decision that may be required: One elected official supports your total involvement in the update process while another does not. It will likely be necessary to build a sufficient coalition of officials who support allowing as much direct REALTOR® involvement as possible.

Set up a “Key Contact” Program

REALTORS® have established a “key contact” program at the state level that can be adapted to the local level. A “key contact” is a person who is matched to a staff person or elected policy maker in their community. The “key contact” serves as a source of information for policy-makers about issues affecting the real estate industry. The Association has a handbook that can help you in establishing this program.

Initial Contacts

- ◆ A team of local REALTORS® should be identified to ensure that enough committed people are available to begin and maintain the involvement process.
- ◆ Meetings should be held as quickly as possible with planning staff and commission members, as well as with elected officials and their staffs. At these meetings REALTORS® would discuss why they want to be involved, how they plan on participating, what they have to offer the process and the outcomes they hope to achieve.
- ◆ Local examples of successful development, zoning and regulations that illustrate and align with the REALTORS® specific comprehensive plan update policy recommendations should be documented and provided to planning staff and officials following the initial meetings.

Ongoing Involvement

- ◆ Ongoing contact should be maintained with planners, elected officials and their staffs to advocate for specific policy recommendations and ongoing involvement.
- ◆ Local REALTORS® should be present at every meeting, workshop, discussion or hearing at which the comprehensive plan update will be discussed. Planning commission, city and county councils and commissions, and public meetings held by staff are examples of the types of meetings at which REALTORS® should maintain an ongoing presence. But remember that most decisions are made behind the scenes, so you'll want to be involved there, too.
- ◆ Whenever public comments are allowed, be they written, or oral, REALTORS® and their allies should be mobilized to provide public support for the plan updates you seek. Staff and officials should be shown that there is widespread, vocal and repeated support for your proposals and decisions to enact them. This is particularly important because officials are much more likely to approve plan provisions if they know they are strongly supported by committed community members.
- ◆ It is critical to provide written and oral testimony for the "record" to ensure you have "standing" (the legal right to be involved and address the issues you presented) should policy decisions be (or need to be) challenged.

Finishing Up

Thank and continue to support officials who approved policies you proposed. Remain involved in the community.

Proposed Key Messages

The following outlines proposed general key messages to be used to describe and explain REALTORS involvement in the comprehensive plan update process.

Basic Messages

- ◆ REALTORS® live in the communities where we work.
- ◆ Like our neighbors, we're concerned about the quality of life in our communities.
- ◆ Like our neighbors, we're concerned about the economic vitality of our communities.
- ◆ And like our neighbors, we're concerned that we have safe neighborhoods with the schools, roads, transit, housing and other infrastructure needed to improve both our economic vitality and our quality of life.

Local Comp Plan Update Messages

- ◆ Our quality of life starts with a good job. It means having a roof over your head. Quality of life means living in a robust community with a wide variety of local employment opportunities and commercial enterprise, good schools, safe neighborhoods, high-quality public services, efficient transportation systems, and infrastructure that keeps pace with growth.
- ◆ Our quality of life relies on the quality of our environment. But it also requires safe neighborhoods, jobs, schools, roads, transit, housing, offices, stores, and factories. Because we live in the communities where we work, REALTORS® are working hard to protect our environment and ensure we have a healthy economy. The quality of life in our communities depends on both.
- ◆ Our community is updating its plan for handling growth. We live in the community, and are also independent business people here. We are going to be active in this update process because we're concerned about the quality of life where we live and work.
- ◆ We want to ensure that the updated plan protects the environment as well as including elements that will ensure we have a vital economy and adequate housing.
- ◆ We are committed to assisting in the comprehensive plan update process. A big part of our job is to know the communities where we live and work. We have to understand the housing market and the economy, as well as the amenities and environment that keep our community healthy and attractive.

Policy Recommendations

We've also developed recommendations for local governments on the elements that should be included in comprehensive plan updates:

- ◆ An economic development element, which includes an inventory of current land uses, resources and needs, and goals and policies to achieve economic vitality.
- ◆ A housing element so that a balance of housing and jobs can be achieved, as well as providing affordable housing and planning for the overall number of homes needed to accommodate projected growth.
- ◆ A capital facilities element that provides the infrastructure needed to ensure the framework is in place to support residential, commercial and industrial development. This element could include a public investment strategy to direct growth to targeted areas.

- ◆ A land use element that includes provisions for the future economic, housing, and infrastructure needs of the community, including access to land to meet these needs.
- ◆ Benchmarks for measuring how well the goals of the plan are being achieved.
- ◆ Detailed environmental analysis at the outset via programmatic studies. These studies would analyze the environmental effects of the updated plan and projects that would be allowed within its framework. This would assist in simplifying and streamlining the permitting process while ensuring that environmental protection is provided.
- ◆ Coordinated and consolidated development review processes to make permitting more consistent and predictable.
- ◆ Flexible zoning that can stimulate economic development as well as producing attractive neighborhoods, open space and parks.
- ◆ Performance standards that directly relate to the effects on specific neighborhoods, sites and projects.
- ◆ Adequate development densities to offset higher land and construction costs and to provide incentives to encourage development in areas targeted for growth.
- ◆ Working with neighborhood organizations, citizens and businesses to identify the types of public facilities the community wants. These elements, such as parks, trees, sidewalks, and open spaces, can be included in the community plans to provide certainty that the community will receive the amenities it wants to improve its quality of life.
- ◆ Working with developers to establish and implement strategies to assist in assembling land and obtaining financing to help provide the housing, as well as schools, roads, transit, offices, stores, and factories that will keep our economy strong and improve our quality of life.

Conclusion

The REALTORS'® role in this process is critically important.

While the market will ultimately determine where growth occurs, you can help local governments set the tone for your community's success in attracting economic growth and quality development. By ensuring the right policies are in place to provide the proper framework — establishing proper goals and policies, coordinating planning and permit

review processes, providing infrastructure, ensuring land availability through zoning ordinances, implementing effective development regulations — your community can set the stage for successful efforts for job retention, expansion and recruitment, as well as quality growth and housing opportunities, while improving your community's Quality of Life.

You're not alone in your efforts to improve our Quality of Life. A whole team and a wide array of resources (included in the following list) are available to assist you.

Please let your local executive officer or government affairs person know that you want to be involved – that you want to have an impact. Or you can contact the Government Affairs team at the Washington Association of REALTORS®, 1-800-562-6024.

Resources

The Quality of Life Project has developed an extensive body of policy proposals that reflect the public's concerns (*Principles*), and offer a large number of *Recommendations* including issue papers, model policies and “Best Practices.” These may be used at all levels of planning, review and financing processes to meet the challenge of local circumstances.

All of our research and issue papers, policy recommendations and presentations are available at no charge. They may be obtained either through our website, <http://www.warealtor.com/government/qol/index.asp>, or by contacting the Washington Association of REALTORS®.

Training advocacy and education in land use are also available by contacting the Government Affairs team at the Washington Association of REALTORS®, 1-800-562-6024.

Research: Providing communities and policy makers with research, reports, statistics, studies and information about the costs and benefits of growth, land use regulations, growth management and other growth policies.

Surveys: Providing surveys, focus groups and tracking polls to determine public attitudes regarding growth, development, land use, and growth management, ensuring that policies reflect the will of the people.

Policies: Developing policy proposals that reflect the public's concerns, and are offering a number of recommendations, issue papers, model policies and best practices for comprehensive plans, development regulations, the review process, economic development planning, infrastructure financing, and concurrency requirements.

Outreach: Educating citizens about land use regulations, growth management and environmental laws, and how policies affect the economy, housing, property owners and our environment. Training citizens how to be effective advocates of policies that preserve the environment for our children, encourage economic vitality, provide housing opportunities and build better communities with good schools and safe neighborhoods. Developing advocacy materials, issue kits, presentations and videos to help citizens provide useful information to build better communities and improve our quality of life.

For more information about the resources we can provide, see the Quality of Life Resources and Tools for REALTORS® booklet, go to the REALTORS® Quality of Life website at: <http://www.warealtor.com/government/qol/index.asp>, or call the Washington Association of REALTORS® at 800-562-6024.