

TCED Capstone Project
The Warren County and Clay County Comprehensive Planning Process

According to Google, a comprehensive plan can be defined as a document designed to guide the future actions of a community. It presents a vision for the future, with long-range goals, objectives and action items for all activities that affect the local government. In 2015, comprehensive planning was foreign to the Upper Cumberland Development District (UCDD), but it seemed like a service that should be provided to the communities of the Upper Cumberland Region. The UCDD already provided several planning services for the region including land use planning, transportation planning, and solid waste planning, and it seemed like comprehensive planning was the next step in the evolutionary process of the agency. However, UCDD did not choose the community for its first comprehensive plan—the community chose them.

Clay County is located in northern Middle Tennessee along the Kentucky border. It is home to many natural attractions, including the Cumberland River and Dale Hollow Lake. Clay County was rocked in the mid 1990's when several factories closed their doors leaving approximately 2,000 people without a job. That number would be difficult for a thriving metropolis to overcome, much less a community of less than 8,000. In fact, Clay County has yet to recover, as it has spent the last several years either as an Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)-designated 'distressed' or 'at-risk' county. However, in 2015, Clay County stakeholders decided to stop feeling sorry for themselves and decided to do something about their state of economic depression. Their solution was a comprehensive plan. With the help of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Clay County sought out a private consultant to help them with this process. The county also asked if UCDD would assist the consultant with statistics, demographics, and other aspects of the plan. Within a few months of the process, it was apparent that Clay County was not happy with their chosen consultant and asked the UCDD to take over and finish what would become the Clay County Comprehensive Plan. By the end of 2016, the plan would be finished and in the hands of the local elected officials. Committees were formed at the local level to implement the plan and everyone seemed to be pleased with the finished product. While the comprehensive planning process for Clay County was nearing its end, the UCDD was just getting warmed up.

Warren County is located in southern Middle Tennessee approximately halfway between Nashville and Chattanooga. Warren County is known for the multiple rivers that flow through the county, historic downtown McMinnville, Rock Island State Park, Cumberland Caverns, and the largest meditation center in the western hemisphere, the Isha Institute of Inner Sciences. Despite these incredible attractions, Warren County is most known as the nursery capital of the world. According to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, Warren County led the nation in the production of nursery stock. It is also important to note that despite spending the last several years as an ARC at-risk county, in 2019 Warren County ascended to the status of a transitional county. The reason that this is important is that even with the transitional designation, Warren County ranks in the middle of the pack of most statistical categories when compared to the other ninety-five Tennessee counties.

Instead of being content with a middling status, the leadership in Warren County decided to comprise a plan to improve the overall quality of life for its citizens. In the winter of 2017, then-mayor of the City of McMinnville requested that the UCDD assist the city and county with the composition of the Warren County Comprehensive Plan. Originally, funding for the plan was to be in the form of a Three Star grant from the State of Tennessee's Department of Economic and Community Development (ECD). The county was forced to adapt, as that grant was not awarded. However, after initially denying the request, ECD did offer to assist with a portion of funding and once again with some help from USDA, funding was in place and the planning process was ready to begin. A little over a year later, the comprehensive plan was presented to local elected officials and local community leaders with overwhelmingly positive responses. Since then, the UCDD has been in constant contact with the local governments in Warren County and has assisted them with several aspects of the implementation process.

The purpose of this capstone project is to analyze the Clay County and Warren County comprehensive plans and to also compare the different challenges that arose during the planning process. Also to be analyzed is the impact that the TCED courses had in the planning process, particularly the courses that focused on Strategic Planning, Marketing and Attraction, Entrepreneurship and Small Business, Basic Economic Development and Basic Finance. Many

things were learned by the UCDD planning team from the Clay County plan, and the Warren County plan benefited from the gained experience. The lessons learned from the construction of each plan will also be discussed. The comprehensive planning process is different for every community. In order to plan for a community, a demographic baseline and local understanding must first be established.

A snap shot of Warren and Clay Counties

While Clay and Warren have a number of similarities, the two communities couldn't be more different, as will be demonstrated in the following description of each of the counties.

Clay County

Clay County is the quintessential example of a rural area. Celina is the county seat and the only incorporated city. Its population according to the 2017 American Community Survey is 7,684, which is sixth lowest in the State of Tennessee. According to the US Census, Clay County has experienced a decline in population in almost every decennial census (1980 and 2000) since 1940. According to the University of Tennessee's population projections, Clay County's population will continue to decline through at least 2050. Clay County has experienced two mass exoduses within the last 80 years. One was the post-World War II Michigan rush to manufacture automobiles in the late 1940's; the second was the closing of the garment factories post-NAFTA in the mid 1990's.

Despite the decline in population, thousands of people visit Clay County each year to experience Dale Hollow Lake. Established in 1943 by the U S Army Corps of Engineers, Dale Hollow Lake is one of the most scenic lakes in the entire country. The lake offers several options for recreation to its visitors including camping, water sports, boating, hiking, and especially fishing. Dale Hollow Lake has made Clay County not only a popular place to vacation but also a popular retirement destination. The Clay County government also sees a direct benefit from the lake via sales tax revenue from marinas and property tax revenue from residences adjacent to the shore line. Due to its proximity to Celina, lake patrons often travel to the downtown area and visit local restaurants and boutiques.

In addition to Dale Hollow Lake and downtown Celina, Clay County has several other strengths. These include Highway 52, which is a four lane state route that connects Celina to Interstate 40. The County also has an abundance of historic places, including the Clay County Courthouse and the Free Hill Community.

While Clay County has a number of attributes, the number of detriments is prominent. To coincide with the consistent loss of population, Clay County's property tax rate is currently \$3.10, which is the seventh highest rate in the state. This can be linked to extremely low property value which result in limited revenue for the county. The City of Celina has an aging and limited infrastructure system that needs to be updated and expanded. Due to the limited infrastructure, residential contractors cannot fully develop the property located near Dale Hollow Lake, and the local government cannot effectively recruit industry. Another significant negative statistic is that since 1980, Clay County's median age has increased from 32.9 to 45.1. This statistic is important, because this has a direct effect on the county's healthcare system and EMS department. All of these factors contributed to Clay County reaching out to the UCDD for planning assistance.

Warren County

As mentioned in the introduction, Warren County is known as the nursery capital of the world. Despite being the country's number one producer of nursery stock, the volume of production has been on a steady decline for the last several years. This decline has not just affected the nursery industry however, as the total sales from agricultural products in Warren County declined over 20 million dollars (18%) from 2007 to 2012. The decline of beef and dairy cattle, soybeans, row crops, and other agricultural products has had a direct effect on the reduction of farms in Warren County from 1,594 in 2002 to 1,122 in 2012.

While the farms in Warren County have been decreasing, the number of manufacturing jobs in Warren County has been increasing. Large industries such as Yorozu Automotive Tennessee, Inc. and Bridgestone Americas Tire Operations LLC are located in the Mountain View Industrial Park (MVIP) in Morrison. Industrial Development is of the highest priority in Warren County, as significant financial investments have been made to ensure that MVIP is as competitive as it can possibly be.

Access to major cities is not an issue in Warren County, as State Route 70S is a four lane highway that connects McMinnville to State Route 111 in the east and Murfreesboro in the west. Highway 55 is a four lane state route that gives McMinnville and MVIP access to Interstate 24 in Manchester. As also mentioned in the introduction, tourism is a major source of income in Warren County. Rock Island State Park, Cumberland Caverns and the Isha Institute of Inner Sciences

attract over 100,000 visitors a year, and tourists that visited these and other destinations in Warren County spent over 25 million dollars in 2017.

Local officials in Warren County place a high priority on education and workforce development. Post-secondary options for Warren County High School graduates include a satellite campus of Motlow State Community College and a McMinnville campus of the Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT). While Warren County has many strengths, there are some areas of concern. Despite an abundance of large vacant tracts, Warren County has not had a significant residential development in over a decade. Potential reasons for this include a lack of local contractors and a significantly lower profit margin than properties in neighboring counties. Warren County also has not had a tax increase in over eighteen years to keep up with the rising cost of yearly operating expenses. Another issue is that the recidivism rate in Warren County is at over eighty percent, which leads to an enormous burden on the county to house inmates that are frequently returning to its correctional facilities. While Warren County isn't exactly struggling, they are far from what one would consider a well-oiled machine. UCDD was called in to assist Warren County with formulating a plan to ensure future success.

The Planning Process

The purpose of the section is to analyze the construction of both plans. While the plans share similarities, there are also differences that should be recognized. Some differences are due to the uniqueness of each community, and some are due to experience gained during the first comprehensive planning process. Areas of this process to be discussed in this section are the local buy-in from elected officials, data collection, the writing of the plan, establishing goals, objectives, and action items, the implementation plan and the finished product. During the planning process, best practices were established and mistakes were made, but in the end two valuable comprehensive plans were presented to two very different communities.

Buy-in at the local level was different in each community. In Clay County, the county and the City of Celina were "all in." These local governments originally approached the UCDD to assist them with the plan, and in addition to their enthusiasm, the Chamber of Commerce, citizen organizations, and local merchants bought in as well. This was truly a collaboration of the entire community. In Warren County, the local buy-in was totally different. While the City of McMinnville and the Chamber of Commerce were the driving force behind the plan, the county

government and the other municipalities were not very interested. While they would not stand in the way, they were not willing to offer assistance, financial or otherwise. This led to a very interesting dynamic when constructing the Warren County plan. Then, this led to a dynamic shift of focus when, in August 2018, the McMinnville mayor was elected as Warren County Executive. This happened when the UCDD was making the final edits on a plan that they had been putting together for over a year. Originally, the Warren County plan was to be focused on the City of McMinnville. The McMinnville mayor was the champion of the plan, and McMinnville had been prepared to pay for the plan in its entirety before the contributions of TNECD and USDA. In his new position, the Warren County Executive-elect asked the UCDD to include more aspects of Warren County in the plan, including the three municipalities that—prior to the election—had only moderate interest in being involved in the planning process. Aspects of this shift will be discussed in each of the upcoming portions of this section. While this shift presented a great challenge, the plan finally had what it had needed from the beginning: total buy-in from the entire Warren County community.

The gathering of information was also very different with regard to the two plans. In both Clay and Warren Counties, the process began the same way. A kickoff meeting was held with elected officials, UCDD staff, the Chamber of Commerce, and several local stakeholders. At this meeting the plan was announced, and the planning process was discussed. The similarities of each plan ended after this meeting. In Clay County, a private consultant was hired to write the comprehensive plan. The UCDD was to assist the consultant with demographics, statistics, and other aspects of data collection. At the kickoff meeting, the overall goals for the plan were established by the community and the time line for completion was created. The UCDD did assist the consultant with the gathering of data; however, it was not very long into the process that Clay County removed the consultant and procured the UCDD to finish the plan. The data collected by the consultant was mostly historical in nature and thus mostly unusable.

At this point, it was determined that the planning process would basically start over. The planning process began simply enough with basic demographics such as population, per capita income and unemployment rate. These statistics were used to establish a baseline and show the current economic state of the county. After the basic information was gathered, the plan was divided into three main sections consisting of Quality of Life, Infrastructure, and Economic Development. The Quality of Life section included subsections such as Parks and Recreation, Education and

Workforce Development, Health Care, and Housing. The Infrastructure section included Fiscal Strength, Solid Waste, Transportation and Utilities. The Economic Development section included Industrial Development, Agriculture, Tourism, and Marketing. The subsections were divided among several UCDD staff members, and each staff member was responsible for gathering data and constructing a plan for their particular subsection based on the vision of local leadership.

The data collection for the Clay County plan was mostly done through Google searches, speaking with local experts, and existing knowledge about the area. While these methods were used in Warren County's data collection, many more avenues were explored. With Warren County, there was never a question that the UCDD would be completely in charge of producing the comprehensive plan. At the Warren County kickoff meeting, the McMinnville mayor organized a steering committee made up of several local leaders and had them participate in a community-wide SWOT analysis.

After the analysis, the Mayor had the members of the steering committee form focus groups to assist the UCDD staff in the formulation of the plan in each of the particular sections. Since the Warren County plan was partially funded by Three Star (TNECD), it was divided into sections according to then-Governor Haslam's five pillars: Jobs and Economic Development, Education and Workforce Development, Fiscal Strength and Efficient Government, Health and Welfare, and Public Safety. After the focus groups were formed, the subsections were assigned to UCDD staff members and data collection began.

One area in which Warren County differed from Clay County was the amount of citizen involvement. In this plan the UCDD, along with the McMinnville Mayor, wanted to make sure that there was substantial input from Warren County citizens. To accomplish this, UCDD staff members attended community events such as the Warren County Fair, the Autumn Street Festival, and the McMinnville Christmas parade. At these events, staff members set up tables and asked citizens a series of questions. After the final event, hundreds of Warren County citizens had provided input for the plan.

Also different from the Clay County plan was the use of focus groups. These groups were composed of citizens that were interested in a particular subject matter, elected officials and professionals within their area of expertise. Along with focus groups, interviews were held with utility district managers, finance directors, government employees and local educators, among

others, to determine the specific needs of their respective departments. When the data collection period ended, the composition of the plan began.

With Clay County, the writing of the plan was fairly straightforward. Staff members were instructed to take the information that they had gathered and formulate a plan to guide Clay County from their current state to their desired outcome, based on the goals established at the kickoff meeting. This proved to be difficult, however, which was evidenced upon reading the initial submission, as if several different authors were writing the plan. A smaller group of UCDD staff were formed to rewrite portions of the plan to create the appearance that the plan was being written by one author.

With the “multiple author” experiment in the rearview mirror, UCDD staff decided to take a different approach with the Warren County plan. With the Warren County plan, subsections were divided up and a team of staff members was responsible for each section. The collective team would come up with bullet points describing their proposed path to reach the desired outcome. When this was accomplished, a group of staff members would then take the bullet points and arrange them into a narrative for each subsection. This strategy, however, proved more difficult than the Clay County method. The bullet points were often lacking sufficient detail, thus the narrative team did not have enough information to formulate paragraphs for certain subsections. This led to the narrative team doing extra data collection and writing a majority of the Warren County Plan.

Successful implementation of any plan is key to its ability to transform a community. It is simply the process of putting a decision or plan into effect or in other words: the execution of the plan. A comprehensive plan’s implementation is the difference between a successful plan and a plan that sits on the shelf collecting dust. This is one area that was similar for both of the plans. Once the narratives for each subsection were written, goals, objectives and action items were established. Each goal was established as a present or future tense statement that illustrated the desired outcome of the listed objectives and action items. Goals were very broad in nature. An example of an established goal from the Agriculture section of Warren County plan is “Warren County has a vibrant and supported agriculture industry.”

Also created as part of the implementation plan were the objectives and action items. Objectives were created as supporting statements for the goals under which they were listed. They were more

specific in nature than goals and were also written in the present or future tense. An example of a goal-supporting objective from the Agriculture section of the Warren County plan is “Warren County creates an environment conducive to establishing, sustaining and advancing agriculture based businesses.” An action item is an imperative statement that supports the goal and objective under which it is listed and is very specific in nature. An example of a goal supporting objective from the Agriculture section of Warren County plan is “Feature agriculture on the county’s website.” These goals, objectives, and action items are the basis of the road map for the community to achieve their desired outcome.

After the UCDD staff created the goals, objectives, and action items, the implementation plan was formulated. The implementation plan listed a champion, mobilizer, and the organizations involved for each section. The champion is an individual or group that should take ownership of the goals and objectives in a particular section. The mobilizer should be directly in charge of following through with a particular action item, and the organizations involved should assist with the completion of the action item. In addition, the easiest action item to complete, or the “low hanging fruit,” was identified in each section. After the implementation plan was completed, the final review with the UCDD Executive Director followed. Once the final edits were made, the comprehensive planning process was complete. After printing, each plan was presented to its respective community.

The Clay County Comprehensive Plan was presented to the Clay County commission in early 2017 by the UCDD Executive Director. It was met with resounding approval. Both the county and city mayors helped establish committees to begin working on action items, thus initiating the implementation plan. The Warren County Comprehensive Plan was presented at the Warren County Chamber of Commerce in November 2018. While there were a few detractors, the overwhelming majority were pleased with the result. The Warren County Executive reached out to the UCDD to assist with the forming of committees to initiate the implementation plan. This process is ongoing, and the Warren County Executive has requested that the UCDD remain involved with the plan’s implementation. While several factors played a key role in the completion of these plans, one that cannot be overlooked is the impact of the Tennessee Certified Economic Developer (TCED) courses that were taken by members of the UCDD staff.

Tennessee Certified Economic Development Courses

The TCED provided the blueprint for what would become the Clay County and Warren County Comprehensive Plans. The planning process was led by two TCED graduates and two that are currently seeking certification. While each course stands on its own merit, there were five courses that heavily influenced the completion of these plans. The courses that assisted the most were Strategic Planning, Marketing and Attraction, Entrepreneurship and Small Business, the Basic Economic Development course, and Basic Finance.

The Strategic Planning course established that blueprint for the composition of both plans. It immediately established that the UCDD should be planning comprehensively for these communities instead of strategically. Also this course gave instructions as to what questions to ask such as “Who do we want to become as a community?” “What community leaders need to be involved?” “What are our strengths and weaknesses?” Also this course established how the vision statement provides community focus, helps evaluate progress, and gives a sense of purpose to the actions of the community. The course stated the importance of goals and how they should not be measurable, how to form measureable objectives and action items and essentialness of implementation. Finally and maybe most importantly, the course stated that plans should be a living document and “never written in stone”.

The Marketing and Attraction course established that in order to effectively market your community that you must first understand your product and then you must understand the market. These tenants are crucial in the tourism and economic development sections of both comprehensive plans. With tourism, each community must play to its respective strengths. Clay County must be able to identify the location of its visitors to Dale Hollow Lake and be able to advertise in those areas. Warren County should be able to package its natural attractions into an experience for its visitors. With regards to economic development, both communities should have knowledge of their inventory of sites, including infrastructure and know what is attractive to industries looking to establish a presence in their area.

The Entrepreneurship and Small Business course was pivotal in assisting both communities in knowing what assets establish a welcoming climate in regards to small businesses. The ideal climate would have an entrepreneurship support system. This system include incubators, networking opportunities, local merchants associations and contact information for organizations that assist small businesses with funding opportunities, legal assistance, code compliance, and

licensing. This course also stated that local governments should seek to be adaptable in regards to zoning and codes to be able to keep up with the changing business climate and improving technology.

The Basic Economic Development Course established best practices for each community with regard to site development and recruitment. Clay County, which is currently developing a site, has action items that demand the performance of due diligence (environmentals, geo tech, and endangered species review) on all current and future sites, the importance of access and infrastructure, the establishment of an incentive program, and the continuing education of the Industrial Development Board. Warren County, which has two State of Tennessee certified sites, has action items that call for the use of TVA mock site visits, RFI audit programs, and a strategy to market the unique workforce initiatives located within the county. While economic development in the two counties is on two different levels, each could take the principles established in the Basic ED course and apply them to their respective community.

The Basic Finance also established best practices for both communities in regards to development financing. Clay County was encouraged to establish a payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) program to help bolster its industrial development. The City of McMinnville has a PILOT established to help attract retail; however, after review it was determined that a stronger incentive could help increase the location of commercial business in the downtown area. In the commercial development section of the Warren County plan, McMinnville is encouraged to implement Tax Increment Financing (TIF) that will allow developers to borrow money against the projected property value increase. These practices, if implemented, could trigger a development boon for both of the respective communities.

Conclusion

It has been established by the Executive Director of the UCDD that comprehensive and strategic planning will be a part of the agency's mission moving forward. The experience gained from the beginning of the Clay County Plan through the completion of the Warren County Plan cannot be understated. Several valuable best practices were established throughout this process and also several lessons were learned. These best practice will be implemented in the composition of future plans and the potential pitfalls will hopefully be avoided.

The first best practice established is that communication with the local government **is** vital. Without establishing the vision of the community, the plan will not succeed because it will not have any clear direction. Also, the Strategic Planning course established that the ultimate goal is the success of the community, not the success of the plan. If the success of the community comes without the assistance of the plan or even in spite of the plan, the goal is accomplished. The second best practice is to receive citizen input. While the goals of the leadership are usually the most sensible, practical, and achievable, the voice of the citizen should always be included. The third and final best practice is to have conviction in and commitment to the plan. The action items that are recommended are not always going to be popular, be it with the elected leadership or the citizens of the community. If that is the case, be prepared stand by **the** recommendations and most importantly, have the research to defend every action item listed in the plan.

The first and most important lesson learned throughout the process is to be flexible. The change in leadership in Warren County during the planning process meant a change in scope of the plan. While this shift in scope was not ideal, the team was able to include Warren County and its other municipalities as a part of the plan. The second lesson learned is that each section should have a sole author. While speaking with one voice is mandatory, it is much easier to rewrite a section of the plan than to write a section without enough information. The third lesson learned from the process that what is good for one community is not necessarily good for another. There are practices that are established that all communities should adhere to such as fiscal responsibility and due diligence. However, there are factors such as financial constraints and the local business climate that could influence whether certain recommendations, that should be common practice, would not be feasible in particular communities.

While these are not all of the best practices established and lessons learned, these are the ones that were most important. The UCDD is currently gathering data for one comprehensive plan and a parks and recreation strategic plan. The best practices and lessons learned from the Clay County and Warren County comprehensive plans will be implemented in the plans that will be written. While there were five TCED courses that were featured in the composition of these plans, something from all of the courses was used for content and it is certain that information from the TCED courses will be used in the future.