

# How to Use the Town Plan Online

## Introduction: Democracy in Action

The Town Plan Online (TPO) is an innovative new tool developed by Reform Cohocton that invites residents to get involved in creating the future of Cohocton by being

1. a vehicle for defining and continually updating the Town's vision, for setting goals and strategies to achieve that vision, and for contributing to the actions that will make it real.
2. a single resource and record of all this local activity, organized around a single web site.
3. an open, living document that keeps our efforts and aspirations for the Town in one easy-to-use place.

The hope is that all residents will be able to use the TPO to bring whatever skills, ideas, or experience they may have to help Cohocton realize its goals. Take a few minutes to read the explanation of the TPO site below and see how it fits into the Cohocton planning process. Follow a few links until you get a feel for how the site works. And take a look at an Action Item or two so that you can understand what an Action Group is all about and how you might contribute.

## What is the Town Plan?

The Town Plan, known as the Master Plan or Comprehensive Plan, establishes goals and strategies from which the Town's zoning and planning laws flow. At one level the TPO is simply a digital version of that document. But it is also much more, because it includes tools that enable citizen groups to work toward realizing the planning vision.

The TPO is divided into two parts, the Core Plan and the Working Plan, that operate under the supervision of two town committees, the Planning and Zoning Committee (PZC) and the Community Development Committee (CDC).

1. The Core Plan is the digital equivalent of the paper version of the Town Plan. It includes a Preface, a Vision Statement, a description of Planning in Cohocton, a Summary of the town's planning milestones along with physical and demographic information, and Links to further mapping and geographical data. Following this is a section on current Goals and Strategies with more specific guidelines. Reading it is essentially similar to reading the paper document, except that many links have been provided to make it possible to jump quickly to related sections of the site. The Core Plan is a relatively static document meant for reading and reference; only the Town Board can modify it. The Core Plan will be continuously reviewed and upgraded, and its vision renewed at the Community Visioning Workshops scheduled every two years. The PZC administers the Core Plan by setting planning policy and approving revisions. The PZC includes two members each from the Town Board, the Planning Board, and the Zoning Board of Appeals, as well as four community members at large.
2. The Working Plan is the other half of comprehensive plan. As the name suggests, this is where the objectives of the Core Plan are actually carried out. Unlike the Core Plan, the Working Plan is continuously updated. The CDC administers the Working Plan by appointing and monitoring the progress of several Action Groups.

## What are Action Groups?

Action Groups are volunteer sub-committees appointed or approved by the CDC. This is where the active volunteer work of realizing the town's future actually takes place.

Each Action Group has its own page on the TPO site, serving two purposes. Members of the group use the page as a working tool, communicating with each other, posting documents for downloading, and so forth. In addition, any town resident who is interested in a project – not just a group member – can monitor the relevant Action Page or even send comments or ideas to the group. All that is required to participate is a simple registration of your name and email address on the TPO site and a commitment to productive communications.

## Who can participate in the TPO and how?

Anybody can “participate” in the TPO in the sense of reading what is posted there, following Action Group progress, and so forth. More active participation, such as emailing questions or comments, is limited to landowners and residents of Cohocton who must first complete a simple registration form. In addition, nonresidents can contribute comments and ideas under a separate status through the same registration process.

## What is an Action Page?

The TPO Action Page is, in effect, an ongoing, virtual meeting of the group that anyone is welcome to attend. Action pages are customized for each group, but in general they give the group's goal, its authority under the Core Plan, its schedule, current tasks, reports, useful downloads, and so forth.

## Where do Action Groups come from?

Most of the initial Action Groups will come from public town visioning sessions that Reform Cohocton will hold. Townspeople at these community-wide meetings will put forth ideas for projects, group them by similarity, and rank them according to urgency. The CDC will use the ranking to form several Action Groups, staffing them with interested citizens. Future Town Plan Workshops will repeat this renewal process for Action Groups and for the Town Plan in general every two years

Action Groups can be initiated in other ways as well. Local boards may suggest that a group be formed to address a problem or to pursue a goal. And individual citizens can also initiate an Action Group, using the protocol described below. A resident who follows this procedure will gain access to the planning process and a fair consideration of his or her idea.

## How do I turn my idea into reality?

If you have a good idea you'd like to see realized on behalf of the community, here is how you can use the TPO to make it happen.

First, you must be sure your idea is supported by the Town's objectives as described in the Town Plan. Search the TPO site to see what basis exists that's relevant to your idea. Start by looking at the short Preface and Vision Statement pages, check the Goals and Strategies and Archives, and be sure to read the list of Action Items. You might find an Action item that is close to your idea. If you do, check its Minutes and perhaps send an email to the chairperson to get a sense of where your idea might fit. It may have been discussed already, in which case you might ask to join the group.

Assuming there's nothing in the works already, submit an Action Request Form requesting support from the CDC. The CDC, possibly with advice from the PZC, will review your

application for consistency with the Core Plan, practicability, and appropriateness. The CDC may reach a number of conclusions: it may simply approve the project, or it may postpone it or find it unsuitable.

If your idea is approved, this is where your participation actually begins. The CDC will define the scope and priority of the project and authorize you to set up an Action Group. You will be asked to assemble a committee subject to CDC approval. An Action Group page will be established on the TPO site. The CDC will then monitor your project's progress and evaluate its readiness for review by the PZC and recommendation to the Town Board for ratification.

Ratification by the Town Board would be the final step in this process, preceded by public input, budgeting, and advocacy by the PZC. Once completed, the Action Item would be ended and its results would become a reality for the Cohocton community.

### What are the Rules of the Road for using the TPO?

1. Anyone can read anything on the TPO site.
2. Any registered user – resident or nonresident – can send a message to the chair of an Action Group.
3. Only Action Group members can post to their Action Page.
4. The CDC creates new Action Groups.
5. Only the Town Board can modify the Core Plan.
6. Only Action Group members may use the Action Page's contribution tools: i.e. post messages, add files, make entries in the diary, etc.