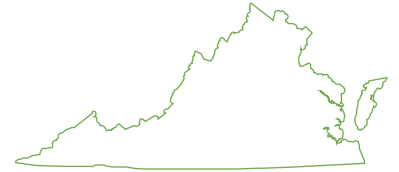


# Comprehensive Planning



SARAH KOHRS

Virginia is a Dillon Rule state, which means local government authority is limited to the powers granted by the state legislature. Counties, cities, and towns need General Assembly authorization to enact most policies. However, the legislature has granted local governments control over land use decisions in their jurisdictions, including the authority for land use planning and zoning.

[Virginia State Code § 15.2-2223](#) calls for local planning commissions to prepare and recommend Comprehensive Plans (Comp Plans) to guide the physical development of territory in their jurisdictions. As such, decisions and plans vary widely between communities. Local governments must adopt Comp Plans, review them, and potentially update them every five years. They must include transportation as an element of their plans, but transportation decisions generally are made at the state level.

According to the Virginia State Code, [Comp Plans](#) direct “a coordinated, adjusted, and harmonious development of the territory which will, in accordance with present and probable future needs and

resources, best promote the health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity and general welfare of the inhabitants, including the elderly and persons with disabilities.” Transportation plans must be included that accommodate multi-modal forms of transportation and consider how to align transportation infrastructure with affordable housing and accessible community services. They include analyses of conditions and trends, provide a long-term vision for the community, and can include more-detailed ordinances that define, direct, and regulate acceptable land uses. Comp Plans are the foundation for local policies like zoning and subdivision ordinances. However, because Virginia is a Dillon Rule state, they may not impose more limits on development than the General Assembly has authorized in the Code of Virginia. In short, local ordinances must be consistent with overall state law.

Virginia is divided into planning districts based on the community of interest among its counties, cities, and towns. Planning District Commissions (PDCs) are regional planning organizations that can facilitate coordination between jurisdictions on important regional issues—like transportation.



Cities, counties, and towns of 3,500 or more people are eligible for commission memberships. Virginia has 21 PDCs composed of elected officials and citizens appointed by local governments.

PDCs “encourage and facilitate local government cooperation and state-local cooperation in addressing on a regional basis problems of greater than local significance.” They are a political subdivision chartered under the [Regional Cooperation Act](#) by the local governments of each planning district.

PDCs serve as a liaison between local governments and state agencies, develop regional strategic plans, and assist in the development of substate plans. They also collect data, conduct studies, identify opportunities, implement services, provide technical assistance, and participate in statewide geographic information systems (GIS).

Their authority is limited: Their actions may not affect the powers and duties of local planning commissions, and they may not implement their plans and policies without the agreement of the member local governments. [The Virginia Association of Planning District Commissions \(VAPDC\)](#) supports PDCs and works to coordinate inter-PDC functions and to bring diverse resources together in partnership with local, state, and federal authorities.

Virginia has a complex web of county government classifications ranging from commissions and boards



to executives and managers. Most cities have a council-manager or mayor-council form of government. These bodies have final say on land use decisions.

### To Learn More

- › [American Planning Association, Virginia Chapter](#)
- › [Virginia Planning District Commissions](#)
- › [Resilient Virginia](#)
- › [The Virginia Chapter of the American Planning Association: “Managing Growth and Development in Virginia: A Review of the Tools Available to Localities”](#)
- › [Virginia Department of Transportation: “Land Use and Development”](#)