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Integrating the STAR Community Rating System into Comprehensive Planning

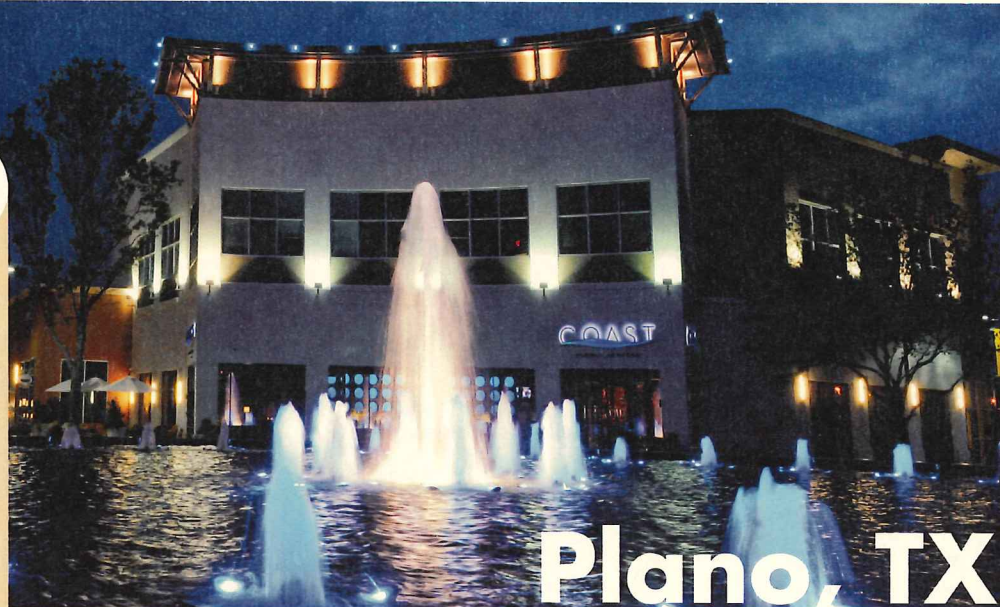
Local comprehensive plans are often regarded for the same reason they are ridiculed. While they establish the community's ideal vision for its future, complaints that these plans too often end up "on the shelf" without resulting in meaningful change frustrates planners and the public alike.

To increase accountability for results, Plano, TX and Phoenix, AZ have incorporated metrics and best practices from the [STAR Community Rating System](#) into their comprehensive plans. STAR uniquely combines a robust framework for local sustainability together with a third-party certification program to recognize communities that achieve sustainability outcomes or have adopted the practices that will lead them there.

Whether or not communities decide to pursue STAR certification, the following case studies show how cities and counties can use the rating system to guide the development and measure implementation of their comprehensive plans.

STAR Communities

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"STAR was essential to developing our plan, and we intend to use it in implementation to measure success of the plan actions moving forward"

– Lori Schwarz, AICP, Comprehensive Planning Manager for the City of Plano.

When Plano launched its comprehensive plan update in 2009, the city was at a transition point. The city's existing plan from 1986 came from a perspective of generating new growth – in fact, much of Plano's housing stock was built between the 1970s and 2000s. Now, less than 1% of the land zoned for residential is vacant and Plano has three times the national average amount of retail space. With the population still growing but becoming more diverse and aging along with the shopping malls, Plano needed a new vision.

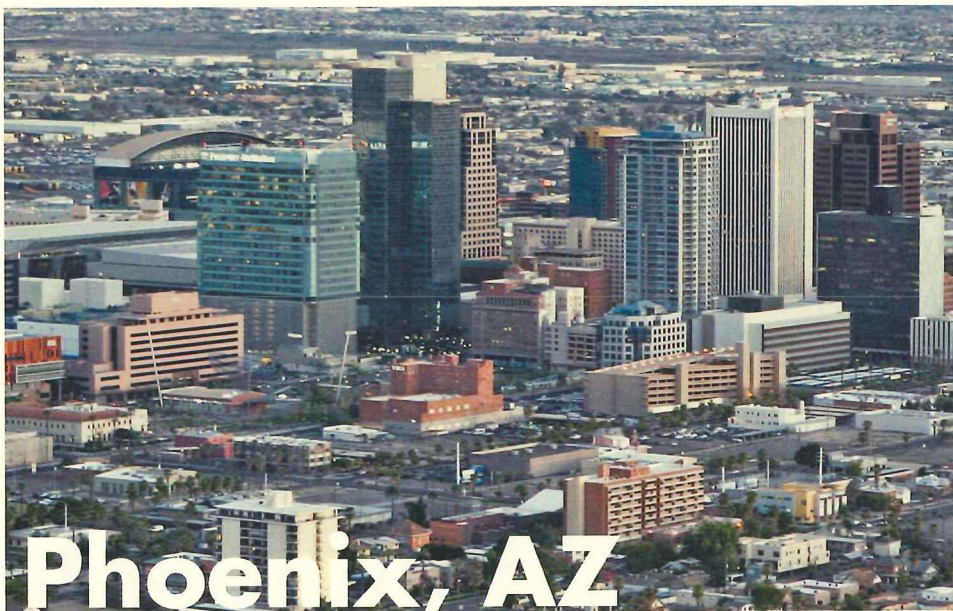
Plano's new comprehensive plan, [Plano Tomorrow](#), focuses on maintaining and redeveloping its current assets in order to remain a vibrant, resilient, sustainable and complete city in the future. The recession drove home this vision; while the Dallas-Fort Worth area fared relatively well compared to other parts of the country, the City of Plano chose to be fiscally conservative and ensure the city was prepared to respond to the changing national economic conditions. During that time, some major projects, such as the comprehensive plan, were suspended to ensure the city maintained the highest quality of services for Plano residents.

When the planning effort restarted in 2013, it was well-timed to utilize STAR. Plano was accepted into STAR Communities' [Leadership Program](#), which provides extensive technical and peer support for communities seeking STAR certification. The Long-Range Planning Division led the completely in-house comprehensive plan process while the Department of Environmental Health took the lead on collecting data for STAR.

"The cross-department collaboration on these parallel efforts was extremely useful," said Schwarz. "It ensures that departments across the city are moving in the same direction and that important conversations were had before plans and programs are established."

The Plano team also discovered that STAR helped to round out the plan by identifying areas where they had not received public feedback and capturing ideas that were already in practice or under discussion, but had not yet been formally placed in a planning document, such as creating a 20-year solid waste plan or conducting a community health impact assessment.

The data collected for STAR will be used to evaluate the success of Plano Tomorrow's implementation as part of the city's performance measures program. "STAR provides a good measuring stick for the long-term," said Schwarz, "It will help us determine if we are meeting our goals."



"Including STAR metrics in Phoenix's 10-year update to the City's General Plan just made sense"

– Josh Bednarek, Principal Planner for the City of Phoenix.

"The Mayor charged us with making the plan more user-friendly, since the previous plan was 500 pages," said Bednarek. "We really liked the layout and framework that STAR provides in allowing the reader to dive into the topic area and very quickly figure out what we were going to do to address that."

To simplify the message, city staff focused on two questions: "What are the things you love about Phoenix?" and "What are your big ideas?"

Over the 2.5-year process, the City held 150 meetings and collected input from 1,300 web users that generated 9,700 big ideas to consider. The feedback resulted in the vision of Phoenix becoming a "connected oasis" and identified 5 core values to underpin [PlanPHX](#): celebrate diverse communities and neighborhoods, strengthen the local economy, connect people and places, build the sustainable desert city, and create an even more vibrant downtown.

Since Phoenix was also pursuing STAR certification at the same time, city staff used STAR's framework and metrics as a guide. "STAR's Outcomes provided metrics that really dovetailed well with our five core values," said Bednarek. "It was a really valuable tool for us to highlight where our plan lined up and point out things we hadn't addressed, either because they aren't required by state statute or the ideas hadn't come up in conversation with the public."

Alignment with PlanPHX also helped with data collection for STAR. As Rosanne Albright, Brownfields Program Manager, said, "Since Phoenix is such a big city that has so many programs going on at once, it really helped that all the departments were already collecting data for the general plan. In some cases, especially in the area of equity, STAR helped to identify new metrics that we can track to make sure we are meeting our goals."

Now that the general plan is nearing completion, attention is turning towards implementation. "How we're going to measure success, that's where STAR will really come in handy," said Bednarek. "In some cases, we're not quite there yet, but thanks to PlanPHX and STAR, we're well on our way."

Top 10 Reasons to Integrate STAR into Comprehensive Plans

Whether your community is ready to pursue STAR certification or just wants to download the rating system as guidance, there are many reasons to use STAR when developing your comprehensive plan:

10. STAR can help identify metrics for some areas that are harder to quantify, such as equity.
9. STAR metrics give the community a way to measure and track the plan's success over time.
8. STAR metrics provide good indicators to communicate progress to the public.
7. Timing the comprehensive plan process simultaneously with pursuing STAR certification can make data collection easier for all departments.
6. Cross-department collaboration ensures that all departments are working towards the same goals and identifies new ways they can work together.
5. Aligning the comprehensive plan with STAR's nationally vetted framework adds legitimacy and context to the plan's goals.
4. STAR's framework can illuminate gaps in the comprehensive plan draft about important ideas that didn't come up during public meetings.
3. STAR's framework can point out programs and policies that are already in place but have not yet been formally captured in the comprehensive plan.
2. STAR encourages the community to set ambitious targets to reach higher levels of sustainability and livability.

And the #1 reason is . . .

Achieving STAR certification at the end of the comprehensive planning process can boost feelings of accomplishment and civic pride, creating momentum for plan implementation.



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Photos courtesy of the City of Plano and the City of Phoenix