

# Planning the City in the New Economy: Plan Cincinnati

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*The City of Cincinnati, Ohio recently completed its first comprehensive plan in over 30 years. Developed through a highly collaborative community-driven process, Plan Cincinnati aims to “re-urbanize” the depopulated Rust Belt city and strengthen its economy. Alongside goals to increase industrial recruitment as well as homegrown small businesses, a key economic strategy of the plan is focusing investment geographically in the City’s established neighborhood centers.*

The City of Cincinnati sits on the Ohio River in the center of a metropolitan region of approximately 2.1 million people in southwest Ohio, northern Kentucky and southeast Indiana. Situated in a basin area among surrounding hills, Cincinnati has a population slightly less than 300,000 or approximately fourteen percent of the region’s population. In area it is 79.5 square miles or less than two percent of the region. The topography provides wonderful lush hillsides and beautiful vistas of the Ohio River Valley. Historically the valley and hilltop setting also meant that as the city grew during the height of the industrial revolution, its factories had to be multistory and on small footprints. These factors play an important role in the economic development planning for the city as the center of the region.

As in other cities, the New Economy is visible in Cincinnati in the emergence of high tech incubators and accelerators in the urban core. An important aspect of any economic development strategy is to leverage these startups and allow them to thrive and grow in the city. Plan Cincinnati, the city’s first comprehensive plan in 30 years, targets these new realities and factors them into its strategies. The strong identity of the City’s 52 neighborhoods and each neighborhood’s independent community council, which serves as the official voice to the Mayor, nine at-large City Council Members and the City Administration, also inform the Plan. The effect is a strong emphasis on the economic health of neighborhood centers.

## Background

Cincinnati holds a significant place in the history of Planning in the United States: its 1925 Master Plan was the first in the nation to be officially adopted by an elected body; its 1948 Master Plan was ground-breaking in planning for

the greater metropolitan area rather than only focusing within the city limits. Moreover, Cincinnati attorney Alfred Bettman successfully argued for the validity of zoning in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Euclid v. Ambler* which upheld the constitutionality of zoning.

Despite this impressive history, by 2009 the most recent comprehensive plan for the City had been adopted in 1980, and provided little guidance to a City seeking solutions to modern land use, transportation, housing, public health, and economic issues. Cincinnati needed an overall guiding document that framed the City’s vision for revitalization and steps necessary to make it a reality.

In 2009, City officials and citizens began creating a new comprehensive plan that would encompass goals and strategies across five initiative areas: Compete,

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Connect, Live, Sustain, and Collaborate (see flowchart image). Throughout the three year development of Plan Cincinnati, city staff led a process of unprecedented public participation through direct engagement of thousands of Cincinnati stakeholders. Public participation took several different forms:

- Forty representatives appointed by the Mayor from businesses, non-profits and institutions, and neighborhood groups to become the overall steering committee;
- Twelve Working Groups with up to thirty members each;
- Three annual Neighborhood Summits that attracted up to 600 people each year;
- A youth outreach program that engaged over 600 local youth from kindergarten to 12th grade;
- Two Public Open Houses with 200 participants each;
- Numerous visits to local organizations including churches and neighborhood groups; and
- Online presence via active Facebook and Twitter accounts and an email-blast list of over 1,500 addresses.

The Plan successfully involved stakeholders of various ages, backgrounds, geographies, and levels of desired involvement. These partnerships create buy-in from city and neighborhood leaders, developers, and other large corporations to support the ideas of the plan when it comes to making decisions – especially for tough decisions that may not always be popular. It received widespread support and was adopted unanimously by both the City Planning Commission and City Council in October and November 2012.

The Vision underlying Plan Cincinnati is “Thriving Re-Urbanization focused on an unapologetic drive to create and sustain a thriving inclusive urban community where engaged people and memorable places are paramount, where creativity and innovation thrive, and where local pride and confidence are contagious.” Plan Cincinnati aims to re-imagine urban form by emphasizing modernization without suburbanization. To do this, Plan Cincinnati focuses on what makes Cincinnati unique — its historic and walkable urban neighborhoods. It features an approach to policy based on revitalizing neighborhood centers and corridors while improving citizens’ physical health and quality of life. The Conceptual Land Use Plan emphasizes mixed-uses and defines areas where compact walkable development should be reinforced or established.

This article focuses on strategies in the Compete section of the Plan due to the relevance to the “new economy” theme. The Compete section balances the needs of established businesses while dealing with legacy of manufacturing land use and a new high-tech service economy. Whereas in previous decades employees made life choices around their jobs, Plan Cincinnati recognizes that today businesses need to operate in a place where they can attract and retain talented employees. For this reason,

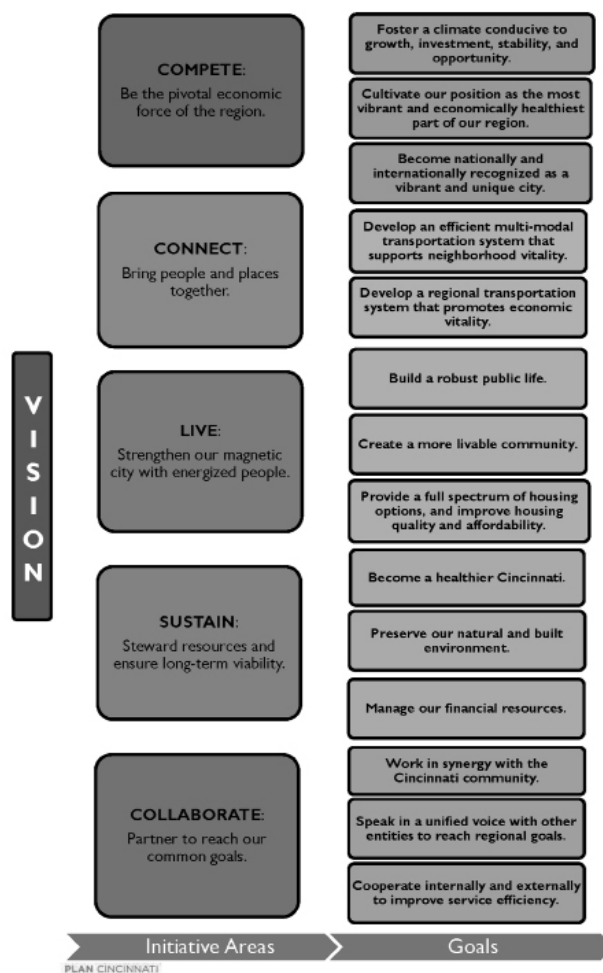
it is important to note that all five of the initiative areas working together are essential in facing today’s economic challenges.

## Compete

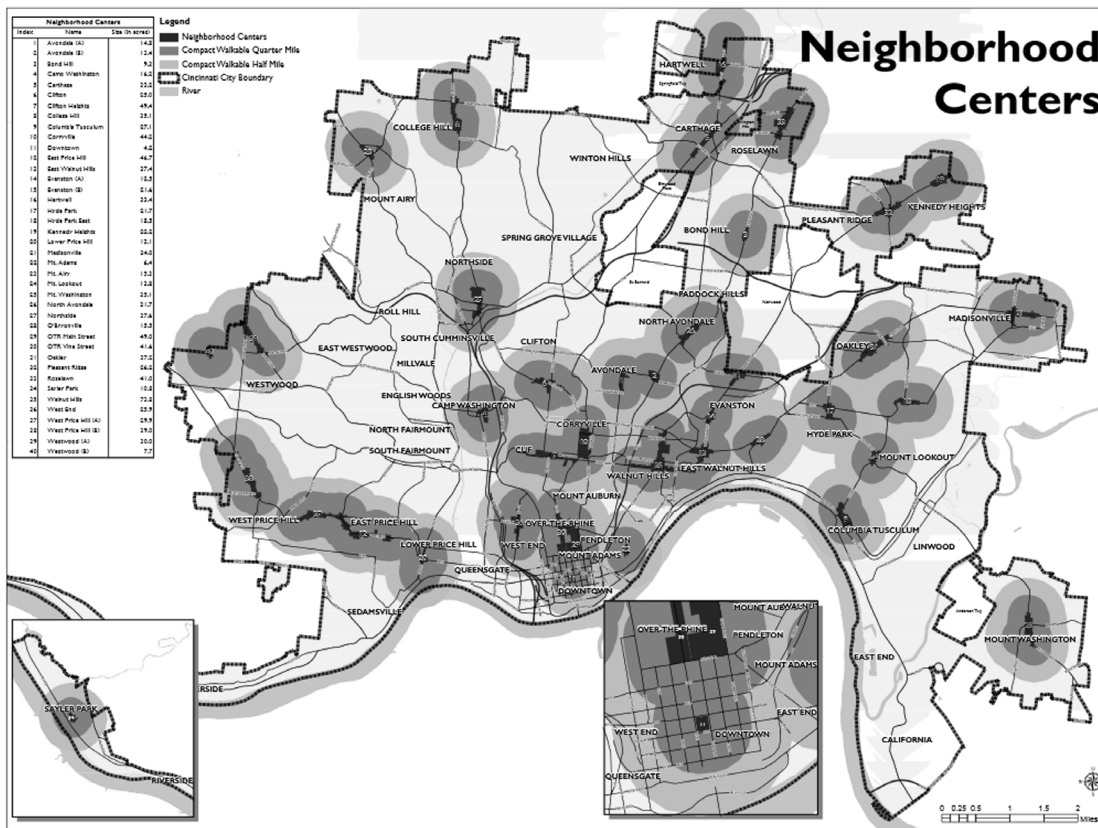
The overall economic development strategy of the Plan, outlined in the “Compete” section, has to do with fostering a climate conducive to growth, targeting investment to existing business centers, and raising the profile of Cincinnati nationally.

### Compete Goal 1: Foster a climate conducive to growth, investment, stability, and opportunity.

When crafting the goals for the economic components of Plan Cincinnati, the stakeholders wanted to balance the need to maintain important corporate headquarters (Cincinnati is home to nine Fortune 500 companies and two Fortune 100 companies including Procter and Gamble, Macy’s, American Financial, Kroger, and Fifth Third Bankcorp.), deal with aging manufacturing areas in need of revitalization, and take advantage of the growing start-up economy.



Excerpt from the Plan Cincinnati initiatives, goals, and strategies flow chart. Courtesy of the authors.



During the creation of Plan Cincinnati, the stakeholders used quantitative data collected by economic development consultants from national and state sources, including the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. Census, Decision Data Resources, the National Science Foundation, the Internal Revenue Service, and numerous private sector sources and studied many potential avenues to achieve the City's goals. The results were several key strategies that were further broken down into short, mid- and long-range objectives. The first economic strategy under this goal is called "Grow Our Own." This refers to the economic development principle that it is far easier to keep an existing business than attract a new one. One of the first activities undertaken was to better coordinate business retention visits between the City and the Regional Economic Development Initiative (REDI Cincinnati). The next will be to redesign the City's website and provide a portal for business to not only access City services, but also to find pre-vetted business services of outside entities.

The second broad strategy was to pursue new growth in targeted areas and industries. Plan Cincinnati identifies several of the established economic clusters in the region including aerospace, automotive, and financial services, along with emerging economic clusters including advanced energy, consumer products and creative services, and life sciences. A recent example of its implementation is the "Investing in Manufacturing Community Partnerships" (IMCP) initiative with a focus on the aerospace industry. In 2014, in partnership with the City of Dayton, Cincinnati applied for and was one of twelve regions in the nation awarded this federal designation. IMCP designation

provides a liaison in every federal agency involved in development and gives grant applications additional priority points. However, its real value is the focus on one industrial sector and mapping the supply chain, workforce, and training requirements in order to identify gaps and strategies to address them.

The final strategy is to build a streamlined and cohesive development process. The permitting process in any large city can be cumbersome and involve multiple departments and individuals. Cincinnati's current Mayor and City Manager designated this as one of their top priorities. Their plan is to conduct a thorough review of the building department to make sure it has the adequate resources and staff to quickly issue permits and conduct inspections. This will be an ongoing process with continual feedback from development stakeholders and city staff.

### Compete Goal 2: Target investment to geographic areas where there is already economic activity.

Each of Cincinnati's fifty-two neighborhoods has both a strong identity and dedicated civic leaders. The Plan Cincinnati process led to the conclusion that we cannot accomplish change if we spread our efforts and investment out too thinly across the entire city. The Plan identified a list of "neighborhood centers" and categorized each as to their economic health and physical characteristics. The map of these centers guides economic investment into key strategic geographic areas of the City. For example, when the region's Port Authority is looking for areas to redevelop brownfields or underutilized manufacturing sites, it uses the map to identify locations that have the

highest marketability and provide needed jobs for the City's population.

**Compete Goal 3: Become nationally and internationally recognized as a vibrant and unique city.**

While Cincinnati's citizens were enjoying their city with its low cost of living, great sports and arts organizations, parks, and festivals, the rest of the world didn't seem to notice. Some stakeholders who took part in the Plan Cincinnati process relate this back to Cincinnati's German heritage – an attitude that doesn't dwell on success but is always looking toward the next big project. Recognizing that this quiet nature was preventing the city from achieving needed growth, the stakeholders of Plan Cincinnati designated promoting our City's assets as one of the three goals of the economic development.

Even in the midst of the great recession Cincinnati was growing and redeveloping. When banks were hesitant to lend, the historic district in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood saw new restaurants and bars opening continuously, condo demand growing, and hundreds of apartments remodeled. The Over-the-Rhine renaissance was fueled by an investment from the non-profit Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation (3CDC). This \$829 million in private financing leveraged approximately \$200 million in City investment. Not only is the historic district seeing major investment, the City's new \$148 million 3.6 mile streetcar line is also under construction to connect Over-the-Rhine with the riverfront. The Banks, an area on the riverfront between two stadiums, is developing with national retailers, hundreds of new apartments, and a new park with walks along the river.

While the marketing strategies have yet to be taken up by any one organization, some recognition is occurring, as evidenced by a February 24, 2015 article in the New York Times that begins: "CINCINNATI — A rapidly growing sector for consumer research, coupled with a boom in construction and redevelopment, is renewing interest in Cincinnati's downtown." The article goes on to discuss the success in Over-the-Rhine, the streetcar, and the office buildings under construction for General Electric's Global Operations Center and dunhumby, a leader in consumer analytics. It may prove that this goal simply serves as a reminder and no formal program is required.

**Moving Forward**

The City is dedicated to the implementation of Plan Cincinnati. The Plan will directly guide the city's Capital Budget, which was reinforced by the decision of the Cincinnati City Council in a December 2012 vote that there must be an in-depth review of the Capital Budget to determine how each item aligns with Plan Cincinnati. Additionally, the City Manager has decreed that all ordinances and contracts must include language that is consistent with Plan Cincinnati in order to be approved. The City Manager even developed a Plan Cincinnati stamp, pictured below, to be used on ordinances and contracts

that are consistent with the plan, showing the validity and importance of the plan as it relates to future projects in the City. The City has also committed to the success of Plan Cincinnati through the new Land Development Code, which will include the first use of Complete Streets guidelines and a form-based code.

The City Planning Department has several employees working on the implementation of Plan Cincinnati. The Steering Committee from the planning process has transitioned into an Implementation Committee which consists of six Action Teams, each working on one of the five initiative areas of the plan as well as an additional team that will market the plan on a local, regional and national scale. The City feels that those who helped create the plan should also have an active role in implementing it, so citizens have also been invited to join the Action Teams. Plan Cincinnati will be reviewed annually and updated every five years, which is a reminder that it will not be simply a document, but rather a living, breathing plan that will help guide the future of the City. The goals, strategies, and tasks of each initiative area are the measurable and implementable parts of the plan; these will be reviewed and adjusted as the City continues to change.

The City of Cincinnati's first comprehensive plan in 30 years provides some lessons on public engagement. During the process, the team sought input from as many and varied stakeholders as possible and let those stakeholders guide the process. The evolution from basic categories like transportation, development, and education into Compete, Connect, Live, Sustain and Collaborate stressed the interdependence of the elements and generated excitement for the process, which promoted continued involvement throughout a lengthy process. Also, especially for the Compete section, having good data from a variety of sources both nationally and locally generated focused recommendations from the steering committee and resulted in a fact-based, implementable Plan that has already set in motion many positive changes.

For further detail, the entire Plan Cincinnati document can be found at [www.plancincinnati.org](http://www.plancincinnati.org).

