

U. S. Department of the Interior
Assistant Secretary—Indian Affairs
Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development
Division of Economic Development

Tribal Economic Development Principles at a Glance Series

Comprehensive Tribal Community Planning



This is the sixth in a series of economic development primers prepared by the Division of Economic Development (DED), Indian Affairs Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development (IEED), to offer answers to fundamental questions about creating jobs and expanding economies in tribal communities.

The information contained in these primers, or in websites linked in them, is not intended to offer legal advice.

If you would like to discuss comprehensive tribal community planning in more detail, please contact the Division of Economic Development at (202) 219-0740.

Our tribe is considering a development project. It has been suggested that we conduct comprehensive tribal community planning beforehand. What is comprehensive tribal community planning?

Comprehensive community planning is conducted by tribal governments and their citizens concerning where their community has been, where it is now, and what it should be for future generations. The aim of this type of planning is for a tribal government to collect the full range of views of its citizens with the assistance of qualified, disinterested third-parties. A successful plan is one that enjoys support among all segments of a tribe's society, including its elected officials, traditional leaders, spiritual leaders, youth, adults, and elders. Planning itself is a process that provides a forum for the voices of these segments of tribal society and accounts for their views toward a plan for the future.

“Qualified” means that the professional/academic entity assisting the tribe possesses expertise in community planning and has conducted similar work in the past.

“Disinterested” means that the professional/academic entity assisting with the planning has no financial or personal stake in the outcome of the study it is conducting.

“Third-party” refers to a person who is not a member of the tribe or an entity that is not connected to the tribe. This can include multiple persons or entities.

Why would we want to do comprehensive tribal community planning?

Planning can empower tribal officials to make informed decisions about issues or problems in their community based on their tribe's social and economic values that emerge from dialogue with stakeholders. Since it is based on the views of the tribe's citizens, a plan should be unique to the tribe, and its development guided by those views. Creating a plan also provides tribal citizens with an opportunity to participate in their government's planning process and help set a course for their tribe's future. This can help to unify a tribe around a particular goal. A cohesive tribal nation can make a strong government-to-government partner, as well as create a stronger environment for economic opportunities for all segments of its society.

How long will it take to prepare a plan?

Depending on the size of the tribe, the complexity of its society, and taking all views of its citizens into consideration, the preparation and completion of a plan may take years. However, some tribes may complete their plans in only a few months.

Why is it advised that our tribe only consider “disinterested third-parties” to conduct comprehensive community planning? Why can’t we contract with a member of our own tribe to conduct the plan?

It often takes a disinterested third-party entity to bring all of the segments of a tribe’s society together for a dialogue, and it is best that no one element of that society be given the authority to lead the planning process. Bringing in a professional/academic third party makes it more likely that those who will be facilitating and recording the dialogue will be trusted by the society’s members to have no preconceptions or partiality with respect to a comprehensive plan. Otherwise, a dialogue that has been led by one element of the society may be viewed with skepticism or found to be less than credible by the rest of the tribe.

What topics might our tribe examine as part of a comprehensive plan?

A plan can address as many topics as the tribe’s society believes are important. Topics might include:

- Development of natural resources
- Air quality, water quality, noise, and traffic
- Policing and fire protection
- Options for housing and locations
- Local commercial services desired
- Health services and wellness
- Education
- Employment and opportunities
- Spiritual values

The concept of “sustainability” – how a tribal society’s values and identity can be preserved indefinitely – is important in modern planning. Related to this is the concept of “adaptation,” or how a tribal society’s values and identity can be maintained when changes occur. Continuing change means that plans will probably need to be adjusted at some time in the future, so the need may arise to review a plan every ten years or so.

Can you give some examples of how community issues are discussed in comprehensive community planning?

Here are a few examples of how issues might be approached with segments of a tribe's society in the community planning process:

Example #1:

Tribal members raise a number of issues that need to be resolved such as lack of jobs, food insecurity, lack of decent housing, and youth suicide.

- A written survey is sent out by the third-party planning team. Thereafter, a general meeting for all tribal members could be held to discuss the results

- Citizen groups are formed to address employment issues, food supplies and nutrition, alternative housing options, and youth empowerment.

Example #2:

As community issues are discussed and better understood, separate meetings by segments of the tribal society could be held on them. It is fundamentally important that all segments of the society are heard from so that their views can be taken into account. This creates channels for understanding and compassion. Here are just a few to consider along with subgroups of those segments whose opinions can be solicited:

- Youth (middle school, high school, college)

- Elders (male and female)

- Women (young girls, teenagers, young adults, older adults)

- Men (young boys, teenagers, young adults, older adults)

- Spiritual leaders (traditional and church organizations)

Example #3:

After a year-and-a-half of facilitated dialogue, segments of tribal society and subgroups have emerged. They believe their views have been captured, and that the time has come to share them with all of their tribe's citizens. The professional planner develops a written report on the views of the segments and their subgroups.

- A meeting of all tribal citizens is held and the written report is presented.

- Discussion follows on possible solutions, and ways and means for their use.

- Priorities are discussed among the solutions.

- Solutions are tested and refined during a one-year trial period.

How does comprehensive community planning help a tribe?

Community planning can empower segments of a tribal society to work with their tribal government to deliver and improve services in their community. It can ensure that issues are understood and that priorities can be agreed upon, as well as create an appreciation for how issues relate to each other. Grassroots citizen engagement also can lead to citizen-based leadership through the development of leadership skills and abilities. Segments of tribal society can examine:

- More precise numbers of persons who are and are not receiving services.
- How well needs are being met.
- Ways to conduct outreach to other tribes to share experiences and best practices.
- Possible cost efficiencies in service delivery.
- Means to project workforce needs and relative expertise in order to deliver services.

Are there different kinds of tribal community plans?

Yes. As the questions and answers above indicate, there is no one-size-fits-all profile for how a comprehensive tribal community plan should look. Every plan should be presumed to be different. Because cultural heritage and social and economic conditions vary, so, too, will planning and plans. For some tribes, their plans may end up addressing only parts of their communities. In other instances, plans may be comprehensive for reservations with many communities. While community plans are primarily intended to be used by tribal governments as decision-making tools, they also can be directed towards investors and lenders. For example, comprehensive tribal community planning can be used to support feasibility studies which speak, in part, to the tribe's work force, community infrastructure, and commitment to economic development.

What are the costs associated with comprehensive planning?

Because costs depend on the complexity of issues being addressed and the time required to address them, the final cost of any particular tribal plan will be unknown prior to its development.

In 2007, the Division of Economic Development (DED) joined with the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) to conduct consultations on the concept of comprehensive tribal community planning. Currently, DED is unable to offer grants to fund tribal community plans.

Can a comprehensive community plan be used to obtain a Federal, state, or private grant?

Given the potential benefits of planning, a comprehensive tribal community plan might help a tribe's efforts to obtain such funds.

What if our tribe does not agree with the outcome of comprehensive tribal community planning?

The value of planning is that it helps tribal governments make informed decisions to address community issues and needs. Of course, a tribe as a sovereign nation can accept or reject a plan it develops. But, the assistance of a third-party entity to conduct the planning process increases the objectivity and, ultimately, the credibility of the plan. Use of a professional planner/academic institution with proven experience in Indian Country may lessen the risk of distrust among segments of the tribal society towards the plan.

Once completed, can tribal community planning help our tribe attract investors to finance economic development?

Yes. Community planning is an exercise of tribal sovereignty that can communicate a tribe's social and economic values to investors, and furnish them with a model for development that reflects the needs and aspirations of its citizens.



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