

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

---

### A. OVERVIEW

On April 7, 2004 Governor Bob Wise signed Senate Bill 454 ushering in a new set of state enabling planning laws for the first time in nearly a half century in West Virginia. The new law repeals the existing Chapter 8, Article 24 and replaces it with a new chapter in the state code: “Chapter 8A Land Use Planning.”

The new law modernizes the state’s planning enabling legislation. It makes activities such as smart growth initiatives and multi-county efforts easier, yet maintains the status of planning as a permissive activity in the state, but does mandate that comprehensive plans must be updated every 10 years. It clarifies some matters that had been left to interpretation under the previous statutes, such as the connection between a comprehensive plan and a zoning ordinance. The legislation requires that before a municipality (or county government) can introduce new zoning initiatives in the community through their zoning ordinance, that this elements must first be addressed as part of the municipality’s (or county’s) current Comprehensive Plan.

For the City of Fairmont, the new legislation came at an opportune time. The City has invested a great deal of human and financial capital in developing several redevelopment and revitalization initiatives for areas of Fairmont in recent years that will benefit greatly from the new legislation. In lieu of the traditional method of hiring a consulting firm to update and amend the Comprehensive Plan, City officials chose to develop the plan in house utilizing the staff of the Planning Department and the members of the Fairmont Planning Commission as the steering committee for the planning process. Community leaders, private citizens and partnering agencies were invited to partake in the planning process and collectively, all parties have collaborated to draft a plan that accurately reflects the goals and vision of the people who live, work and visit Fairmont as well as establishes guiding principles for the future growth and development of the community.

### B. THE PURPOSE OF A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Comprehensive Plan is a process through which citizen participation and thorough analysis are used to develop a set of strategies that establish as clearly and practically as possible the best and most appropriate future development of the area under the jurisdiction of the planning commission. A Comprehensive Plan aids the planning commission in designing and recommending to the governing body ordinances that result in preserving and enhancing the unique quality of life and culture in that community and in adapting to future changes of use of an economic, physical or social nature. A Comprehensive Plan guides the planning commission in the performance of its duties to help achieve sound planning. A Comprehensive Plan must promote the health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity and general welfare of the inhabitants, as well as efficiency and economy in the process of development. The purpose of a Comprehensive Plan is to:

- (1) Set goals and objectives for land development, uses and suitability for a governing body, so a governing body can make an informed decision;
- (2) Ensure that the elements in the comprehensive plan are consistent;
- (3) Coordinate all governing bodies, units of government and other planning commissions to



- ensure that all comprehensive plans and future development are compatible;
- (4) Create conditions favorable to health, safety, mobility, transportation, prosperity, civic activities, recreational, educational, cultural opportunities and historic resources;
  - (5) Reduce the wastes of physical, financial, natural or human resources, which result from haphazard development, congestion or scattering of population;
  - (6) Reduce the destruction or demolition of historic sites and other resources by reusing land and buildings and revitalizing areas;
  - (7) Promote a sense of community, character and identity;
  - (8) Promote the efficient utilization of natural resources, rural land, agricultural land and scenic areas;
  - (9) Focus development in existing developed areas and fill in vacant or underused land near existing developed areas to create well designed and coordinated communities; and
  - (10) Promote cost-effective development of community facilities and services.

A Comprehensive Plan may provide for innovative land use management techniques, including:

- (1) Density bonuses and/or density transfer;
- (2) Clustering;
- (3) Design guidelines, including planned unit developments;
- (4) Conservation easements;
- (5) Infill development;
- (6) Consolidation of services; and
- (7) Any other innovative land use technique that will promote the governing body's development plans.

When preparing or amending a Comprehensive Plan, a planning commission shall make comprehensive surveys and studies of the existing conditions and services and probable future changes of such conditions and services within the territory under its jurisdiction. The comprehensive surveys and studies may cover such factors as population density, health, general welfare, historic sites, mobility, transportation, food supply, education, water and sanitation requirements, public services, accessibility for the disabled and future potential for residential, commercial, industrial or public use. The major objective of the planning process is providing information to and coordination among divergent elements in the municipality or county. The elements in the comprehensive plan shall be consistent and governing bodies, units of government and planning commissions must work together to ensure that comprehensive plans and future development are compatible.

A planning commission shall prepare a comprehensive plan for the development of land within its jurisdiction. A planning commission shall then recommend the comprehensive plan to the appropriate governing body for adoption. A comprehensive plan should be coordinated with the plans of the department of transportation, insofar as it relates to highways, thoroughfares, trails and pedestrian ways under the jurisdiction of that planning commission.

The comprehensive plan is a written statement on present and future land use and development patterns consisting of descriptive materials, including text, graphics and maps, covering the objectives, principles and guidelines for the orderly and balanced present and future

# Introduction

---

economic, social, physical, environmental and fiscal development of the area under the jurisdiction of the planning commission. A comprehensive plan shall meet the following objectives:

- (1) A statement of goals and objectives for a governing body, concerning its present and future land development;
- (2) A timeline on how to meet short and long-range goals and objectives;
- (3) An action plan setting forth implementation strategies;
- (4) Recommendations to the governing body of a financial program for goals and objectives that need public financing;
- (5) A statement of recommendations concerning future land use and development policies that are consistent with the goals and objectives set forth in the comprehensive plan;
- (6) A program to encourage regional planning, coordination and cooperation with other governing bodies, units of government and planning commissions; and
- (7) Maps, plats, charts and/or descriptive material presenting basic information on the land included in the comprehensive plan, including present and future uses.

The purpose of this Comprehensive Plan is to give direction to both public and private decision-makers so that the most beneficial arrangement of land uses can be identified and developed in the same manner. Inherent in this proposal is the understanding that a community's elected officials will provide public services, for present and future residents, in an orderly and economically efficient manner. This Plan prescribes programs and activities that will create conditions favorable to improved health, safety, transportation, housing, civic activities, recreation, education, and cultural opportunities.

The adopted Comprehensive Plan represents the backbone for decision-making in the City of Fairmont. In order to be used effectively, this Plan must be accepted, understood, and supported by the elected officials who are charged with the responsibility of making decisions and by the citizens who recognize the benefits that can result from proper planning.

This Comprehensive Plan provides a basis for intelligent discussions by the public and its elected representatives on the future development of Fairmont and portions of Marion County. It also coordinates decision-making within and between public and private activities in the endeavor to achieve an environment that balances quality of life with economic development and preservation.

This Plan is geared toward the social, economic, and environmental conditions that prevail today. It also promotes a balance between environmental protection and the provision of adequate services and facilities required by the populace of the future. By adopting this Plan, decisions will be made, monies will be spent, and programs will be initiated in a coordinated manner.

## C. LOCATION



Nestled away in the rolling hills of North Central West Virginia along side the Monongahela, Tygart and West Fork Rivers, the City of Fairmont is the county seat of Marion County and with a population of just under 20,000 it is the largest municipality in Marion County. Fairmont is approximately midway between Morgantown and Clarksburg along Interstate 79.



*Fairmont is located within a 500-mile radius of one-half of this nation's population.*

## D. HISTORY

The City of Fairmont had its beginning in 1818 when Boaz Fleming laid off town lots on a portion of his farm and proceeded to sell them. In 1820 an act of the Virginia General Assembly recognized the Town of Middletown Virginia. It was named Middletown because of its approximate location between Clarksburg and Morgantown. A sister city, Palatine, was laid out in 1838 just across the river. In 1842, Marion County was formed from parts of Monongalia and Harrison Counties by an act of the Virginia General Assembly. Middletown was made the seat of the new county. One year later, in 1843, the General Assembly changed the name of Middletown to the Borough of Fairmont.

It is interesting to note that the current city of Fairmont was once smaller separate towns. Polesley's Mill was incorporated in 1867 into the Town of Palatine. Pettyjohn was a mail drop in 1872 near today's 14<sup>th</sup> Street. West Fairmont was incorporated in 1892, and Buffalo Station founded in 1774 was incorporated as Barnesville in 1906. In 1899 the West Virginia Legislature granted Fairmont a new charter by which Fairmont, West Fairmont, and Palatine became the City of Fairmont, with Barnesville incorporating into the City in 1913.

Among the industries in the Fairmont area in the early nineteenth century were small water-powered mills, blacksmiths, carriage works, and several "coal banks." The Barnesville Woolen Mill, located near the mouth of Buffalo Creek, is one such example. In 1852, a great flood swept away many of the riverside industries. However, later in the same year, a powerful force of a

# Introduction

---

different kind brought commerce and industry back to Fairmont. It was the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The arrival of the railroad, and the immigrants who built it, dramatically increased the population of Fairmont and drove up the value of local real estate. Another significant event of 1852 was the construction of a 560-foot suspension bridge across the Monongahela River linking Fairmont with Palatine. Although this bridge is gone, its replacement, the historically significant High Level Bridge (as well as numerous other rail and auto spans), made Fairmont a city of beautiful bridges.

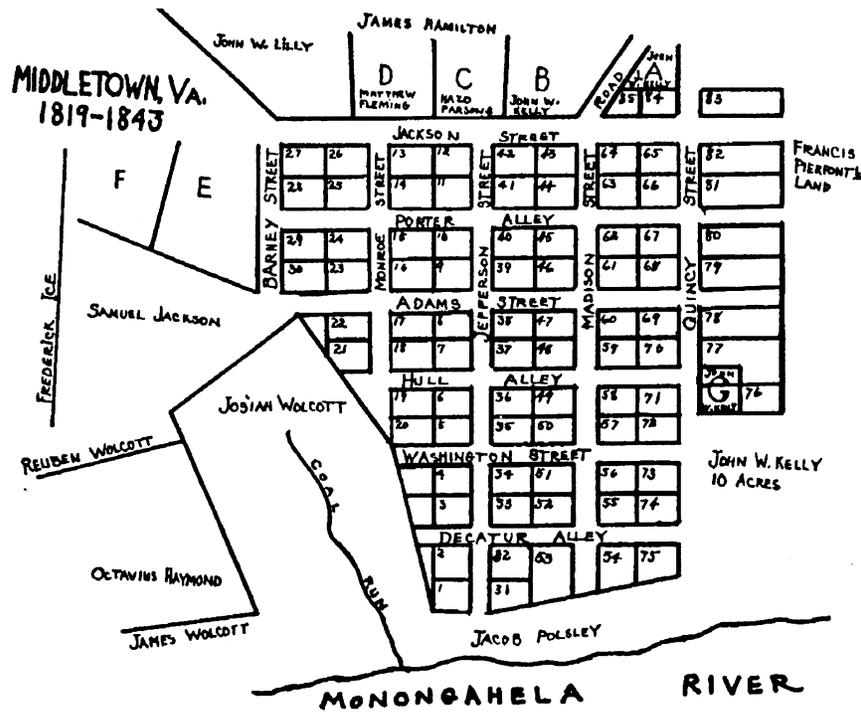


*When Fairmont's "Million Dollar" Bridge opened in 1921, the neighboring city of Morgantown did not have a single paved road.*

Between 1890 and 1930, Fairmont became the central transportation and financial center for an extensive coal mining region in north central West Virginia. This region was referred to as the "Fairmont Field." It included Barbour, Harrison, Marion, Monongalia, Preston, and Taylor Counties. Fairmont's prosperity during these years was linked to a rapid increase in the expansion of coal mining in the Fairmont Field.

Overall, Fairmont reached the height of its industrial development in the early 1920s. The Great Depression forced some companies into bankruptcy; others struggled along at reduced levels. The 1930s were particularly vexing for the coal industry, which suffered from overproduction and excessive competition. Many mines were shut down and there was considerable unemployment. Fairmont eventually recovered and enjoyed another period of prosperity during WWII (due to the increased demand for coal).

Beginning in the 1960s, however, Fairmont's industrial base suffered the same slow erosion that affected the region as a whole. Yet, Fairmont is not without thriving industrial plants in the 1990s. The Alcan Aluminum Corporation cold rolling mill and North American Philips Lighting Corporation light bulb plant operate efficiently and profitably with modern technology and labor-management relation programs. For the most part, however, the economy, the population level, and the condition of the remaining industrial architecture of Fairmont have faced the same fate as other cities during the de-industrialization of the early 1980s. During this period many important industries in the City were shut down and many sites were razed.



*Earliest known map of Fairmont (formerly named Middletown). Source: Now and Long Ago by Glenn Lough.*

While much of Fairmont’s industrial base has been lost, the City still retains rich evidence of its industrial heritage. There are numerous fragments of older industrial sites, which can be interpreted in order to help keep Fairmont’s history alive.

**E. STUDY AREA**

This Comprehensive Plan includes recommendations for the physical development and use of the land within the jurisdiction of the governing body of the City of Fairmont and gives consideration to land uses and development opportunities adjacent to the current corporate boundaries.

**F. PLANNING PROCESS**

The Comprehensive Plan for the City of Fairmont is a collaborative effort between the citizens of Fairmont, the City of Fairmont Planning Commission and the City of Fairmont Planning Department.

The Comprehensive Plan is based on a goals-directed planning approach and focuses on issues deemed critical by the residents of Fairmont. The Plan’s recommendations, when implemented, will help the governing body, the planning commission and planning staff attain the community’s vision. The policy formulation process involved three basic steps: a) defining goals; b) translating the goals into actions; and c) establishing policies to ensure actions are taken.

# Introduction

---

The planning process included an analysis of existing conditions within the study area and the identification of specific strategies to ensure orderly development within the area. The planning process also comprised numerous opportunities for citizen participation. These opportunities were offered in the form of: a) visioning workshops; b) Planning Commission work sessions; c) interviews with key players in the community; and d) community input meetings. This approach was successfully used to identify issues, opportunities, constraints, and attitudes among the widest possible spectrum of citizens.



*One of the many opportunities for community input during the planning process.*



*The planning process was an opportunity for residents to share their views with the Planning Commission and staff.*

## G. ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

The 2005 Comprehensive Plan for the City of Fairmont is composed of twenty-one chapters. Maps, charts and graphs have been included as supporting documentation in the appropriate chapters. Chapter 1 provides a description of the Fairmont study area, its location and history, and the planning process. Chapter 2 consists of the socio-economic profile of Fairmont and provides a comparison to surrounding areas. Chapter 3 focuses on the land use element, both current and future. Chapters 4 through 12 focus on specific elements: Housing, Transportation, Infrastructure, Public Services, Rural, Recreation, Economic Development, Community Design, Preferred Development Areas, Renewal/Redevelopment, Financing, Historic Preservation, Tourism, Annexation, Safety, and Arts & Culture. Each of these elements are laid out in the same format and consist of a brief overviews, goal and actions, existing conditions, basic issues, and recommendations. The Plan concludes with the Implementation Schedule for each of the chapters and a chapter highlighting the Citizen Participation that was achieved during this planning process.