An aerial photograph of a city, likely Missoula, Montana, featuring a large river (the Clark Fork River) winding through the urban landscape. The city is built on a hillside, with various buildings, green spaces, and a tennis court visible. In the background, rolling hills and mountains are visible under a clear sky. A blue and white decorative graphic element is on the left side of the page.

Montana's Growth Policy Resource Book

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MONTANA'S GROWTH POLICY RESOURCE BOOK



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DRAFT GROWTH POLICY RESOURCE BOOK NARRATIVE

Purpose of Resource Book

The purpose of this handbook is to help the leaders and elected officials of cities, towns, and counties to understand the purpose of a Growth Policy and to decide how it can be best developed and used in their community. For places without dedicated planning staff, developing or updating a growth policy can be an intimidating task. This is particularly true when their starting point is simply the list of statutory requirements for growth policies. This handbook is meant to distill the process of creating a growth policy into an understandable and achievable process for any Montana community, whether they complete it on their own or with the assistance of a consultant.

Why Create a Plan?

For communities in the midst of population growth, there are questions about how to provide additional services and maintain a quality of life that current residents have come to appreciate. In communities that are losing population, questions surround topics such as how to keep schools and other services operating and how to maintain existing businesses or attract new ones.

Regardless of the circumstances a city, town or county faces, planning is important. Whether a community is growing or facing population loss, most residents want a common vision for the future that reflects their values. A growth policy is one means to accomplish that vision. Ultimately, developing such a plan should result in commonly accepted goals and objectives that will help create and maintain the type of community that residents want to live, work, and play in. In addition, a growth policy should provide a consistent framework for local governments to make decisions and reduce ambiguity and inconsistency in the decision-making process.

What is a Growth Policy?

A growth policy is an official public document adopted and used by Montana cities, towns, and counties as a guide for making decisions about their future, particularly with regards to land use. A growth policy is not a regulation; rather, it is a community's official policy meant to guide and help manage change for the benefit of residents. For communities in Montana that are declining in population or experiencing very slow growth, the term "growth policy" can seem a misnomer. Nonetheless, whether growing or declining, a growth policy is an essential tool that communities can use to make themselves resilient in the face of inevitable change. While the statutory requirements for a growth policy focus primarily on land use, the document should also address topics such as economic development, housing needs, local services, infrastructure, natural environment, and other issues of importance to each individual community.

A growth policy is essentially a dynamic long-range plan meant to help guide the development of a city, town or county and identify policies and projects that it will use to influence its physical, economic, social, and environmental character.

A growth policy is not a regulatory tool and cannot be used solely to make decisions on proposed land use projects or development. That being said, a growth policy can provide the legal basis for the adopting or updating of zoning or subdivision regulations which can be used to achieve the goals of the plan.

For example, to create or amend zoning regulations to address an issue such as junk vehicles or debris in yards, the growth policy should at a minimum discuss the issue in brief and explain that zoning regulations may be amended or adopted to regulate them. This provides the legal connection between the growth policy and the new regulations. The Community Technical Assistance Program has a range of resources available to help with planning issues including subdivision regulations and zoning. Visit comdev.mt.gov/Programs/CTAP for more information.

Important Recommendations

It is critical that a city, town, or county's new or updated growth policy be a document that is achievable. Achievable means that the document contains specific goals, objectives, and projects that can be accomplished, are measurable, and provide local residents with tangible results.

Too often growth policies and other planning documents provide large amounts of data and analysis but contain little clear or concrete guidance about how to improve a city, town, or county. Because of this, growth policies and other plans can often result in few visible improvements. This can be due to the fact that the growth policy was either not realistic, or its guidance language was so vague that community leaders and residents were unsure what was supposed to be done to implement the plan.

While there is no guarantee that a growth policy can be successfully implemented, ensuring the document is based upon realistic expectations and contains clear and concise language will make it more likely that this happens.

With this in mind, when working on a growth policy, it is important to create one that is easy to read and to use. Distill complex issues into easy to read text. Depending upon the complexity of a city, town or county's issues, limit facts, figures, and narrative to only what is needed to tell a community's story. Remember, a growth policy is a snapshot in time. Once the plan is adopted, much of the data and information in it can already be outdated. Thus, consider using content such as photos, maps, tables, and charts to communicate much of the information in a growth policy. They can be very effective ways to quickly share information and ideas.

History

With the passage of Senate Bill 97 during the 1999 Montana Legislature the terms "master plan" and "comprehensive plan" were changed to "growth policy," and are now all synonymous under Montana statute. Thus, cities, towns and counties can refer to their growth policy by the more traditional term such as "comprehensive plan" or "master plan." The 1999 legislation also established minimum requirements for what a growth policy must include.

Prior to 1999, the state's planning statutes allowed cities, towns, and counties to adopt master (comprehensive) plans and provided an optional list of elements that could be included in a plan. The actual contents of the plan were left up to the communities. Under the 1999, statute, "growth policies" were required to meet certain minimum requirements. The rationale for setting minimum requirements was to ensure that if the growth policy is going to be used as the basis for the regulation of land development and of private property, the document should meet certain minimum standards. The 1999 statute was also meant to ensure that growth policies remain "living" documents that would periodically be updated as communities change. This is meant to be achieved by requiring that growth policies be reviewed at least every five years and if necessary revised. For stable communities, five years is probably sufficient, but in rapidly growing or shrinking communities this review may need to be on a shorter cycle.

The statutes governing growth policies have been amended several times since the original legislation was enacted in 1999. Amendments have occurred in 2001, 2003, 2007, 2009 and 2013. The following are the most important changes that have occurred since 1999:

2003 Legislature:

- Clarified the detail to which the required elements are described is at the full discretion of the governing body.
- Clarified that having a growth policy is optional for communities.
- Required a planning board to prepare a growth policy.
- Specified that a growth policy is not a regulatory document.
- Specified that a governing body may not withhold, deny, or impose conditions on any land use approval based solely on compliance with a growth policy.
- Established that a growth policy is required for a County or City to adopt or amend County or Municipal Zoning. This does not include "Part 1 County Zoning."
- Required that subdivision regulations must be made in accordance with an adopted growth policy.

2007 Legislature

- Added the requirement that a determination must be made whether or not the following are needed with regards to fire protection:
 - Identifying the location of the wildland-urban interface (WUI); and
 - The need to adopt regulations that require:
 - defensible space for buildings.
 - vehicle access to facilitate fire suppression; and

- adequate water supplies for fire protection.

2009 Legislature

- Required that sand and gravel resources be described in a growth policy's inventory.

Statutory Requirements

The growth policy statute, [MCA 76-1-601](#), does identify the minimum content that must be included in the document. That being said, the statute does not define the level of detail to which each element must be described. Depending upon the issues faced by a city, town or county, some topics will be more important than others. The elements required by statute include the following:

- Goals and objectives.
- Maps and narrative describing the character and features of the community, including land use, population, housing, economics, local services, public facilities, natural resources, **and other topics as identified by residents.**
- Future trends and potential changes for each of the elements.
- Description of the projects, policies, regulations, and other tools that might be used to achieve the goals and objectives.
- Description of the community's strategy for developing, maintaining, and replacing public infrastructure, including things such as drinking water, wastewater treatment, sewer systems, solid waste, fire protection, roads, bridges, and telecommunications.
- Implementation strategy or "action plan" that includes:
 - Schedule for implementing the guidance in the growth policy.
 - Identifying the conditions (events/changes) needed to revise the growth policy.
 - Schedule for reviewing the growth policy at least once every 5 years and undertaking a revision of the document if necessary.
- Explanation of how the governing body will coordinate and cooperate with other local governments (i.e., cities with counties and vice versa).
- Explanation of how the governing body will evaluate and make decisions on proposed subdivisions with respect to the "public interest" criteria found in the Subdivision and Platting Act (76-3- 608 (3)(a), MCA). The criteria include agriculture, agricultural water user facilities, local services, the natural environment, wildlife and wildlife habitat, and public health and safety.
- Explanation of how public hearings regarding proposed subdivisions will be conducted.
- Evaluation of the potential for fire and wildland fire in the community including:
 - Determining if the wildland-urban interface needs to be identified.
 - Determining if regulations should be adopted that require:
 - defensible space for buildings.
 - Vehicle access to facilitate fire suppression.
 - Adequate water supplies for fire protection.
- Optional content that can be included:
 - Neighborhood plan.
 - Infrastructure plan.

Community Inventory and Trends

The statute governing growth policies requires that a city, town, or county create an “inventory” of its existing characteristics and features using maps and narrative. The inventory must include information on land use, population, housing needs, economic conditions, local services, public facilities, natural resources, and other topics identified by the community’s planning board. Accompanying the inventory, the growth policy must provide trends and changes for each item in the inventory. It is typical that the inventory and trends are discussed together on a topic-by-topic basis, rather than addressing each as separate sections.

Maps

For most planning projects such as a growth policy, maps help form the basis for the first discussions about the project. Informational maps can show things such as the boundaries of the city, town or county, property lines, streets/roads, water/sewer, land use, rivers, lakes, floodplains, parks/trails, and blocks. Up to date aerial photography can be an excellent way to start discussions about a community.

GIS (geographic information systems) mapping is now an essential tool for creating maps of a city, town, or county. Having access to either GIS software or a consultant who does can provide communities with highly detailed maps that can help a planning board and residents better understand their community.

Narrative-Text

Along with maps, the statute requires that the inventory be completed using narrative to describe the inventory topics. There is no limit on the amount of text used to meet this requirement. That being said, to ensure that the plan is easy to read and use, minimizing the amount of text used to describe each topic is important. As mentioned elsewhere in this document, the growth policy should be an easy to use guidance document, it should not be an encyclopedia of a city, town, or county. Therefore, try to use only the narrative necessary to tell a community’s story.

Inventory

The following are the specific topics that *must* be addressed in the plan inventory and trends.

Land Use

As mentioned earlier, how a city, town or county addresses land use in its growth policy will be dependent upon the circumstances it faces. Rapidly growing communities will place a high emphasis upon land use in their growth policy and slow or no growth communities will likely not be very concerned about it at all.

For a city, town or county dealing with high growth it will be essential to understand the following:

- What is the community’s current land uses?

- Create a map of existing land uses.
- Where is new growth occurring?
 - Use subdivision plats or building permits to track.
- Where does the community want new growth to occur?
 - Locations easy to provide access and provide services to.
 - Minimal hazards i.e. fire or flood.
- If a city or town, does it have adequate water and sewer capacity to serve new growth?
- Identify areas that might be hazardous for residential development: floodplain, wildfire etc.
 - Floodplain maps (FIRM) and wildfire mapping
- The above data may be used to create a future land use map (FLUM) to show where a community wants new growth.
 - This is easier for cities and towns as they are smaller geographic areas.
 - More difficult for counties due to large geographic size.
 - Counties may want to create a simplified map that identifies broad areas to guide growth.

There is no need to provide detailed narrative to tell the “story” of land use in a city, town, or county. Maps, tables, charts and even bullet point lists are easy to understand methods to communicate a community’s particular situation.

Population

Understanding population and demographic changes is important for any city, town, or county, but the actual focus of this inventory and analysis will depend upon the community’s individual circumstances. Residents in fast growing communities will likely want to have a sense of how much growth will occur in a specific time period, say 5 to 10 years. This may help a local government understand how much housing will be needed and accompanying subdivision development that might occur. In addition, population estimates can help determine if the community has the local services or infrastructure needed to serve a growing population. For example, based upon predicted growth, a city or town will want to know if it has adequate water and sewer capacity to serve the new residents.

For a city, town, or county with a stable or declining population, estimates, and demographics might be used to understand if residents are aging and how many people fit into each age category. This information could help decision makers understand what might be occurring to the community’s supply of workforce, school age population, and if additional senior services are needed.

Again, there is no need to provide detailed narrative to describe population and demographic changes for a city, town, or county. Tables, charts, and even bullet point lists are easy to understand methods to communicate a community’s particular situation.

Housing

The affordability of housing is a challenge throughout the state. Ensuring that city, town, or county residents have safe and affordable housing is essential to many aspects of a healthy community. This includes workforce and senior housing. Thus, it is very important that the growth policy at least include a basic understanding of a community's housing market and its housing needs. Local realtors and Census data can be used to answer the following questions:

- Who can and cannot afford to live in the community?
- Does the community provide housing for a wide variety of residents?
- Can young adults afford to remain in, or return to, the community?
- Can essential emergency service workers (e.g. fire, police, medical) and other essential service workers (e.g. grocery store and restaurant employees, municipal employees, etc.) afford to live in a community?
- Do senior citizens have adequate alternatives for remaining in the community as they age?
- Does the community's housing inventory promote job growth?

Again, there is no need to provide detailed narrative about housing changes and estimates. Tables, charts, and even bullet point lists are easy to understand methods to communicate a community's particular situation.

Economic Conditions

Understanding city, town or county income and employment trends can form the basis for forecasting future employment and income trends. Ultimately these trends can help influence decisions about local economic development efforts, construction of infrastructure (roads, water, sewer etc.) and if additional residential development is needed.

At a more focused scale, understanding a city, town or county's "per capita income" and "median household income" can be used as a measure of the average resident's and family's well-being in comparison with other communities, the region, the state, or the nation.

Median household income in a city, town or county is one of two commonly cited measures of individual wealth used in the United States. The other measure is per capita income. Each takes a slightly different approach to measuring how well a community's residents are doing financially.

Median household income considers the incomes of all people ages 15 years or older occupying the same housing unit, regardless of relation. A single person occupying a dwelling by themselves is considered a household. Per capita income measures the average income earned by each person in a city, town, or county. Therefore, two income earners in the same family or household are counted separately when measuring per capita income.

Median household income can be used to identify trends regarding the economic health of a city, town, or county. For example, comparing median household incomes with surrounding

communities can provide a glimpse as to which has a higher quality of life simply based upon economic data. Also comparing a city, town or county's median household income to its real estate prices may indicate whether the housing prices exceed residents' ability to afford housing. It is generally assumed that people can afford to pay up to three times their annual incomes for a home. Therefore, the ratio of median household income to a community's median home sales price may reveal whether the cost of a typical home is out of reach for a typical household.

By looking at income and employment trends, the economics section of a growth policy can help identify trends in growth or decline for the different industries in a city, town or county and where a community might be most successful in focusing its economic development efforts.

Local Services and Public Facilities

Local services and infrastructure are the foundation of a city, town, and county's everyday operation. Because services and infrastructure are closely tied to one another, it is recommended that they be discussed together.

Services used by residents can include: fire protection, law enforcement, medical services, water and sewer, solid waste disposal, public health, education, library, senior services, parks and recreation, private utilities such as electricity, telecommunications and internet, and other governmental or non-governmental services operating in the community. Public facilities/infrastructure that residents use on a daily basis can include road/streets, water and sewer lines, bridges, buildings (city hall/courthouse, fairgrounds), landfills, parks, and trails.

Since an inventory of local services and infrastructure is community-specific and will vary from a city, town or county, the staff at the community's departments such as public works, sheriff, road department etc. should be the primary way of gathering local services information for the growth policy.

This section can also serve as the city, town, or county's "strategy for developing, maintaining and replacing infrastructure." To meet the requirement of statute it is important to clearly discuss infrastructure needs and specifically state that this section is also meant to meet the statutory requirement for the "strategy." Also, if a community has an up to date capital improvements plan (CIP) that comprehensively addresses infrastructure, the CIP can be referred to as the community's infrastructure strategy. See Appendix A of this document for additional information on CIP's from the Montana Department of Commerce.

Natural Resources

A general analysis of the natural and environmental characteristics of a city, town, or county should be included in the growth policy. Natural and environmental characteristics can be important factors in determining which areas of a community are most appropriate for residential development. Fire hazard, floodplains, steep slopes, etc. can impact residential development and in turn new residential development can impact wildlife, and their habitat. A basic understanding of these and related issues can help a community formulate its policies toward siting new development.

In addition, this analysis can also help a city, town or county better understand other opportunities and challenges that exist with regards to topics including:

- Forest management and wildfire.
- Water quality and quantity.
- Open space and wildlife habitat.
- Sustainable agriculture.
- Public land management.

Rather than creating separate sections, this portion of a city, town or county growth policy can be a good location to address the topics of sand and gravel resources and wildland urban interface.

Sand and Gravel

With regards to sand and gravel, the rationale for gathering this information is to provide a basis for a city, town or county to create regulations to separate incompatible uses such as residential housing and gravel pits, while ensuring economical sources of gravel are available for future construction. Brief narrative and soils maps that identify potential gravel soils in relation to a community would likely be adequate to meet this requirement.

Wildland Urban Interface

Every city, town, and county in Montana has a wildland urban interface (WUI). The WUI is an area where human made structures and infrastructure are in or adjacent to areas prone to wildfire. In evaluating a community's WUI, the first step is to identify its location. Sources for this information include the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) Forestry Division or a county's current Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). See Appendix A of this document for additional information on development in the WUI from the Montana Department of Natural Resource and Conservation.

Once a city, town, or county identifies its WUI area it must describe in narrative form whether or not it will consider adopting regulations to protect homes and other structures from wildfire. The narrative should discuss any potential regulations needed for creating defensible space around homes, safe vehicle access to and from homes, and needed fire protection water supplies.

Coordination Between Other Cities, Towns and Counties

The statute requires that cities, towns, and counties developing a growth policy must state how they anticipate cooperating and coordinating with other adjacent cities, towns, or counties to implement their growth policies. This requirement applies only to Montana local governments. Thus, a city or town must explain how they will work with their surrounding county or nearby municipalities. Conversely a county must state how it will work with the municipalities within and adjacent to its boundaries to implement its growth policy.

Often statements of coordination will focus on the resources that are shared between cities, towns, and counties such as emergency services, law enforcement or how they can promote economic development or improve parks and recreation services together.

Evaluation of Subdivisions: Primary Review Criteria

The review of new subdivisions is probably the most common land use planning process undertaken in Montana. Because of this, the legislature wanted to ensure that growth policies describe the process by which subdivisions would be reviewed under the “primary review criteria” found in the Subdivision and Platting Act under 76-3-608(3)(a), MCA. The primary review criteria include:

- Agriculture.
- Agricultural water user facilities.
- Local services.
- Natural environment.
- Wildlife.
- Wildlife habitat.
- Public health and safety.

This requirement is meant to build in a certain level of predictability and consistency during the review of subdivision applications by cities, towns, and counties. The growth policy statute specifically requires that cities, towns, and counties provide a statement explaining how they will:

- Define the primary review criteria.
- Evaluate and make decisions regarding proposed subdivisions with respect to the criteria.

When defining the review criteria, using the definitions found in state statute is recommended as a starting point, nonetheless a city, town, or county has the discretion to define the criteria to meet its specific circumstances. In addition, communities can always look at the definitions used in other growth policies to get a sense of what has worked for other jurisdictions across Montana. Additionally, the Community Technical Assistance Program (CTAP) can provide support for these considerations and has resources online, specifically support for Subdivision Regulations (see Appendix A of this document).

Describing how a subdivision application will be evaluated is meant to require a city, town, or county to outline how each of the criteria will be used to review and make decisions on proposed subdivisions. This generally involves identifying thresholds that a subdivision will need to meet in order to be approved. For example, a community may place an emphasis on ensuring that adequate emergency services will be available in order to approve a subdivision. Then it would compare the available emergency services in relation to the location and size of the subdivision and make a determination as to whether the impact that the subdivision will have on emergency services is acceptable or can be mitigated by the developer. A similar evaluation would need to be discussed for each of the primary subdivision review criteria.

Here is an example of how to include subdivision evaluation narrative in a growth policy:

- Evaluation Criteria for Effect of a New Subdivision on Public Health and Safety:

- Are there potential manmade hazards to residents of the subdivision such as high voltage lines, high-pressure gas lines, highways, roads, railroads, railroad crossings, nearby industrial or mining activities?
- Are there potential natural hazards to residents from flooding, high winds, wildfire, or difficulties such as highwater table, expansive soils, or excessive slopes?
- Are there sufficient emergency services and facilities to serve the subdivision?
- Is there adequate vehicle access for emergency services?
- Are alternative transportation options such as bike and pedestrian routes, shared use paths, sidewalks to schools, etc. present and available to serve the development?
- Does sufficient opportunity for recreation exist to serve the residents in a development?

Public Hearings on Subdivision Applications

The legislature also wanted to provide some level of predictability and consistency with regards to how public hearings are held for subdivisions. Thus, a city, town or county is required to include in a growth policy a narrative description of how it will hold public hearings on subdivision applications.

The following is an example of how a public hearing on a subdivision application might be conducted and described in a growth policy:

1. Planning Board President opens the public hearing.
2. Planner provides a summary of the subdivision application and staff report including findings of fact.
3. Subdivision applicant is given an opportunity to make comments.
4. Planning Board members are given an opportunity to ask clarifying questions of the subdivision applicant and planning staff.
5. Members of the public have an opportunity to make comments.
6. Public comment is then closed, and Planning Board discussion takes place.
7. If Planning Board members feel prepared to make a decision on the application, they will vote to either recommend project approval, conditional approval, or denial.
8. If Planning Board needs more information or additional time to consider the project before making a recommendation, or if the applicant wishes to modify the project and bring a revised proposal back to the Planning Board, the Board may opt to extend the public hearing in accordance with the review period outlined in statute. The public hearing must be extended to a date certain and the applicant should concur with the extension.
9. Once all public comments have been received within the allowable timeframe, and once the Planning Board has taken its vote, the Planning Board President closes the public hearing.

Other Elements

A city, town or county is not bound by the list of statutory elements when creating a growth policy. They have the flexibility to add or focus on any other topic that is deemed important and appropriate.

Topics that might be included beyond traditional land use issues might include:

- Economic development.
- Areas of poverty or needs of low-income residents.
- Local services, i.e. library, ambulance, senior services, etc.
- Infrastructure, i.e. water, sewer, streets/roads, telecommunications, and internet etc.
- Parks and recreation facilities.
- Downtown redevelopment.
- Preparing for a natural resource boom or bust.

Neighborhood Plans

Neighborhood plans are an optional part of a growth policy. Such plans are generally either a companion document to or an appendices in the growth policy. These plans can help achieve the goals found in the growth policy but would do so by focusing on a much smaller geographic area and generally address issues specific to the area in question. Neighborhood plans can be the basis for developing and adopting zoning regulations for smaller areas, particularly in counties. An adopted growth policy is required to create a neighborhood plan and the plan must be consistent with the guidance found in the growth policy.

Infrastructure Plan

The “infrastructure plan” identified in the growth policy statute is meant to provide the incentive to encourage growth in or adjacent to cities or towns. The idea behind such a plan is to encourage new residential growth near or in municipalities by exempting proposed subdivisions from certain review requirements. In theory this is meant to make the subdivision review process easier and less expensive, thus encouraging urban style growth near or in cities. It is important to note that creating an infrastructure plan typically requires significant time and resources and would also need to be accompanied by zoning regulations that address the primary subdivision review criteria found in 76-3-608(3)(a). In addition to this complexity, creating such a plan typically requires the cooperation of multiple jurisdictions, usually a city and county.

The Process: Preparing A Growth Policy

Under Montana statute, a planning board is the only public entity authorized to prepare a growth policy at the request of its governing body. Creating a growth policy can take considerable time and effort on the part of the planning board and if applicable, the board’s planning staff or planning consultant. The more complex the issues the city, town, or county faces then generally the lengthier the process to complete the plan. State and federal agencies have programs to support the development of many planning documents, such as a Growth Policy. For further information and resources, please reach out to Community

Technical Assistance Program (CTAP). See Appendix A of this document for additional information on CTAP.

Each city, town or county will approach the process in a slightly different manner, but in general the process will include answering the following questions and completing the accompanying tasks:

- Why is the community creating or updating a growth policy?
 - Residential growth impacts?
 - Resource expansion or decline: oil/gas or mining?
 - Population loss?
 - Economic decline or business loss?
 - Infrastructure or service needs: water, sewer, medical services, etc.?
- Does the community have a planning board?
 - If not, one needs to be created to meet the applicable statutory situation. City? County? Consolidated Board? (76-1-101, MCA).
- How will the planning board complete the project?
 - Budget?
 - Funding sources?
 - Planning staff?
 - Planning consultant?
 - Volunteer committees?
- If a consultant being used for the project, think about the following:
 - Budget, how much is the community willing to spend?
 - Request for proposals (RFP).
 - Interviews.
 - Selection.
 - Contracting.
- Create a realistic schedule:
 - When should the process be completed?
 - Consider the calendar: holidays, calving or harvest season, etc. all impact the schedule.
 - Creating or updating a growth policy is generally a 9 to 12-month process depending upon complexity of issues faced.
- Outreach to Community Residents
 - What is the purpose of outreach?
 - Create a “marketing plan” for outreach: how, when and who is responsible for outreach?
 - In light of the Covid-19 Pandemic is a community prepared to use alternative communication methods: Conference calls, Zoom, Microsoft Teams or WebEx?
 - Possible outreach methods:

- Email listservs.
 - Social media: Facebook etc.
 - Video conferencing (if necessary).
 - Surveys: online and hardcopy.
 - Word of mouth.
 - Newspaper articles/ads.
 - Radio ads.
 - Presentations at meetings of civic groups.
 - Open houses.
 - Etc.....what works the best in a community.
- Inventory and list the “elements” that a community has and identify trends that are affecting each:
 - Land uses.
 - Population.
 - Housing needs.
 - Economic conditions.
 - Local services.
 - Public facilities.
 - Natural resources.
 - Other characteristics and features a community identifies.
- Using resident input, community trends and the knowledge of the Planning Board, identify a community’s opportunities and issues to be addressed in the plan.
- Develop goals and objectives that describe how a community will take advantage of opportunities and address issues.
 - Focus on realistic and achievable goals and objectives.
 - Use clear and concise language....avoid vague statements.
- Create an “implementation” or “action” plan to achieve the goals and objectives.
 - Identify specific projects to be completed and include the following for each:
 - Who is responsible for completing the project?
 - When will it be done?
 - What resources will be needed: staff/money?
 - How will the plan be monitored to demonstrate success?
- Resident review of the draft growth policy.
 - Open house.
 - Video conferencing (if necessary).
 - Electronic version posted on website.
 - Hardcopies at courthouse, city hall or library.
- Planning Board hearing and recommendation to the governing body regarding adoption.
- Governing body adopts the growth policy.

- Recommend document review on an annual basis and at a minimum every 5 years to ensure it is still relevant and reflects the current needs of the community.



Figure 1 - Typical Process for Developing a Growth Policy

Goals and Objectives

In 1999, the Montana Legislature's Environmental Quality Council (EQC) developed a report called Planning for Growth in Montana. The EQC's report encouraged the state's cities, towns, and counties to undertake a "visioning process" as a preliminary step in developing their individual growth policies. "Community Visioning" is defined as "a process through which a community imagines the future it most desires and then plans to achieve it." According to the EQC report, an advantage of this approach is that it results in a positive statement and emphasizes areas of agreement.

One of the most important outcomes of this visioning process is the creation of goals and objectives for a city, town, or county. Clear and concise goals and objectives can provide the foundation for creating an effective and achievable plan. Goals and objectives are statements describing the way residents of a community want to address opportunities and challenges they see. Essentially, they provide guidance about the future development of the community. Resident input is critical and should be included throughout the visioning process.

Creating goals and objectives will involve identifying the issues and challenges a city, town, or county faces. During the process common statements might be heard from residents such as "what's wrong with our community" or "we can't change anything." While a community's challenges and problems should not be overlooked, it is just as important to identify a community's strengths and potential opportunities. In other words, it is important to think about what makes a community's glass "half full" instead of "half empty." Bottomline: identify and address the negatives but give equal weight to the identification and support of the positive aspects of a community.

For a planning board approaching the creation of goals and objectives, the process can be daunting. Starting with a "blank sheet of paper" can be intimidating for many people. A helpful approach can be to review growth policies from other communities and look at their goals and objectives. This can provide helpful ideas and help start the process of developing a community's own plan.

What are Goals?

Goals are general policy statements that explain what a city, town or county wants to achieve for itself. Typical goals can be statements such as "protecting public health and safety" or "maintaining quality of life." In most cases goals are organized according to the specific topics identified in the growth policy, such as economic development, land use, housing, local services, and infrastructure.

What are Objectives?

Objectives are the strategies or steps that would be used to achieve the goals in the growth policy. Unlike goals, objectives should be much more specific and measurable. Examples might include "creation of a special improvement district to fund street improvements", "amendment of a zoning ordinance", "creation of a parks and trails plan", or "update of a capital improvements plan", etc.

Like goals, objectives should be realistic and achievable. Creating realistic objectives will depend upon carefully assessing the city, town or county's resources and capabilities. Also, a single goal may have several objectives identified as the way to accomplish the goal.

It cannot be emphasized enough that creating realistic and achievable goals and objectives requires careful consideration and most importantly should be supported by the advice and guidance of city, town, or county residents. Successful goals and objectives are based on reality and fact, not just what residents may believe to be true. It is only through honest conversations and an examination of facts that a set of realistic and appropriate goals and objectives can be established for the community.

Implementing the Policy – Action Plan

Developing goals and objectives is the first step in a city, town, or county to make the changes its residents want. The next step is to create an action plan of specific projects or steps that will achieve those goals and objectives.

An action plan breaks each objective into identifiable projects and steps, assigns each project/step to one or more organizations or people and then identifies when each project/step will be completed. For example, if one of the objectives is to improve pedestrian safety along a highway in a city, town, or county, one step could be organizing meetings with the Montana Department of Transportation to discuss potential options to improve safety. This project might be assigned to a community's staff or another organization and might be scheduled for completion within four (4) months of adopting the growth policy.

The bottom line is if there is no clear or effective method to carry out the action plan, the growth policy is likely to collect dust and may lead to planning fatigue from residents who feel that such efforts are a waste of time and money. Also, for city, towns, and counties with scarce resources, good planning is essential to not only ensure successful projects but the efficient and effective use of resources and money.

Creating an action plan is challenging. It requires that a city, town, or county identify each project/step required to achieve a particular goal or objective. Thus, the activity of creating the action plan in itself is a good test of a community's growth policy. If a community does not know how to implement a given goal or objective, then it is likely not going to be achieved.

Ultimately an implementation/action plan should include the following information:

- Identify the specific projects: replace John Doe Bridge, adopt zoning regulations, etc.
- Who will complete the projects: community staff, local board, non-profit, etc.?
- When will the projects be completed: at a minimum identify the year?
- Does the community have the resources to complete it: money, staff, permitting, etc.?
- How will projects be monitored to demonstrate or document progress and success?

Outreach to Community Residents

Effective and meaningful input from city, town, and county residents is essential to assure the success of a growth policy. Resident participation in community decision making is fundamental to our democratic process of government and is essential to the success of any community planning process. Thus, the participation of residents in the development of a growth policy cannot be ignored, poorly planned, or poorly executed. It may be a challenge, but it is essential.

A well-developed and conducted resident participation process should do two things. First it should highlight opportunities and issues that city, town, and county residents might see and that are not apparent to the planning board and community leaders. Second it should create community “buy in” for the guidance provided in a growth policy. This “buy in” or “ownership” of the process and document by residents is critical as it will give significant political and legal support to the document when it is adopted by a community’s governing body.

Many methods can be used to encourage the participation of residents in creating a growth policy. There are the traditional steps such as open houses and meetings, newspaper articles, handouts, hardcopy surveys and presentations to civic groups. There are also new opportunities for engagement using the internet and social media.

Here is general list of outreach methods by category:

Virtual

- Websites.
- Social Media.
- Virtual Meetings/Video Conferencing.
- Online Surveys.
- Interactive Maps.

Media

- Newspaper.
- TV.
- Internet.

In-Person

- Public Meetings/Hearings.
- Open House.
- Neighborhood Meetings.
- One on One Meetings.

Hardcopy

- Handouts.
- Hardcopy Surveys.

- Postcards.
- Posters.

While traditional outreach methods such as open houses and meetings are still important ways to inform residents and gather their advice and guidance, in today's busy world consider other options such as social media and online platforms. Websites, online surveys, video communications (Zoom), Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. are methods that can allow community residents to learn about a planning process and provide their input on their own schedule and as time allows versus attending a meeting on a specific date and time and at a specific location.

While using social media for outreach has advantages it can pose challenges, particularly for smaller cities, towns, and counties with limited resources. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has compiled a list of advantages, challenges, and tips that a community might consider when using social media to encourage participation from its residents.

Advantages

- Provides public information about the project.
- Serves as a real time outreach tool.
- Reaches large numbers of people with enormous amounts of information.
- Offers a low-cost way of distributing all types of documents and media.
- Offers an accessible forum for advertising upcoming events and posting project updates.
- Enables participation of stakeholders in remote locations and those unable to attend meetings or events in person.

Challenges

- Many people still do not have access to the internet.
- Many people are still not comfortable using social media.
- As a participatory tool they can be important but cannot completely replace face-to-face interaction.
- The anonymous nature of many social media users presents challenges for honest and open interaction among stakeholders.
- Information overload and poor design can prevent people from finding what they need.
- Not all communities have the technology to provide access to people with disabilities.

Tips for Successful Social Media Outreach

- Be thoughtful about social media posts - all the levels of information, links, and illustrations available are necessary to inform and engage the user.
- Design a social media program knowing that it will be shared with other stakeholders.
- Provide alternative communication options for those who are not social media-literate or do not have access to the internet.
- Work to provide access to people with disabilities.

- Consider usernames and hashtags (#) that will give stakeholders information about the project.
- Place the social media platform addresses on all correspondence and other printed material from the organization.

Cities, towns, and counties operate under the premise of permitting open and free access to the deliberations and decision making of local boards and governing bodies. This was challenged in 2020 by the Covid-19 pandemic and the health and safety protocols implemented such as social distancing. In person public meetings came to an abrupt end as many local governments in Montana were ill-prepared to conduct business virtually. That being said, the state's communities quickly adapted by conducting meetings using video conferencing services such as Zoom, Teams and WebEx, thus trying to fulfill their obligations for public involvement in government decision making. This situation may have also changed public expectations for how accessible local government ought to be. This experience illustrates how essential it is to be prepared to use alternative methods of communication and public participation when preparing a growth policy or other services provided by local government.

No matter the method of outreach used by a city, town or county, the end result should be thoughtful and useful input from residents. To achieve this will require a well thought out and focused marketing campaign whether using traditional methods, social media, video conferences, or a combination of all.

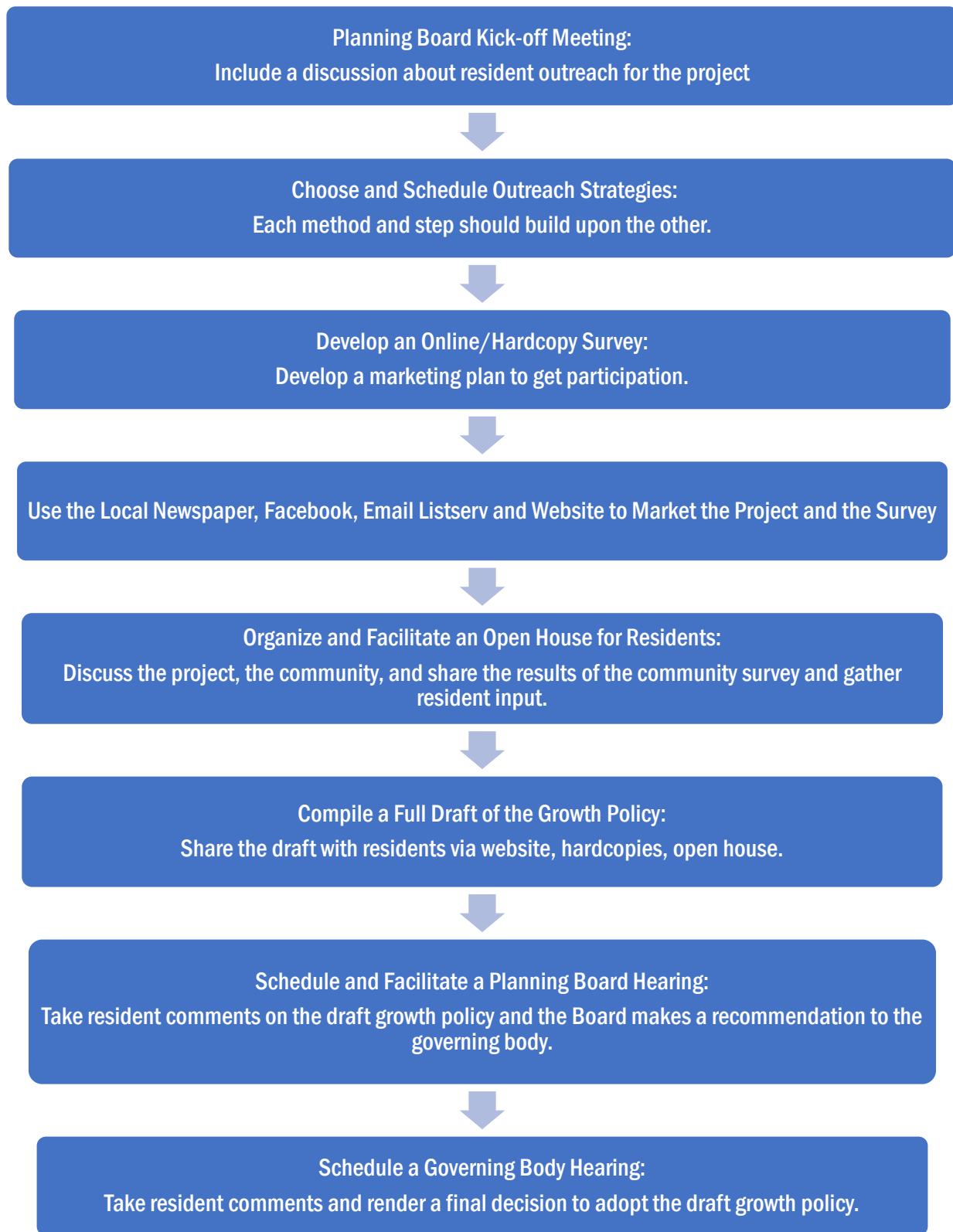


Figure 2 - Typical Resident Engagement Process for a Growth Policy

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

What is a growth policy?

- It is an officially adopted vision and plan for guiding the development of all aspects of a city, town, or county.

Does a city, town or county have to adopt a growth policy?

- No, a community does not have to adopt a growth policy unless you wish to amend or adopt zoning regulations under 76-2-201, MCA (county zoning) or 76-2-301, MCA (municipal zoning).

Can a growth policy be used to regulate land use?

- No, growth policies by themselves cannot be used to regulate the use of private property. A community must adopt stand-alone regulations to address land use.
- Regulations must be developed in “conformance” with the growth policy. This means adopted regulations should follow the guidance in a growth policy.

Does the governing body need to have a planning board to create or amend a growth policy?

- Yes, under statute a planning board is the locally appointed board that must develop the growth policy.

Can a subcommittee or advisory group work under the planning board to create a growth policy?

- Yes, as long as the subcommittee or advisory group works under the guidance of the planning board.

Does a growth policy have to be a detailed and complex document to meet our needs or statute?

- No, as long as the plan provides achievable and clear guidance and meets the statutory requirements it can be a simple and straight forward document.

Can a city, town or county’s growth policy discuss other topics not listed in the statute?

- Yes, a community has the discretion to add any relevant topic that it chooses into the growth policy.

Does the governing body or planning board have to use a consultant to draft a growth policy?

- No, the planning board and community residents can develop a growth policy on their own. That being said, an experienced planning consultant can help make the process more efficient and effective.

How does my city, town or county pay for a growth policy?

- The state of Montana and federal government have several programs that can help communities pay for the preparation of growth policies and other important planning documents.

- See Appendix A of this document to learn more about the Community Technical Assistance Program (CTAP) and how it can assist with funding the update of creation of a growth policy.

How many hearings must be held to adopt a growth policy?

- The only hearing required under the statute is the one held by the planning board. The governing body can formally adopt the policy once the planning board holds its hearing and makes a recommendation. It is always advisable for the governing body to hold a hearing on the growth policy as well.

Can the governing body make changes to the draft growth policy that is recommended by the planning board?

- Yes. The final decision about the content of the growth policy is at the full discretion of the governing body.

Can the governing body make simple updates to the growth policy?

- Yes. As long as the planning board is involved in the process, holds a hearing, makes a recommendation and the governing body approves the changes.

How often should the governing body reevaluate our growth policy?

- State statute requires that a community review its growth policy every five (5) years.

How does the governing body evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of our city, town, or county's growth policy?

- Use an annual review of the document by the Planning Board to see what progress has been made to achieve goals and objectives and to complete specific projects.
- Ask questions such as:
 - Are the community's goals and objectives still relevant?
 - Have circumstances, information, assumptions, needs, priorities, or legal framework changed?
 - Does the expressed needs and desires of residents suggest the need to make changes?
 - Where have problems occurred in implementing the goals and objectives?
 - Are there updates or amendments to the plan that would improve implementation of the goals and objectives?

Where can a city, town or county find out more about how to prepare a growth policy and any resources available to help my community with long-term planning?

- The Montana Department of Commerce provides the Community Technical Assistance Program to help answer questions and guide a community through its planning activities including:
 - Long range community planning.
 - Subdivision regulations and review.
 - Zoning regulations and administration.
 - Drinking water and wastewater treatment systems.
 - Transportation: bridges, streets/roads, multi-modal.

- Stormwater management.
 - Planning best practices and tools of the trade.
 - Exemption review and certificates of survey.
- CTAP provides assistance by phone, email, and in person including:
 - Review of and guidance on draft engineering, planning, and regulatory documents.
 - Creation of model documents and planning resource publications for use statewide.
 - Advice in navigating Montana's administrative rules and laws as they pertain to planning and land use.
 - On-site training workshops.
 - A resource library.
 - GIS mapping .
- See Appendix A of this document to learn more about the Community Technical Assistance Program (CTAP).

Appendix A: Growth Policy Support Information and Links

Montana Growth Policy Statutes:

https://leg.mt.gov/bills/mca/title_0760/chapter_0010/part_0060/sections_index.html

Montana Planning Board Statutes:

https://leg.mt.gov/bills/mca/title_0760/chapter_0010/parts_index.html

Montana Department of Commerce Community Development Division: Presentations, Publications and Model Documents:

<https://comdev.mt.gov/Programs/CTAP/Toolkit/Publications#Capital-Improvements-Plan-1178>

This site provides information on:

- Annexation.
- Buildings for Lease or Rent.
- Capital Improvements Planning.
- Planning Boards.
- Subdivision Regulations.
- Zonings.
- Technical Documents (i.e. preliminary engineering and architectural reports).

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation: Flood and Fire:

<http://dnrc.mt.gov/flood-and-fire>

This site provides information on:

- Flood Resources
 - National Flood Insurance Program.
 - Floodplain Disaster and Recovery.
 - Floodplain Hazard Management Regulations.
 - Floodplain Permitting and Regulations.
 - Floodplain Mapping.
 - Federal, State and Local Floodplain Contacts.
- Fire Resources
 - My Wildfire Risk / Request a Site Visit.
 - DNRC Fire Map.
 - Homeowner Wildfire Preparedness Resources.
 - Fire Conditions and Weather Updates.
 - Current Fire Restrictions by County.
 - Wildland-Urban Interface Maps.
 - Community Wildland Fire Protection Plans.
 - Year-to-Date and Historical Fire Information.
 - Air Quality Updates.
 - Northern Rockies Coordination Center.

Community Technical Assistance Program (CTAP) of the Montana Department of Commerce:

Community Technical Assistance Program (CTAP) provides professional planning assistance to communities across Montana in support of sound land use and development decisions, economic revitalization, and overall community resilience. Technical assistance is provided through workshops and trainings, direct assistance by phone or email, collaboration with local, state, and federal partners, the creation of model documents, and guidance on planning best practices. <https://comdev.mt.gov/Programs/CTAP>