

Milwaukie Comprehensive Plan  
Implementation Analysis and Critique

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## Introduction

A few years ago, the City of Milwaukie, Oregon set out to replace their dated comprehensive plan. In 2020, that new plan was adopted and set into motion by the city council. We can now look back on our plan and on the city's other planning work to assess what our strengths were and what needs improvement.

Most importantly, we can evaluate the effectiveness of our plans. Are the goals and objectives set out realistic? Has the city followed through on its promises to the community? For areas that we find inadequate progress, what could we have done differently at the time of the plan's conception, or how can we move forward differently from this point?

In this report, we will look at a number of the goals and objectives laid out in the 2020 comprehensive plan. Later, we will analyze a select few in terms of their effectiveness or implementation.

## Community Vision

The *City of Milwaukie Community Vision* should guide our work in planning for the future of our city. This 2015-updated version of the original 1995 community vision encompasses the goals and aspirations of our residents, and as such, the vision will be referenced throughout this report in order to assess a goals pertinence or effectiveness relative to the vision

## Key Goals

### Community Engagement

An important goal prescribed in the plan, and the first goal listed in fact, is Community Engagement. More specifically, the plan lists the following two objectives:

*1.1 - Foster broad, effective, and collaborative community participation*

*1.2 - Promote Inclusion and Diversity*

It is essential that these goals were included, and it is fitting that they lay at the beginning of the plan, as they should be used as a guide throughout the subsequent goals. Specific policies outlined include adequate outreach to connect with underserved communities, enhanced community involvement, developing a strategy for equitable and inclusive engagement, and tracking demographic information in community outreach campaigns.

These policies, in theory and in addition to other policies not mentioned above, should help to ensure that all of the Milwaukie community is represented in these processes. The wording of these policies, however, is strongly suggestive rather than prescriptive, and it remains to be seen how strongly they will be abided by in future projects. A key issue in policy 1.2.6 is the requirement that tracked demographic data from public outreach campaigns be reported to the City Council annually. This means that issues in outreach efforts may be left unreported for up to a year, and even then, it specifies no required actions for the council to take.

Seattle, Washington, in their “Inclusive Outreach and Public Engagement Guide”, suggests that process evaluations from participants be collected and reported to the decision makers of the project, along with participation rates by communities of color. While this specific policy may serve as a suggestion rather than a requirement, being that it is written in a “guide,” it offers a useful idea. The results of these demographic reports should be included within their respective reports rather than reported annually.

In fact, a more firm policy may have been to *require* that a certain performance metric in terms of racial diversity in outreach responses be met for each project. This likely would incur additional costs and time, but would result in a more representative plan in the end. It would be

crucial, in this case, to ensure that the opinions shared or issues raised by communities of color be turned into actions rather than simply noted on the plan document, as this could be considered a form of tokenism. Of course, all input should be taken seriously in all instances, but the city should have a firm plan for implementation laid out prior to adopting these sorts of metrics.

This comprehensive plan is recent enough that the community has yet to see if the policies outlined will make a meaningful impact. A particular failure on the cities part, however, is the lack of outreach on the topic of transportation. The comprehensive plan omitted the subject due to the city's extensive *Transportation System Plan* (TSP), which was adopted in 2007 and updated in 2013. Though extensive outreach was done in 2007, the plan admits that the public outreach process in 2013 was “far less intensive than the one in 2007.”(Milwaukie) While the updates may not have warranted an extensive campaign at the time, due to the update coming just six years after the previous one, it means that now, 17 years on, the community has not had a serious opportunity to get involved in the city’s long-term transportation planning. With most residents interacting with the transportation system on a daily basis, this is a significant oversight.

*“Milwaukie’s government is transparent and accessible, and is committed to promoting tolerance and inclusion and eliminating disparities.”* (Milwaukie Community Vision)

Furthermore, the original TSP makes little mention of diversity, equity, or inclusion. A short section on “Environmental Justice” makes a mention of identifying underserved communities, and a map identifies “transit disadvantaged” areas, but the section is brief. Should

the city truly wish to enhance outreach and promote inclusion and diversity, then it should consider an update to the TSP before 2035, the end of the plan's effective range.

## Housing

As with any city or community in the Portland region, housing is a key issue that needs to be addressed firmly and quickly. The comprehensive plan states that “between 2012 and 2018, the median home price for Milwaukie increased by 85%” and that more than half (2018) of Milwaukie renters were classified as “housing-cost burdened.” With the projected continuing increase in regional population, it is essential that the plan adequately addresses these issues.

Additionally, this housing crisis is a crisis of racial justice and equity. Though rent increases affect all members of the community, they disproportionately affect BIPOC communities. In Oregon, “35 percent of White households are renting,” and “twice that share—70 percent—of Black households are renting...” (Potter) The plan lays out a number of goals for housing, but two stand out:

### *7.1 - Equity*

### *7.2 - Affordability*

Recent reports reaffirm that Milwaukie is “focused” on” missing middle housing, including duplexes, triplexes and cottage courts.” (Slothower) This is consistent with policy 7.2.2 which states that the city should “Allow and encourage the development of housing types that are affordable to low or moderate-income households.” (City of Milwaukie) This, in conjunction with Oregon’s HB 2001 which made the state the “first state in the nation to essentially ban single-family zoning statewide.” (Potter) The first examples of these new policies taking action have already been seen, such as with the new “Shortstack” development which will bring 15

affordable units to the Ardenwald neighborhood. (Rogers) Cottage cluster developments such as this should now be permitted on nearly any residential property in the city.

It is yet to be seen, however, if the city will be effective and efficient at encouraging and approving new developments. The city no longer has any single family zoning, and is instead mainly zoned “R-MD,” “Moderate Density Residential. This permits, without the need for conditional user approval, the construction of duplexes, triplexes, quadplexes, townhouses, and cottage clusters, and leaves in place the ability to build “single detached dwellings.”

The city’s “Housing Capacity Analysis” shows that though the city permitted the construction of over 100 multi-dwelling units in fiscal year 2019, it has done little in 2020 or 2021 to build anything other than single family units or ADU’s. The analysis states that two multi dwelling developments were completed in 2022 and that another six were in development or permitting. Complete data for 2022 may not have been available at the time of that report, and a new report may prove useful in assessing the performance for 2023 and 2024.

## **Plan Performance**

While the comprehensive plan is certainly ambitious, and many aspects may be thorough or effective, much of the essential goals are vague, suggestive, or otherwise weakly worded. A bright future is painted and goals to achieve it are laid out, but too much responsibility is placed on the city, the community, and the city council to actually implement it. The community has done their part by contributing to the plan and sharing their vision for the future, meaning the work now is left to Milwaukie. Without the firm, clear policies needed to achieve what is desired, the goals and ambitions may never be implemented fully.

## **Other Goals**

The plan, of course, outlines many other policies and goals that align with the vision for the future of the city. These include environmental issues, the Willamette Greenway, government transparency, urban growth, economic development, and a number of other topics. It is likely that many of these topics will face similar challenges as the ones analyzed in this report, and further analysis into each should be considered.

All of these goals are intertwined, however. An increase in the number of available affordable housing units in the city can help to reduce urban sprawl, increase affordability, and improve many Milwaukie family's financial situations. If this new housing brings in new residents, that will help to increase the city's tax base and will bring more customers to the businesses of Milwaukie.

To the point of outreach, inclusivity, and equity, it is essential that all populations are included in the decision making processes for these goals and that every Milwaukian has the same opportunity to share their vision and have it heard.

## **Conclusion**

The new comprehensive plan is ambitious, visionary, and impassioned. It prescribes a set of policies and goals that, if followed, will create a brighter, more equitable, and more sustainable city in the future. The City Council should abide by this plan in decision making in order to show the residents of the community that the city is committed to their prosperity and future.

The plan, however, is not perfect. Vision statements and lofty goals make a great looking report, and they can give at first glance the appearance of an ambitious city, but further analysis

shows that there are flaws. The city should apply aspects of the plan, such as community engagement, retroactively. Investments should be made into hearing the concerns of Milwaukie residents in aspects such as transportation.

Furthermore, some aspects of the plan simply state the status quo. Housing, as an example, makes the city appear very forward thinking in its approach to middle housing. The plan does not go much, if any, further than what was mandated by the State of Oregon. With vague, weak wording, the plan cannot be relied on to guide the city down the road. As council members cycle in and out and other city staff and leadership changes over time, a firm comprehensive plan is needed to set out what the residents envision so that nothing is lost along the way. Suggestive rather than decisive language leaves too much room for interpretation.

The council should pursue ways to ensure that the vision and future laid out in the plan is realized. Whether it be further community engagement on certain topics, new ordinances setting in stone the ideals of the plan, or further refined planning in specific areas, the community has shared with the city what they envision, and the city must now follow through.



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