Policy 101 – *Tips on Writing Effective Policies (December 2022)*

Shorter is better. A plan is more usable, has greater impact, and is easier to understand when there are fewer policies and the policies are concise and to the point. Long, multipart policies tend to lose their impact. Granted, there are times when it makes sense to have one longer policy rather than two short ones. Look for ways to shorten a policy that will not reduce clarity or change the intent.

Lead with the focus of the policy. The first few words should state the primary point of the policy. Subsequent phrasing states how and other details.

Use strong action verbs. Good examples include, "implement," "provide," and "require." Weaker examples that are vague about what happens and the potential outcome include, "work with," and "consider." Policies should always begin with a verb. All policies apply to the city, therefore, there is no need to begin each policy with "The city should…"

Who is the "actor" for the policy? This is the city's plan, therefore, each policy should be phrased in the terms of what the city will do. This is also a good double check on whether a policy is feasible. If it can't be read a policy as something the city will be responsible for, then the policy needs to be recast.

Set policy, don't regulate. Policies should set the city's objectives and provide guidance, not dictate specific standards or regulations. Generally, policies are best expressed as "should" statements and not "shall" statements, although some policies need to be stated with strength and precision. The Comprehensive Plan sets the direction and, in most cases, the details of implementation should be left to the functional plans.

Locate policies where people will look for them. The easier they are to find, the more likely they will be used. Decide whether some subsets of policies should be located with their associated topic or grouped together. E.g. policy on financing of roads could be with other transportation policies or with other financing policies. Use references in the plan so that related policies in other sections are easy to find.

Add value. Each policy should add value by providing specific direction or objectives. Restating common practice or built conditions is not necessary. Vague policies that don't lead to action are unnecessary. Eliminate language that may have a racially disparate impacts.

Be clear about priorities. Having multiple policies that state, "It is a priority to…" only weakens the set of policies and confuses the reader. Consider putting priorities into a single policy statement and, if possible, indicating a hierarchy.

Send lists to the appendix. Lengthy lists of instructions, "such as" statements, and other references can be located in an appendix or external document that the policy points to. Attempting to embed them in the policy makes the policy long and unwieldy and could create confusion between policy and implementation.