

Flagstaff Regional Plan Style Guide

August 3, 2012 CAC Meeting

Overview: The Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) is proud of the Regional Plan. We seek clear and enthusiastic language that will present our resolutions in a compelling way. Although a professional editor may offer suggestions, we will determine the plan's style.

Need & Purpose: After one round of edits, the draft Regional Plan still shows great variability in format, length, tone, and intent. Because multiple parties drafted different parts of the current plan, the diversity of style is not surprising. Consistency will make the plan easier to use—as well as more likely to be used—by the public and by decision-makers.

Model Documents: the Style Guide Task Team reviewed several regional plans and recommends the editor review them in the following context:

- **General Findings:**
 - Graphics should be directly relevant to adjoining text and strike an appropriate balance between being attractive and informative. They should make the document accessible and provide a tool for accountability.
 - Formatting technique(s) like color, headings, bullet points, text boxes and/or font styles should permit quick identification of main points.
 - Web site should avoid loading too much information or links on a single page. It should allow users to access increasing levels of detail as they need or want them.
- **Austin – best model**
 - Most similar to Flagstaff in tone and stated values.
 - Good use of photographs, graphics and nice balance of black and white space.
 - Guiding Principles are simple and memorable.
 - Introductions to elements are succinct and chapter summaries helpful. The brief list of challenges delivers intent and import.
 - Good list of document users.
 - May overuse “buzz words” and some value statements seem clichéd.
- **Melbourne**
 - Too “splashy” with its use of graphics where too many do not directly support the text.
 - Good user-friendly format and use of clear, simple language.
 - Good use of technical reports, especially online accessibility.
- **Blueprint Denver**
 - Too text heavy with little or no formatting. Too much background information upfront.
- **Sacramento:**
 - Dissatisfying tone. Too regulatory, bombastic, and “proud.”

“Flagstaff-centric” Words and Phrases: These words and phrase describing Flagstaff appear frequently in public participation exercises and should be used regularly in the plan.

- Exceptional
- Bright
- Underfunded
- Authentic
- Hometown
- Great potential
- Frontier
- Complete
- Not Phoenix
- Fun
- Family
- Opportunity
- Active
- Funky
- Diverse
- Wonderful
- Outdoors
- Beautiful
- Friendly
- Hot
- Sense of place
- Sacred
- Inspiring
- Vibrant
- Dry
- Unique

Audience: These are the primary users in order of frequency or importance of use.

- **City Council/Board of Supervisors (legislative bodies):** Will use the document to make final decision in most land use decisions including/such as regional plan amendments, zoning cases and permits. Document should quickly provide general background (why/intent), goals and policies (how), and sense of priorities. Document should also be broad enough to permit Council priorities or emphasis to change between major plan updates. This may be especially true during annual budget process to set programs that implement the plan. Will have strong interest in public response and reaction to staff recommendation and legislative interpretation of the plan.
- **City/County Planning & Zoning Commissions:** Advisory to Council/Board. Will use the document similarly. May desire clear connection to supporting technical documents to best justify or explain their recommendations.
- **City/County Management (including legal counsel):** Also advisory to Council/Board. Will use the document to review staff recommendations, assess high level legal implications (e.g., property acquisition or impact issues), and explain budget recommendations (e.g., funding for master planning efforts, regulation updates, etc.)
- **City/County Community Development Staff:** Will use the document to develop and evaluate application of regulations to development applications such as regional plan amendments, zoning cases, and subdivision platting and make recommendations to management and governing bodies. Document should permit staff to clearly communicate to applicants the community expectations and concerns relevant to the property in question, subsequent recommended modifications or conditions for approval, and the reasoning behind them. Section heads will also use the document to prioritize budget request for planning efforts such as area plans and regulation updates.
- **Development Community/Realtors/Prospective Buyers/Land owners:** Will use the document to determine permissibility of different development proposals on their property, advise developers or owners on best available properties suitable to a proposed use or “highest and best use” for a given property, inform on the range of possible uses surrounding a property and their potential impacts to that property, inform on long range changes including infrastructure.
- **Interest Groups:** (e.g., Environmental, Business, and Education): Like property owners will use the document to advocate for or against proposals or applications but often on a broader range of policy issues. May use the document to advocate for or against new initiatives such as plans, infrastructure investments, educational programs, or business districts.

- **Resource Agencies:** Will use the document in discussions with the City and County on resource/agency management plans, joint agreements, and cooperative initiatives.
- **General Public:** Requires an accessible document that allows them to decide—literally vote—on whether it represents the “right” direction for the region. May use the document as a means of advocating for or against generally larger or more impactful proposals.

Conciseness: Simple declarative sentences should be used, not passive construction (“The goat is on the roof,” not “the goat is located on the roof”). Plan authors often add language for two reasons: First, to list examples; second, to list purposes. The former may be relegated to the appendices as strategies and the latter retained to inform a full range of strategies. Use short statements with “punch” for the goals while longer statements are often necessary for the policies.

Example: ***Goal E&C.2: Protect, improve, and restore ecosystem health and maintain plant and animal community diversity across all land ownerships in the Flagstaff region.***

Change: Protect, improve and restore ecosystem health

- “and maintain plant and animal community diversity” explains ecosystem health, is addressed in the introduction, and may be seen as redundant.
- “across all land ownerships” might be retained to inform a full range of strategies or more fully developed as a strategy.
- “Flagstaff region” might be safely assumed as implied.

Eliminating redundancies and choosing words with the fewest syllables will make the document shorter and easier to use and understand. Eliminated text should be either supported by the introduction or removed to an appendix and to the extent possible editor’s comments to document.

Tone: A consistent and predictable tone is desired. Flagstaff as a community tends toward the informal. One CAC member used the phrase “friendly and welcoming” and a plan reflective of that informality is appropriate. It is desired that language become more formal as an element moves from introduction (conversational or storytelling) to goals to policies (more structured syntax).

Example (informal): WR1.1 Participate in and support regional processes to develop a sustainable water budget.

Example (too formal): ***Policy E&C.7.3.*** The City of Flagstaff and its regional partners shall implement best management practices to protect and maintain surface waters and their contributing watersheds.

Intent: The plan will clearly state the type and degree of intended government action. Goals will be limited to action statements. Generally speaking, the use of active verbs is preferred. Policies will contain both degree and action. This pre-defined set of words and synonyms will be used to express degree. The use of adverbs (e.g., “Strongly encourage...”) to emphasize intent or priority may be used sparingly. A draft policy exhibiting supporting clauses may be a good candidate.

Inform: Government can give people information and hope they benefit from it (stop smoking).
Suggested Synonyms: **Educate, Advocate**

Encourage: Government can subsidize an activity and hope to get more of it (“cash for clunkers,” private education, recycling) Suggested Synonyms: **Subsidize, Support**

Require: Government can require or prohibit an activity (licensing, traffic laws, and regulation)
Suggested Synonyms: **Mandate, Enforce, Regulate**

Provide: Government can actually provide the activity because it is so important and enough of it will not occur in the absence of government provision (defense, police, and roads). Ideally, government should provide only “public goods,” but people will disagree about how much of it

Petition (not included in Cothran’s work): Government can pursue enabling or regulating legislation from the appropriate level of government to enable pursuit of locally desired policy ends that are now legally or financially unattainable. (implement a local gas tax)

Partner (not included in Cothran’s work): A unit of government may lack the authority or means to unilaterally affect policy and depend on the act or partnership of another agency to achieve the policy goal. (secure long-term open space commitment from federal agency)

Generally speaking, as a policy document the plan should be long on guidance and short on mandates (i.e., “Require”). An exception may be its application to process actions, such as requiring a developer to consider the full range of resource values. Where the CAC feels mandates are imperative, clear justification in the plan or a supporting document may be warranted.

Clarity: Deliver a clear message by using plain English, not “legalese” or “plannerese.” Use consistent construction. Lead each paragraph with the point being made and then explain it. Describe the ideal state or goal then explain why it’s desirable. Describe present conditions if they are different from the desired condition, but celebrate and affirm present conditions if they good. Provide history only as necessary for clarity.

Use of Technology: The editing team should keep in mind the following objectives when applying technological or digital applications to the document:

- **Universal access:** Some users will not have access to computers or the internet except through public locations. Some users will not have the capability or training to use digital technology.
- **Over-reliance/Proper balance:** The directly presented text and supporting graphics should convey all or nearly all of the policy guidance of the plan. Technology applications should enhance ease of navigation and provide access to additional information but should not be required for general policy guidance.

Thanks to Susan Lamb Bean, Nat White, Devonna McLaughlin and Alex Wright for their input.