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Comprehensive Planning for the Promotion of Sustainable Development in Georgetown County.

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**Best Practices in Comprehensive Planning for the Promotion of Sustainable Development
in Georgetown County, SC:
A Recommendation for Strategies to Localize United Nations Sustainable Development
Goals**

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Abstract

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a framework for governments across the globe to work toward ending poverty, protecting the planet we call home, and improving the lives of all people.(United Nations, 2015). Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals worldwide will require an assessment of the resources and restrictions that dictates whether these goals can be localized in a way that is within the power and ability of a community. Considering the challenges that need to be overcome to obtain sustainable communities throughout the world, the United Nations member states designed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to be a long-term plan that outlines the targets of each SDG and the indicators of successful implementation efforts.

Implementing sustainable practices falls into the hands of local governments with varying degrees of oversight from regional or national partners. “An increasing number of communities are seeking to incorporate sustainability concepts into their development plans, but undertaking what this means and how to do it effectively can be a challenge” (Moss, 2016). The most effective tool for these governments to make strides towards the vision laid forth by the United Nations Member States and localize these goals is through the comprehensive planning process. Comprehensive planning is a community’s long-term guide for development that provides insight into that community’s capacity to serve residents in its current state, and plans those various stakeholders have to facilitate future growth.

This report will analyze the development of the Georgetown County Comprehensive Plan as it relates to excepted best practices for regional planning that promotes inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable communities as described in the 11th United Nations Sustainable Development Goal: Sustainable Cities and Communities. The analysis of current practices in

place for Georgetown County planning efforts in comparison to successful examples of comprehensive planning throughout the world aims to provide insight on how the County can better utilize comprehensive planning to implement policy that promotes sustainable communities and UN SDGs alike.

Evaluating Sustainable Development Goals & Targets

Community planners play a crucial role for governments of all sizes when working to implement sustainable practices at a local level. The 11th SDG provides various targets that specifically reference planning efforts that promote sustainable development and strong relationships between local and regional planning efforts. Target number 11.a reads “Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning” (United Nations, 2015). By understanding the potential for Sustainable Development Goals potential to guide sustainable growth, governments can work towards adopting additional best practices for comprehensive planning in efforts to guide the future of their community. Even with this understanding and a continued call for sustainable development, there always remains a question if a community has the resources and capacity to implement sustainable development goals to begin with (Kanuri et al. 2016). Georgetown County will not likely implement and report on a Sustainable Development goal in its entirety anytime soon however, it needs to develop a mechanism for which long-term initiatives can be properly outlined and continually accounted for by everyone in the community. Evaluating the comprehensive planning process and its role as a policy in Georgetown County in order to improve upon the current methods of development and implementation is the first step to localizing SDGs and promoting sustainable growth regardless of the communities’ current capacity to do so.

Literature Review

Sustainable development has been increasingly placed at the forefront of long-term planning initiatives across all sectors of industry. Communities across the globe have a responsibility to achieve sustainable development measures in the face of future uncertainty. As the world faces a multitude of issues regarding inequality, economic prosperity, and environmental conservation, the United Nations Member States have dedicated themselves to a global partnership focusing on sustainable development. Initiatives began in 1992 when more than 178 countries adopted Agenda 21, “a comprehensive plan of action to build a global partnership for sustainable development to improve human lives and protect the environment” (United Nations, 2015). The most recent development in sustainability initiatives amongst UN member states is the 2015 adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which provides a shared vision for ‘peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future’ (United Nations, 2015). The long-term outlook presented by Agenda 2030 and the correlating Sustainable Development Goals makes comprehensive planning a crucial resource in the implementation process of those goals in communities of all sizes.

Comprehensive Planning for sustainable development requires a holistic approach that balances the needs of the community along with efforts to promote economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity. “As the leading policy document guiding the long-range development of local jurisdictions across the country, the comprehensive plan has a critical role to play in meeting challenges such as resource depletion, climate instability, and economic and social disparities” (Goschalk and Rouse, 2015). The American Planning Association’s (APA) Guide to Best Practice for Comprehensive Planning describes how the interrelationships between different elements is a key difference in traditional comprehensive planning and

comprehensive planning for sustaining places. The APA provides an opportunity for communities across the country to compare their comprehensive planning process and outcomes to a national standard for sustaining places through the planning process in hopes of promoting best practices. Traditional compressive planning does not always connect goals and policies to actual implementation (Goschalk and Rouse, 2015). The APA stresses the importance of when utilizing comprehensive planning to promote sustainable development, as the effectiveness of an SDG is something that can be measured. APA guidelines directly align with Sustainable Development Goals, specifically when it comes to the 11th goal and its focus on effective planning practices that engage all community stakeholders to participate in plan development and to continually evaluate and report on goal implementation. Being able to implement APA best practices for the promotion of sustainable development is a crucial skill of any planning staff or government entity involved in comprehensive planning. While SDG implementation and APA best practices may be an excepted pathway to building sustainable communities and exactly what planners should be doing, it can only be achieved ‘within institutional and implementational frameworks appropriate in both time and place’ (Watson, 2016). While systems thinking in comprehensive planning refers to strategies to avoid viewing each element as a separate policy, but rather a complex system, these strategies must pay mind to circumstances unique to a community as well (Goschalk and Rouse, 2015).

For communities evaluating their planning process, focusing on cooperation amongst surrounding local governments to align planning objectives can be an extremely valuable strategy to promote overall sustainability and eventual implementation of SDGs. Cities present a unique challenge in coordinating efforts with surrounding governments as their needs may drastically be different but also presents an opportunity to transcend urban/rural divide and

collaborate with other local governments that might not be able to achieve SDGs or sustainable planning initiatives on their own. (Kanuri et al., 2016) By providing common targets around initiatives which local authorities can collaborate on, attractive investment opportunities can present themselves to the private sector and individual residents alike. The comprehensive plan in its ideal form is an extremely effective policy tool for SDG implementation. By focusing on the strength of a coordinated document with a system of accountability, community planners have an opportunity to greatly impact community development. “The comprehensive plan is the right place to establish the connection between adopted goals and actual outcomes through local governmental activities” (Godschalk and Rouse, 2015). With an effective comprehensive plan that considers the needs of the community and adheres to best practices, sustainable development initiatives can shift their focus to cultivating the necessary resources rather than establishing the framework.

Empirical Data and Case Study

Throughout the world, United Nations Member States are working to implement SDGs to create a path towards a better tomorrow. While every country varies in need, planners can look to examples of sustainable planning efforts from communities beyond their own borders to learn additional strategies for the development and application of a comprehensive plan. European countries are consistently identified as being the most effective implementers of SDG’s based on a variety of metrics. “Despite geopolitical tensions and calls to scale back SDG ambitions, the SDGs remain the only integrated framework for economic, social, and environmental development adopted by all UN Member States. The EU should continue to play a leadership role in implementing the goals internally and internationally in the run-up to the SDG Summit in September 2023 and beyond” (Lafortune et al., 2021). Europe has paved the way as a leading

champion of SDG implementation, building coalition amongst countries to advance their efforts both on the continent and internationally. The top ten countries on the 2021 global SDG index were located in Europe, with nine of those being European Union member states. Despite the continent's noteworthy progress to foster SDG implementation, their continued evaluation of their overall impact to global efforts, areas in need of improvement, and their sense of accountability for sustainability demonstrates those countries' commitment to achieving these goals worldwide. The United States does not even fall in the top twenty countries of that same index but does have a variety of examples for both the implementation of UN SDGs and effective comprehensive planning for sustainable development. The United States Sustainable Development report provides a comprehensive view of state-to-state progress in implementing SDGs, but many metrics are unreported or still in data collection (United States Sustainable Development Report, 2021). The United States is falling drastically short of achieving SDGs at the rates expected by the United Nations, with many states having a variety of metrics where they are making negative progress. (Lynch and Saachs, 2021). South Carolina is rated 37th on the state ranking for sustainable development which suggests there are 36 other states that can be used as an example for addressing SDG implementation through community planning initiatives. Pennsylvania ranks 29th in the index but has examples of community initiatives that provide a framework for future implementation of SDGs through coordinated efforts of stakeholders. Pittsburg, Pennsylvania has assessed their work in implementing SDGs through programs designed to engage all areas of government and the community at large with expansive data collection and public input directives. While understanding the limitations within their abilities, the City of Pittsburg has recognized the common language in SDGs can begin to integrate strategies and activities within the community while creating a culture of measured

accountability within the government. (Pendrak and Viljaste, 2020). This initiative in Pittsburg looks to be a blueprint for collaboration and action to improve services to residents with consideration to current and future need to implement sustainable governance. The Aloha+ Challenge is Hawaii's statewide commitment to their social, economic, and environmental goals that incorporates public and private input to advance six priority goals and metrics that align with United Nations SDG's. The initiative features an interactive website that incorporates all of their goals and reports on initiatives related to goals, along with a dashboard of events that along with sustainability initiatives and their priority foals. They commit to local reviews to track their progress with status updates for each priority area and its contributing initiatives. These commitments from cities like Pittsburg and States like Hawaii will continue to pave the way es exemplar cases of incorporating United Nations SDGs into community planning, but there are examples right in Georgetown County's backyard that a path to improved comprehensive planning that could eventually hope to compensate for SDG implementation for the future.

Horry County, South Carolina has drafted and adopted a comprehensive Plan in the last five years called "Imagine 2040". Horry County must consider the needs of a vast larger population with different needs and visions for their community. To address this, their comprehensive planning process features a 3-step system that pays a significant amount more attention to the drafting stage. They facilitate forums for public opinion and develop committees on different focus areas in the first phase of their system. In doing so they are able to understand the perspective of community members and stakeholders before even presenting a draft to the Planning Commission (Imagine, 2040). This suggests that their planning department or consultants drafting elements of the plan have an easier time understanding what needs to be incorporated to address the needs of the whole community and to create a shared vision. The

county south of Georgetown County, Charleston County, utilizes a digitized form of their comprehensive plan that allows for easy navigation of different portions that are clearly identified on their website (Charleston County, 2023). The accessibility of a website like Charleston makes a comprehensive plan something community members and stakeholders can easily look through to determine areas of interest or how goals can be implemented without sifting through material that could be irrelevant to that person or group.

All these examples in some way emulate a portion of the American Planning Associations Comprehensive Planned Standards for Sustaining Places which is organized into a framework of ten related components that are intended to be implemented according to set best practices, defining what a comprehensive plan for sustaining places should do. The ten components are divided into principles, processes, and attribute and are as follows:

Principles are normative *statements of intent* that underline a plan's overall strategy, including its goals, objective, policies, maps, and other content. The six principles are:

1. **Livable Built Environment:** Ensure that all elements of the built environment—including land use, transportation, housing, energy, and infrastructure—work together to provide sustainable, green places for living, working, and recreating, with a high quality of life.
2. **Harmony with Nature:** Ensure that the contributions of natural resources to human well-being are explicitly recognized and valued and that maintaining their health is a primary objective.
3. **Resilient Economy:** Ensure that the community is pre- pared to deal with both positive and negative changes in its economic health and to initiate sustainable urban development and redevelopment strategies that foster green business growth and build reliance on local assets.
4. **Interwoven Equity:** Ensure fairness and equity in providing for the housing, services, health, safety, and livelihood needs of all citizens and groups.
5. **Healthy Community:** Ensure that public health needs are recognized and addressed through provisions for healthy foods, physical activity, access to recreation, health care, environmental justice, and safe neighborhoods.
6. **Responsible Regionalism:** Ensure that all local proposals account for, connect with, and support the plans of adjacent jurisdictions and the surrounding region. Processes are *planning activities* that take place during the preparation of a comprehensive plan and define how it will be implemented. The two processes are:
7. **Authentic Participation:** Ensure that the planning process actively involves all segments of the community in analyzing issues, generating visions, developing plans, and monitoring outcomes.
8. **Accountable Implementation:** Ensure that responsibilities for conducting the plan are clearly stated, along with metrics for evaluating progress in achieving desired outcomes. Attributes are *plan-making design standards* that shape the content and characteristics of comprehensive plans. The two attributes are:
9. **Consistent Content:** Ensure that the plan contains a consistent set of visions, goals, policies, objectives, and actions that are based on evidence about community conditions, major issues, and impacts.

- 10. Coordinated Characteristics:** Ensure that the plan includes creative and innovative strategies and recommendations and coordinates them internally with each other, vertically with federal and state requirements, and horizontally with plans of adjacent jurisdictions (Goschalk & Rouse, 2015)

Each of the components are essential to implementing best practice for any comprehensive plan, which is the first step for any government that hopes to successfully implement sustainable development goals. Following APA guidance and looking to other examples of best practices is crucial for any government at any level, to effectively utilize their comprehensive plan as a policy document that truly facilitates sustainable growth of a community.

Analysis of Georgetown County's Comprehensive Planning Process

The Georgetown County Comprehensive Plan is currently undergoing an expansive update to provide a new guide for policymakers to effectively serve the needs of the counties 63,000 residents and protect the abundance of natural resources unique to this South Carolina coastal community. ("Comprehensive Plan Update | Georgetown County, SC" n.d.) From land conservation projects and cultural resource preservation to economic development and infrastructure initiatives, sustainable planning initiatives will play a crucial role in all working element of a community such as Georgetown County, now and into the future.

The State of South Carolina provides a framework for comprehensive planning under the Local Government Comprehensive Planning Enabling Act of 1994. Under the SC Code title 6- chapter 29 ordinance, local governments are given the authority to undertake planning projects in addition to zoning and land use regulations to guide community development Code of Laws - Title 6 - Chapter 29 - South Carolina Local Government Comprehensive Planning Enabling Act of 1994). The ordinance places requirements on the contents of a comprehensive plan to ensure there is uniform inclusion of necessary elements from different comprehensive plans throughout

the state of South Carolina (“Code of Laws - Title 6 - Chapter 29 - South Carolina Local Government Comprehensive Planning Enabling Act of 1994,” n.d.). While the Act outlined important elements and called for a cohesive baseline of necessary information to be included in the documents, it places a great deal of flexibility in the hands of individual communities about how they implement and track the progress of their comprehensive plan goals. This open-ended nature has hindered the effective use of comprehensive planning throughout the state when comparing to best practices for sustainable planning, but it also leaves a great deal of opportunity to expand the role of the plan through extensive community and stakeholder engagement.

The process for passing a comprehensive plan starts with the proposal of a draft in a meeting amongst the Planning Commission. Planning staff will recommend an element for approval which will be voted on by the Planning Commission after a period of public input. The Planning Commission can defer the material back to staff for additional edits or recommend to County Council. The County Council has to be brought an element to reading three times at separate meetings before a final vote can be made to approve or deny. All these Council meetings are subject to public input as drafts are made available to the public. In 2021 there were various community meetings to weigh public input about the updates to the previous plan and was followed by community surveys for the Land Use element update in 2022 (Georgetown County Council, 2023). Outside of these efforts, there appears to be little regulation as to creating a shared vision for the comprehensive plan that considers that needs of all stakeholders, community members, private companies, and various departments and levels of government in the county.

Georgetown County does not have any specific ordinances related to developing and implementing a comprehensive plan and it was last updated in 2010. In the past few years,

efforts have been made to adopt updated portions of the plan, but limited progress has been made with only two elements having been adopted by Georgetown County Council: The Cultural Resource Element and the Housing Element. The Natural Resource element and the Transportation element are both in the feedback stage that proceeds the completion of an initial draft. The following chart outlines the expected timeline for the different elements to reach completion.

Comprehensive Plan Schedule (updated 3-30-23)

	Data Analysis	Draft complete	Public input phase	PC vote	Approval/Council review date
Cultural Resources Element	X	X	X	X	10/12/21
Housing Element	X	X	X	X	4/6/22
Transportation Element	X	X	X	X	3/28/23
Resiliency Element	X	X			<i>May 2023</i>
Economic Development Element	X	X	X		<i>June 2023</i>
Land Use Element	X	(Existing data)	(Survey)		<i>December 2023</i>
Beachfront Management	X	(Partial)			
Community Facilities Element	X				<i>July 2023</i>
Natural Resources Element	X	X	X	X	<i>Deferred until Land Use Element</i>
Population Element					<i>October 2023</i>

Priority Investment Act					<i>November 2023</i>
Element					

Most of the work related to developing the Comprehensive Plan falls into the hands of the County Planning Department. The Planning Department has a tall order in taking on this responsibility, having limited resources but an abundance of stakeholders with different visions of what the role of a comprehensive plan is and what it should be comprised of. The planning staff is comprised of four employees that have various responsibilities outside of the comprehensive plan update. While some work has been done by outside consultants for certain elements of the new plan, a problem is sometimes created as to how their work considers different stakeholder's perspectives and how cohesive it is with work done by Planning Department or with the vision of other stakeholders. Elements of the updated comprehensive plan have been adopted mostly one at a time with updates being in various stages, creating a sense of frustration amongst community members and planning staff alike.

The challenges the county faces in developing a comprehensive plan could be mitigated by placing greater consideration, resources, and time into how elected officials and departments of the government support planning staff. There are improvements to be had within the confines of established legislation related to long-term planning initiatives and their effective execution. Article III Section 15-35 of the Georgetown County, SC Code of Ordinances establishes a planning committee with the expectation of creating a continued planning program that addresses the needs of the community and facilitates implementation. The expectation for continual planning and the facilitation of implementation as described in the ordinance suggests that elements of the government are not working to the highest capacity possible in their role in the

comprehensive planning process when looking at how long it has taken to adopt an entire plan that is several years overdue. Planning staff is often placed in difficult situations that require a careful balancing of the perceptions of administrative colleagues, the voices and demands of the community, and the confines of the law. Blame cannot be placed on any individual group of stakeholders or departments of the county government for the outdated strategies that have made this current comprehensive plan update process a legislative struggle.

As it stands Georgetown County is not equipped to implement Sustainable Development Goals to their fullest intention or in some cases, at all. Without an extensive comprehensive plan that engages all aspects of the community with a system of accountability and resident engagement, it would be very hard to establish the shared vision amongst all the partners required to implement a Goal in its entirety regardless of resources. There is plenty of room for growth within the comprehensive planning process to be more in line with American Planning Association Best Practices in Comprehensive Planning for Sustaining Places, thus making the community one step closer to implementation of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. SDG #11: Sustainable Cities and Communities is routed in planning for a better tomorrow, so that when the day comes where the resources and community vision for sustainability align, there will be a planning method in place that responds to change and promotes accountability for executing any projects to benefit County growth.

Recommendation:

Sustainable comprehensive planning is not a practice that can be implemented by simply passing a new ordinance or stringently following American Planning Association guidelines to the exact detail. Best practices for sustainable planning from groups like the APA are intended to be a resource and benchmark for communities as they develop solutions that consider their

unique needs and circumstances (Goschalk and Rouse, 2015). Georgetown County will unlikely develop a hardline policy for comprehensive planning that adheres to all aspects of Sustainable Development Goals, but certainly has an opportunity to implement new practices and procedures that give the comprehensive plan a more relevant stake in future community development. By considering bureaucratic dynamics in the County and identifying opportunities within the confines of already established ordinance, the county Government could immediately establish additional measures that dedicate more time and resources to creating, implementing, and monitoring progress for the Comprehensive plan.

To ensure that the Comprehensive Plan is used as a flexible, living document that addressed the evolving needs and continued growth of Georgetown County, several processes could be immediately implemented to strengthen the methods for updating the plan from 2010, setting up for a future shift to sustainable initiatives and SDG implementation. These recommendations make consideration of best practices for comprehensive planning while understanding the limitations and abilities of the Georgetown County Government and partners.

Establish Committees for Comprehensive Plan Elements or Areas of Coverage:

Under Article X Section 5 of the Georgetown County Code of Ordinances, the County Council has the authority to convene ad hoc committees comprised of council members and citizens that can serve as an advisory body to the Council on particular issues. Through this power the Council could establish committees related to each element of a comprehensive plan or have responsibility for a series of related elements. These committees could engage stakeholders, educate themselves on comprehensive planning best practices and limitations within the structure of the County to work with Planning Staff or outside consultants on developing a cohesive vision for what the comprehensive plan should include. These committees

could take charge of encouraging authentic participation and accountable implementation processes recommended by the APA Comprehensive Plan Standards for Sustaining Places framework. All aspects of planning should involve every element of the community and implementation responsibility needs to be clearly defined when drafting elements and establishing goals. Committees with a representative group of community stakeholders and officials could help guide planning staff and consultants in the right direction when drafting to avoid the document being continually deferred or recommended to edit. These committees could also establish methods for accountable implementation and progress measurement that can be accessed by all members of the community.

Promote Horizontal and Vertical Integration in the Planning Process:

Georgetown County contains multiple communities within, and neighbors two of the fastest growing counties in the state in Horry and Charleston County. To create an effective comprehensive plan, it is paramount that Georgetown County communicates their vision with nearby local governments for the purpose of working together towards shared goals. Additional benefits can be found in consulting state and national planning initiatives to tap into additional resources and initiatives that can be partaken in. Horizontal and vertical integrations refer to coordinated policymaking across different sectors of government to optimize resource use and knowledge in aim of working towards a mutually beneficial outcome. (Kanuri et al. 2016). Georgetown County would horizontally coordinate policy with neighboring counties or cities within the county, while vertically coordinating policy with state and national agencies to support a shared vision. Not only does this benefit each government from a resource and knowledge sharing perspective, but the entire region and beyond because of the shared commitments to working on a path to sustainability. The APA refers to this integration as

“Coordinated Characteristics” and “Responsible Regionalism” in its Comprehensive Plan Standard for Engaging Places.

Promote Community Engagement Through an Internet Based Comprehensive Plan:

Public participation is an essential part of any comprehensive planning process. While residents are able to provide input during open Planning Commission and County Council meetings, they are left out of the comprehensive planning process. The comprehensive plan should take input from a representative sample of stakeholders and community members at every level of development, and through the process of implementation. In order to do so Georgetown County can look at innovative examples of marketing the role of the comprehensive plan as something that impacts the entire community, and thus is something everyone should have a stake in. A great first step would be to convert all documentation to an interactive website that allows users to view different portions of the document in a convenient and streamlined matter, as opposed to scrolling through extensive pages in hopes of finding the desired content. Streamlining the comprehensive plan to the internet provides a great deal of more flexibility in content that can be utilized as users could be provided access to a wealth more of knowledge on how the comprehensive plan is being utilized. Additional information could be linked, and updates could regularly be made on progress towards accomplishing set goals. Residents could submit examples of progress towards set goals and sustainability in general to provide a more wholistic view of how the county is working to implement the comprehensive plan at every level. The scope of possibility in digitizing all of the comprehensive plan makes it an important next step in engaging the community. The comprehensive plan should be a living document, and the internet promotes a continued evolution of progress essential to sustainable planning initiatives.

Track Implementation and Progress of Comprehensive Plan Elements:

Continue to update community and relevant stakeholder on progress related to implementing comprehensive plan goals but reconvening committees on an annual or by-annual basis so that state mandated updates on progress every five years and complete updates every ten years, are not something that requires several years of research and interpretation. Use the comprehensive plan as it was intended to guide community growth in a measurable and obtainable way.

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