



Master Planning in Albemarle County: Frequently Asked Questions

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Why does Albemarle County do master planning?

The county's Comprehensive Plan divides the county into designated development areas (5% of the county or 35 square miles) and rural areas (95% of the county or 695 square miles). The intent is to focus development into the urban areas to create quality living areas, avoid sprawl, improve access to services and protect the rural areas.

Master planning the development areas encourages the best use of the finite space designated for development while creating attractive, livable urban communities for the people who live and work there. Master plans for each community become part of the County's Comprehensive Plan which is the county's guiding document for land use and resource protection issues.

How does master planning help guide the county's future growth and development?

Master plans provide a roadmap that translates a community's vision for its future into a general framework that lays out where certain types of development will happen, where various land uses will be permitted, where activity centers and green spaces will be located, and how various transportation and transit opportunities will help people move through the area, among other things.

Each master plan is a "living document" that will undergo a comprehensive review at least every five years to make sure that the assumptions of the plan are still valid and that conditions in the community, including growth rates and development activity, are within the parameters of the plan. The five-year review period is an opportunity to adjust the plan so it continues to meet its goals and guiding principles.

How is a master plan used in land use decision making?

The master plan is used as a guide to help decision makers realize the community's intent for its future. Because the master plan has a fairly general focus, it does not reflect the specific details of what should happen at every possible location. The plan allows some flexibility to accommodate changing conditions, market forces, and the more detailed planning that happens when specific projects are proposed for development. However, even in the cases where some flexibility might be needed, the general intent and guiding principles of the plan are always the decision-makers' point of reference for evaluating development proposals.

What is the timeframe of a master plan?

The master plan is based on a very long term look at the community's future, setting out possibilities that may not be realized until decades after the plan is adopted. The master plan framework or future land use maps show how the area ultimately should develop, recognizing that some elements of the plan will be implemented many years in the future, depending on how market demands and other circumstances influence the pace of development. In other words, the framework or future land use map may include some features that will not be built for decades.

To implement specific recommendations of the master plan, such as transportation and other infrastructure improvements, the master plans have a 20-year planning horizon. This 20-year period is based, in part, on the longest realistic population projections available to the County. A 20-year period is also consistent with state requirements, the County's Comprehensive Plan, and established planning practice. Each master plan will include an implementation plan that sets out what recommendations will be done during the first five years, the second five years, and the remainder of the planning period.

How does a master plan “come to life”?

All master plans will have a detailed implementation section outlining how various components of the plan will be put into place and describing the funding options and decision-making processes that will support these elements. The implementation plans will involve a variety of public and private sector groups, and will prioritize activities to allow the plans to evolve in a logical and sequential fashion. Some of these recommendations may include new or expanded community facilities, additional government services, changes to regulations, new or expanded utilities, different types of open space and recreational opportunities, and connections throughout the community that could take the form of roads, sidewalks, or trails.

The master planning process prioritizes these recommendations, creating a general guide as to when and in what order the different elements will be realized. Implementation is a long-term commitment, with stages that will stretch over the life of the plan based on when specific population levels, traffic levels, or other indicators are actually achieved.

Implementation of the recommendations of the master plan will take place in several different forms: through county capital expenditures, public-private partnerships, land use decisions, private sector investments, community initiatives, and programs and services provided by the county.

What does a master plan “not do”?

A master plan is not the same as the County’s Zoning Ordinance. The plans will not automatically change the zoning district; properties may have to be rezoned in order to be developed according to the land use designation in the Master Plan.

A master plan doesn’t usually indicate precisely how much development or what size building should be located in a particular area. Those decisions are made by property owners or developers. For example, in an area designated Urban Density Residential, which permits anywhere from 6 to 34 dwellings per acre, a developer could decide to build 10 units in a spacious townhouse arrangement. That same developer could plan on 30 units per acre in multi-story condominiums. Each of these developments would have a very different appearance but both would match the land use designation and thus would be consistent with the Master Plan.

How does a master plan relate to population and density?

A successful master plan begins with the current conditions in the area and then factors in projections of future population and determines how best to meet the needs of the future population. One of the first steps in a master planning process is to identify the current demographic and economic conditions in the master plan area. Estimates of how those demographics will change are made and then used to determine how many more schools, miles of road, shopping centers, homes and many other uses the future community will need.

A master plan creates an environment that accommodates higher density so that population pressures are directed to the areas best suited to handle growth. Residential density – the number of dwelling units per acre – is determined by the type of home (i.e. single family detached, duplex, townhouse, apartment, etc.) and by the lot size. The County’s decision to focus development in the Development Areas where master planning is occurring encourages more homes on smaller lots and more multifamily buildings so that more people will live within walking distance of workplaces, shopping, recreation and other amenities.

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More Questions? Contact Community Development at (434) 296-5832.