



# CERTIFIED PLAN HANDBOOK

A DMD Certified Plan recognizes community plans prepared by neighborhood groups and other community organizations outside of the Department of Metropolitan Development that meet minimum expectations for community engagement and content.

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# INTRODUCTION TO CERTIFIED PLANS

**PURPOSE** The program is designed to encourage excellence in community planning and to maximize the impact of community-sponsored planning initiatives. It enables the Department of Metropolitan Development to leverage the full planning capacity of the Indianapolis community by providing community groups a pathway to influencing the official Comprehensive Plan for Indianapolis and Marion County. The certification expectations ensure planning processes and their resulting plans maintain the high level of accountability and transparency necessary when crafting public policy.

**BENEFITS** First, the certification expectations come from the real-world experience of city planners and community organizations in Indianapolis. The expectations come from lessons learned about what types of activities resulted in the most effective and impactful plans. Plans that meet these best practices are more likely to have impact and achieve their goals.

Next, for any decisions relating to the Comprehensive Plan, including zoning-related decisions, State law prescribes that the official Comprehensive Plan is the only plan that must be considered. Community-prepared plans may be offered as testimony in any public hearing, but the Comprehensive Plan is the official governing plan. Recommendations contained in certified plans are used by city staff to amend the Comprehensive Plan, ensuring that official public policy is in line with community desires. While certification does not guarantee policy change, it does guarantee staff consideration that other, non-certified plans do not receive.

Finally, a registry of certified plans is maintained as part of DMD's PlanIndy website. While not officially a piece of The Comprehensive Plan, the site allows everyone involved in community planning to be aware of not only official city policy, but also that a community has developed, through a robust engagement process, its own plan.

## HELP+RESOURCES

It is in everyone's interest that community planning processes are successful, and **Department of Metropolitan Development city planners** are committed to providing guidance and support to those pursuing certification. In addition, these organizations and online resources are available to help you have a successful process and plan:

**The Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission (IHPC)** staff at the Department of Metropolitan Development can provide guidance on preserving historic and cultural assets within your community. You can contact them at [ihpc@indy.gov](mailto:ihpc@indy.gov).

For more than 20 years, the **Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center (INRC)** has provided training and support for community organizations, and many INRC offerings directly support the certification expectations. INRC is also currently working on a suite of model documents that serve as a starting point for meeting the expectations. Learn more about INRC and their offerings at [inrc.org](http://inrc.org).

**Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)** works to improve livability, opportunity, vitality, and education in neighborhoods across Marion County and has championed significant initiatives including Quality-of-Life planning and the Great Places 2020 initiative. Learn more about LISC programs at [liscindianapolis.org](http://liscindianapolis.org).

**IndyVitals.org** provides a range of neighborhood-scale demographic, socioeconomic, land use, and related indicators, how they compare to other parts of Indy and how they've changed over time, as well as a link to SAVI neighborhood profiles for additional information.

**maps.indy.gov** is the main page for the City's mapping applications. Some relevant applications include:

- the MapIndy system, which gives you basic maps, aerial photography, and historic aerial photography.
- the Registered Community Organizations system, which lets you find community groups and contact information;
- the Government Profile, which lets you find elected and other governmental officials;
- the Assessor Property Cards, which allows you to find property owner, assessed value, and basic characteristics about properties;
- the Mapping Application for Public Safety, which lets you track police reports in an area;
- the Indianapolis Site Inventory Tool, which lets you do basic research on brownfields (potentially environmentally contaminated properties);
- Coming soon will be the PlanIndy system, which will give access to planning-related layers like land use recommendations, transportation plans, and redevelopment areas.

# THE CERTIFICATION EXPECTATIONS

## PLANNING PROCESS

The most successful community plans are derived from a robust community engagement process in which all stakeholders have a legitimate voice in the process. Plan organizers should expect to spend at least as much time building engagement before the process starts as the process itself takes. In order for the Division of Planning to consider amending official city policy to reflect the recommendations of a certified plan, staff must trust that the plan was developed with robust community engagement that substantially mirrors or exceeds what city staff would have done. Staff must be sure that planning efforts are truly comprehensive in their engagement and not driven by a single interest.

01

### A CONVENING PARTNER IS RECOMMENDED, BUT NOT REQUIRED.

The most successful and impactful plans often are led by a convening entity with a visible, long-term presence in the study area. The entity should be widely accepted as a respected and trustworthy community partner. A Community Center, Community Development Corporation, or an anchor institution (major institutions like hospitals, museums, or similar large economic entities) that is located in the study area is often a great candidate for serving as the convening partner. A strong convening partner provides legitimacy in the eyes of other partners and potential funders, and can often provide resources like staff, meeting space, or communication support.

#### Certification Checklist:

*This step is not required, and does not affect certification.*

*Throughout the planning process, make sure that you document each of these items. DMD staff will need your documentation when reviewing your plan for certification.*

02

### ENGAGE DMD LONG-RANGE PLANNING STAFF.

Engagement of DMD Long Range Planning staff prior to the start of the planning process and as needed throughout the process for professional planning guidance or technical support concerning land use, transportation, park and recreation, public services or investments, or similar city planning issues.

#### Certification Checklist:

**DMD staff should be given the opportunity to...**

- Meet with project leadership at the beginning of your process.
- Sign off on your Process Charter and Engagement Plan
- Engage in public meetings
- Review your draft document

**Any planning process that does not get sign-off on the Process Charter and Engagement Plan will not receive certification.**

## 03

### DEVELOP AN ENGAGEMENT PLAN

Recruitment and engagement plan outlining target populations with tactics to reach those populations, with specific attention paid to populations traditionally underrepresented in planning processes, including persons of color, low-income households, renter households, immigrant and refugee populations, and those with disabilities. Give people ways to engage in your process other than attending a scheduled event or meeting.

#### Resources:

The Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center has training and staff that can help you think through engagement strategies. IndyVitals.org can help identify the traditionally underrepresented populations in your study area.

#### Certification Checklist:

- Identify the specific engagement needs of different populations in your community
- Provide multiple and different opportunities for people to engage in your process

## 04

### DEVELOP, AND FOLLOW, AN INCLUSIVE PROCESS CHARTER

A charter is a document outlining the governance structure and decision-making procedures that is agreed upon (and followed throughout the process) by plan participants. This charter should at least include any hierarchy or relationship between committees or other decision-making entities or processes, membership eligibility in those committees, entities, or processes, and voting or approval rights.

Decision-making committee structures with participation that represents the actual demographic makeup (age, race, ethnicity, gender, income, owner/renter), land use makeup (residential, business, industrial), and geographic distribution (representatives from all portions of the area) of the study area.

It is completely normal for the charter to evolve as your process progresses, so it should also include a process to amend the charter once the process is underway.

#### Resources:

Use IndyVitals.org to explore the demographic makeup of your community. Check out the “Registered Community Organization” system at [maps.indy.gov](http://maps.indy.gov) to find registered organizations in your study area and contact information for them.

#### Certification Checklist:

- Leaders of all active Registered Community Organizations (a system maintained by DMD) categorized as neighborhood association, homeowners’ association, or business association with geographies covering all or a portion of the study area have been invited to participate
- Decision-making committees are reflective of neighborhood residents and business owners in the study area

## 05

### COMMUNICATE OFTEN

Evidence of ongoing communication with all stakeholders and participants throughout the planning process, including at the beginning of the process, mid-process, and once your plan has been completed. Communication can include emails, print or e-newsletters, updates in community publications, and/or information at community events.

#### Certification Checklist:

- Include DMD Long-Range Planning staff on any e-mail and e-newsletter updates you send
- At the end, we'll ask you to submit copies of communications, so it might be helpful to keep a (real or digital) folder of what you send out!

## 06

### INFORM CITY OFFICIALS

All City-County Councilors and Mayor's Neighborhood Advocates with districts covering all or a portion of the study area have been contacted and are aware of the planning process. Make sure they are invited to any public meetings or events. You may want to engage other representative leadership and officials in your process, as well.

#### Certification Checklist:

- Inform and engage Councilors
- Inform and engage Mayor's Neighborhood Advocates
- Inform and engage other relevant officials

#### Resources:

Check out the "Government Profile" system at [maps.indy.gov](https://maps.indy.gov) to find your elected officials and Mayor's Neighborhood Advocate.

## 07

### REQUEST FEEDBACK FROM LEADERS ON DRAFTS OF YOUR PLAN

All registered community organizations categorized as neighborhood association, homeowner's association, or business association in the area were provided drafts, including the final draft, with an explicit request for comment.

#### Certification Checklist:

**Any planning process that does not request feedback from community leaders on drafts of the plan will not receive certification.**

# GENERAL PLAN CONTENT

In order for the Division of Planning to consider amending official city policy to reflect the recommendations of a certified plan, staff must have specific ingredients and understandings from which to start. Some of these items are general regardless of topic, while others relate specifically to transportation and land use, two primary system plans through which the city shapes planning policy.

01

## DEFINE A STUDY AREA, BUT LOOK AT WHAT'S AROUND IT.

Be sure to define a study area that your plan is for. And while planning by necessity draws boundaries around study areas (or sometimes systems like bikeways), these boundaries are always subjective. Plans must demonstrate an understanding of how they fit into the plans for adjacent areas, city systems, historic and cultural fabric, and larger plans and initiatives. Marion County has no islands that don't relate to what is around them!

### Resources:

DMD's 'PlanIndy' website can identify the key plans for your area. DMD planners can also help.

### Certification Checklist:

- Request approval for your study area
- Incorporate existing plans
- Consider the context beyond your study area

**Any planning process that does not receive study area approval will not receive certification.**

02

## ALIGN WITH THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN VISION.

Demonstrate alignment of the plan vision and strategies with the Vision Element of the Comprehensive Plan for Indianapolis and Marion County (currently the Plan 2020 Bicentennial Agenda).

### Resources:

The Bicentennial Agenda is available at [indy.gov/dmdplan](http://indy.gov/dmdplan).

### Certification Checklist:

**Any plan that does not align with the values of the Bicentennial Agenda will not receive certification.**

03

## ORGANIZE RECOMMENDATIONS INTO GOALS, STRATEGIES, AND ACTION STEPS.

Clear connection between action steps, larger strategies, and broader goals. In other words, demonstrate that action steps are instrumental to achieving something larger.

### Certification Checklist:

**Any planning process that does not have clear connection between action steps, larger strategies, and goals will not receive certification.**

04

## IDENTIFY PARTNERS WHO HAVE AGREED TO TAKE ON YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS.

Clear distinction between vision and achievable action steps, with all action steps having identified, agreeable, and verifiable partners.

### Certification Checklist:

**Any plan without implementation partners will not receive certification.**

05

## BE VISIONARY, BUT ALSO BE REAL.

A plan should be visionary and aspirational. But plans aren't simply wish lists. The most successful plans connect that vision to solid data and research that back up the strategies identified to achieve them. Considering the legal, market, environmental, and other such considerations during your planning process will help your participants think through issues that will have to be overcome--and develop actions to address them. While a market study is not required, the more information you have, the more likely your plan is going to be realistic and successful.

### Certification Checklist:

- Collect data from Indy Vitals/Savi
- Collect data from other sources
- Conduct interviews/other research
- Collect primary data if necessary
- Reflect findings in goals, strategies, and action steps

# LAND USE CONTENT

If your plan will address land use, zoning, or real estate development issues, DMD Planning staff need to see some specific things in your plan.

01

## USE DMD'S LAND USE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM.

Plans must use the established land use classification system employed by the DMD Long-Range Planning team. This classification system is new in 2016 and uses a system of base groupings of land uses-called typologies-and overlays that change something about those base typologies. Within each typology are a range of potentially recommended land uses that only become recommended if their application to a specific parcel meets certain minimum infrastructure and contextual requirements.

### Resources:

The Marion County Land Use Plan Pattern Book is the DMD-established land use classification system and is available at [indy.gov/dmdplan](http://indy.gov/dmdplan). DMD Planning staff will be engaged and can help explain this system and translate!

### Certification Checklist:

**Any plan that does not use the DMD-established land use classification system will not receive land use certification.**

02

## DON'T TARGET OR UNFAIRLY BURDEN SOMEONE/SOMETHING.

Land uses must employ universal policies that do not appear to be overly restrictive or burdensome for one type of land use, one parcel, or one owner.

### Certification Checklist:

**Any plan that targets or unfairly burdens someone/something will not receive land use certification.**

## 03

### KEEP IT LEGAL.

Land use policies must be non-discriminatory, affirmatively promote fair housing (removes burdens and restrictions, and supports inclusion, of locally or federally protected classes), and not violative of local ordinance or state or federal laws or constitutions. Note that some uses, including group homes and religious uses, and some issues, including adult oriented content and signs, are very sensitive and nuanced to regulate. Land use planning is a piece of the legal system by which people have property rights, and as such there are a lot of legal implications around many constitutional topics.

#### Certification Checklist:

**Any plan that appears discriminatory or otherwise illegal will not receive land use certification.**

#### Resources:

DMD Planning staff can help guide. Note that some things are quite clear, like non-commercial signs cannot be prohibited where other signs are allowed, while others are much more nuanced, like whether the end-result of a plan would keep certain population groups out of an area. This is an important area where professionals must be involved!

## TRANSPORTATION CONTENT

If your plan will address transportation and mobility systems or issues, DMD Planning staff need to see some specific things in your plan.

## 01

### CONNECT TO BROADER TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS AND PLANS.

Transportation-related recommendations for specific areas must clearly understand and relate to broader transportation networks, plans, and policies. Bike lanes, trails, sidewalks, and shared transportation infrastructure have to connect to existing or planned systems.

#### Certification Checklist:

**Any plan that does connect to broader transportation systems and plans will not receive transportation certification.**

#### Resources:

DMD's PlanIndy website includes many transportation plans, and DMD Planning staff can help identify applicable transportation system plans for the study area.

## 02

### LINK TRANSPORTATION TO LAND USE.

Plans must align with the proposed land use as well as broader strategies. For example, a streetscape project that beautifies a corridor is focused on a village core area, not simply located on every major street. Another example would be considering the freight/truck needs for areas planned for industrial development.

#### Certification Checklist:

**Any plan that does not support underlying land use recommendations will not receive transportation certification.**

## 03

### UNDERSTAND COSTS.

Plans that identify specific routes or projects must have some basis in reality, including the identification of rough costs, general understanding of any right-of-way acquisition needs, and a general understanding of maintenance needs, costs, and obligations. Remember, your plan isn't the end goal. The end goal is implementing it and having impact in your study area! This step helps your participants understand the scale of improvements they've identified and improves the understanding of what your plan will need from future implementing partners to be successful. We're not looking for anything detailed, and City staff will help provide guidance!

#### Certification Checklist:

**Any plan that is not feasible will not receive transportation certification.**

#### Resources:

DMD Planning staff, or DPW Engineering staff, can provide ballpark unit costs (like the cost per mile of greenway) and can also help you identify available public right-of-way to determine if recommendations fit within available land or if private property would need to be acquired.

## 04

### TIE PRIORITIES TO BROADER GOALS.

Plans that identify specific routes or projects must include a prioritized project list that identifies the most critical investments needed to achieve the broader vision and also help determine what can be compromised if everything cannot be achieved.

#### Certification Checklist:

**Any plan that does not tie priorities to broader goals will not receive transportation certification.**

# ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

## DMD PLANNING VALUES

**Plan for All People:** Plans for the future of our city must seek to affirmatively and materially improve the lives of residents from all walks of life. Plans must reduce, not create, barriers for all people.

**Plan for Change:** The purpose of planning is to inform and facilitate change, not to resist or inhibit it. Plans must show how their areas can evolve based on changing technologies, lifestyles, and consumer preferences.

**Plan to Be Bold:** Plans must stand for something, and through robust stakeholder discussion, must derive a vision and strategic direction that is noticeably different from the status quo. If everyone agrees to something, chances are it really isn't saying anything bold.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**Will you adopt my plan?** No. Plans that become certified are used by DMD Planning staff to update the various adopted plans that make up the Comprehensive Plan for Indianapolis and Marion County. Your plan will be certified, but it will not be adopted.

**Why not?** Several reasons. First, a good plan will not be able to be implemented by DMD because it will have a host of topics, recommendations, and implementing partners that fall outside the authority of the adopting entity, the Metropolitan Development Commission (MDC). Our goal is to have the MDC amend official city plans to support certified plans where they deal with topics the Comprehensive Plan has authority over, which is primarily land use and transportation. We don't want to disappoint plan participants by implying, through plan adoption, that the MDC can do things it has no authority to do. Second, DMD Planning is trying to right-size the number of plans that make up our planning system so that they can be updated more frequently and in a more coordinated manner.

**Who decides what pieces of my plan are used to update the Comprehensive Plan?** Preparing updates to the Comprehensive Plan is the responsibility of DMD planning staff. Changing the Comprehensive Plan is not automatic nor guaranteed. Staff planners will decide what policies and recommendations in the Comprehensive Plan should be changed to support and align with recommendations coming from certified plans, as well as the timing of doing so. DMD's professional planning staff is charged with exploring policies and recommendations at a variety of scales, from an individual property to the entire county and even region. Sometimes a recommendation at one scale (like a neighborhood) presents challenges at other scales, and this is why it is critical to engage DMD planning staff frequently in your process. Doing so will help identify broader-scale issues or implications that your process may not consider or even be aware of that could impact DMD's ability or willingness to make changes to the Comprehensive Plan.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

**What do I actually submit to be certified?** When it comes time for certification, DMD Planning staff will ask you to complete a short form that aligns with the “How do we measure this expectation” description under each expectation.

**Is my plan certified forever?** No. Certification is for a five-year period. Plans may be re-certified every five years if they remain relevant. Significant changes in market conditions, investments in new infrastructure (i.e. a new rapid transit line, highway, or flood protection), significant socioeconomic changes, or a major change in land use (an anchor institution or major employment center coming to, or leaving, the area) are examples of fundamental changes that could signal a plan is no longer relevant and should be redone.

**Who decides on certification, and is there an appeal process?** DMD Planning staff make the ultimate certification decision, although they will consult with partners including the Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center and the Mayor’s Neighborhood Advocates. While certification is completely at the final discretion of DMD Planning staff, we will work with plans that fail certification to see if there are ways to re-open the planning process to address deficiencies.

## BY THE WAY...

We want these expectations to work for you and your planning process. If you have questions or feel an expectation does not work for your circumstances, and you have other ideas on how you could substantially meet or exceed the intent of that expectation, talk with us. It’s important to engage us early for these types of questions or issues, as we don’t simply want to get a plan at the end with a host of explanations about why you deviated from these expectations.