

Community Development Committee

Meeting date: January 18, 2022

Subject: Evaluation of the 2040 Comprehensive Plan Review Process

District(s), Member(s): All

Policy/Legal Reference: Metropolitan Land Planning Act

Staff Prepared/Presented: Patrick Boylan, Planning Analyst, Local Planning Assistance (651-602-1438), Angela R. Torres, Manager, Local Planning Assistance (651-602-1566)

Division/Department: Community Development / Regional Planning

Proposed Action

None. This item is presented for informational purposes only.

Background

The Metropolitan Council (Council) implements the Metropolitan Land Planning Act (MLPA). Specifically, Minn. Stat. § 473.851 establishes the requirement for local comprehensive planning and directs the Council to provide technical assistance to communities for the preparation of comprehensive plans. The Local Planning Assistance (LPA) work unit coordinates the decennial review process and technical assistance efforts.

The 2040 Comprehensive Plan (2040 Plan) review process is a multi-year effort that will continue until the Council authorizes all 168 expected local comprehensive plans. To facilitate completion of local comprehensive plans, the Council's [Sector Representatives](#) provided direct technical assistance and LPA staff coordinated development of a wide array of tools and resources ([PlanIt training program](#)). The Council also authorized planning assistance grant funds for local governments.

Through the 2040 Comprehensive Plan Debrief Project (Project), Council staff initiated a review of technical assistance initiatives as well as an evaluation of the 2040 Plan review process by engaging with local governments and other stakeholders. Feedback on the decennial comprehensive plan review process will inform recommendations for improvements to the review process and technical assistance efforts.

Methodology

The Project team took a many-pronged approach to its evaluation efforts, looking specifically at plan writing, submitting, and reviewing. Throughout 2021, the Project team used surveys, one-on-one conversations, and facilitated focus groups to collect feedback on various topics including the overall Plan review process, engagement efforts, planning resources, and available technical assistance. Engagement efforts included both external partners like local government planning staff and Metro Cities, as well as internal Council technical review staff. Efforts focused on identifying process improvements and collected very limited feedback on regional policy. Sector Representatives were responsible for conducting individual interviews with local planning and consulting staff with the work centered in listening to stakeholder experiences.

The nearly year-long engagement effort and more than 200 individual responses collected through the various methods resulted in several themes that constituted “pinch” or “pain” points in the Plan review process and provide opportunities for improvement. Participants also shared ideas for potential solutions to some of those issues.

Once the data were collected, Council staff analyzed the both the quantitative and qualitative information, gleaning themes from the various data sources by grouping similar comments and from there deriving recommendations for process improvements.

Findings

Shared below is a summary of the preliminary findings from the Project efforts. Based on the identified need to establish or re-build trust between Council staff and local planning, engineering, and consulting staff, as well as elected and appointed officials, the results of the analysis are grouped into three topic areas. These areas address what we heard about resources that were made available to both external and internal Council partners, the Plan review process itself, and communication-related improvements.

Of note, the findings from small communities were consistent with communities of all sizes, so those contributions are integrated into the overall results. Staff did receive feedback from regional partners that, in particular, small communities may face challenges resulting from a lack of permanent planning staff, part-time local government staff, limited forecasted growth, or other considerations which may warrant further consideration.

Resources

Local jurisdictional planners who drafted 2040 Plans appreciated resources like the [Local Planning Handbook](#) (Handbook) and personal assistance to local governments provided by Sector Representatives and Council technical staff. However, they also identified a need for more standardized templates and specific examples early in the planning process.

Resources like checklists were generally perceived as helpful but could be shortened, less repetitive, and more customized for communities. More clarity is needed between the scaled approach which intended to define basic required information while encouraging the “valued-added” items for communities with interest. The distinction between necessary information versus desired elements needs to be well-defined.

Participants provided insights into resources that the Council should continue to build on, like the preliminary review process, while also identifying resources with more limited use.

Council staff across the Council who reviewed plans greatly appreciated the availability of online tools to conduct reviews and provide technical assistance to local governments but needed more formal training in preparation for the Plan review process. Reviewers also suggested a simplified checklist and agreed that the Handbook, PlanIt Program, and preliminary review process were effective tools for local governments that the Council should continue to build on in the next planning cycle.

Review Processes

External partners provided feedback on a broad range of topics related to the responsiveness of reviewers and clarity of communication. Some of the most consistently identified needs for improvement centered on addressing recurring communication issues and making “incomplete for review” letters more helpful.

Council staff provided feedback related to workload and capacity, review methodologies, and document management. Identified areas of improvement include developing consistent review methodologies and resolving recurring capacity issues.

When both external and internal partners provided feedback on foundational elements of the review process including timeline and deadlines, both groups identified areas of improvement similarly, specifically a need to clarify steps in the Plan review process.

Communication

Local planning staff and consulting staff emphasized the need for more one-on-one engagement with local governments early in the plan writing process – ideally starting immediately after system statement release – and carrying on throughout plan reviews. They shared a desire for greater individualized and detailed communications that provided community-specific context on requirements.

Similarly, Council technical review staff provided feedback on the effectiveness of various internal communication channels including one-on-one conversations, in-person chats, or electronic modes. They shared a desire for greater clarification of roles and responsibilities, as well as an appreciation for detailed communications that provided context about communities. Council staff emphasized the need for more one-on-one engagement with local governments early in the plan writing process and throughout plan reviews.

Preliminary Recommendations

Following is a summary of the preliminary recommendations and examples of actions that could contribute to improvements to the Plan review process categorized as follows:

- **Improve Communication**
- **Evaluate Planning Resources**
- **Expand Technical Assistance**
- **Focus on Quality Assurance / Quality Control**

Some recommendations are detailed while others take a broad, high level approach. Implementing other items will require additional consideration to execute. And still other actions may be able to be implemented as the 2050 Regional Development Guide is developed. The interrelated nature of this work means that some recommendations could fit into more than one category.

To accomplish the “**Improve Communication**” action, recommendations focus on improving verbal and written exchanges both with our local partners and internally among Council technical staff. This includes guidance on communication norms and development of internal communication channels such as recurring check-ins to promote collaboration and increases to efficiency. For example, below are actions included in the recommendations to improve communication during the Plan review process:

- Both Sector Representatives and Council members should meet with jurisdiction staff and elected or appointed officials more often during the planning process and offer the opportunity to meet in person at least quarterly.
- Explore opportunities to improve efficacy of incomplete letter communications to best support local governments in addressing completeness, consistency, and conformance issues.
- Convene an advisory group of local planners and consultants to provide feedback on the checklist of minimum requirements for the 2050 comprehensive planning cycle.

“**Evaluate Planning Resources**” includes recommendations for the development of templates, data, and other guiding documents to best support local governments in their comprehensive planning efforts. Several focus on providing resources that cater to different audiences rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, below are actions included in the recommendations to evaluate and improve planning resources during the Plan review process.

- Identify opportunities to improve the Local Planning Handbook to ensure it is easy to use and navigate including adopting metrics to evaluate ongoing effectiveness.
- Develop a resource for both internal and external stakeholders that outlines the review process and explains completeness, conformance, consistency, and compatibility.

- Update existing resources with information on the Metropolitan Council and comprehensive planning for local staff to share with community members and elected officials. Develop new resources or add information as needed.

“**Expand Technical Assistance**” recommendations address areas of improvement related to engagement between Council staff and regional partners including local governments, consultants, and state agencies. They represent ideas that combine ways to improve effective communications with internal and external partners with technical assistance with the end goal resulting in proactive, personalized, and reliable technical assistance. For example, below are actions included in the recommendations to expand technical assistance during the Plan review process.

- Encourage more local governments to participate in preliminary reviews.
- Sector Representatives should engage one-on-one with local governments and consultants after issuance of 2025 System Statements and before plan writing begins to talk through the comprehensive planning process, Council requirements, and other essential information.
- Provide more examples to local governments during the comprehensive plan development and review process. Annotate examples to explain why they are good examples.

Finally, one key portion of the Project was a reflective component where we examined what Council staff does well or where staff could improve a process, tool, or method in internal or external interactions. The “**Focus on Quality Assurance / Quality Control**” (QA/QC) recommendations suggest evaluation of existing and future processes to allow for continuous improvement before, during, and after comprehensive plan reviews. For example, below are actions included in the recommendations to focus on QA/QC aspects during the Plan review process.

- All reviewers should understand and be able to communicate the “why” behind each requirement in their technical area.
- Explore why checklists were seen as “overly complex” and how to address this for the 2050 planning cycle.
- Evaluate individual staff capacity needed to conduct reviews and develop work plans that allow Sector Representatives and technical reviewers to prioritize reviews.

Next Steps

Building on these preliminary findings and recommendations, the Project team is currently engaging with Metro Cities in continued partnership to identify further improvements to the Plan review process. Together, we are coordinating a longer-term technical working group focused on regional planning and comprised of local government technical staff. This working group will review and assess the findings and recommendations from this Project as one of their first tasks together. This technical working group is expected to be organized in early 2022.

The Project team will present to the Land Use Advisory Committee (LUAC) on January 20, 2022, to continue engagement with the committee and share these preliminary findings. The Project team will also re-engage with partners that contributed throughout the past year to share and solicit additional feedback.

After these upcoming efforts, the Project team will finalize a report that incorporates feedback from these engagements. The final report will include a summary of engagement efforts and a full list of detailed recommendations. The implementation of priority recommendations will begin in 2022 and this will be treated as a Phase 2 of the Debrief project.