



CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Conroe Comprehensive Plan is an official public document that will serve as a general framework for future development in the community. The Plan is a tool that can be used by the City to guide future growth in an appropriate and desired manner and improve the quality of life of its residents. In order to achieve this, the Plan:

- ◆ Provides a policy framework for decisions relating to the physical growth and economic development of Conroe
- ◆ Documents a vision and provides goals that Conroe can work toward through the year 2025
- ◆ Assesses opportunities and challenges facing the City
- ◆ Identifies community priorities as well as important strategies and policies for addressing them
- ◆ Outlines an implementation program that emphasizes specific actions and practical results

PLANNING IN THE CITY OF CONROE

The City of Conroe last updated its Comprehensive Plan in 1991. Since that time, the City has undergone significant change and growth. As such, Conroe's City Council and Planning Commission recognized the need to take another look at where the City currently stands and where it would like to be in 2025. The 1991 Plan has provided important background information about infrastructure demands and capital improvements needed to serve growth. However, the needs identified in the plan are largely based on data that has since become outdated. Recent change described by residents and verified by Census data has resulted in challenges and opportunities that call for new goals and strategies.

City officials are well aware of these challenges and have been actively planning for particular aspects of the

community with the recent completion of the *Parks, Recreation and Open Space Master Plan* (2003) and the *Downtown Development, Branding and Marketing Plan* (2005). The Comprehensive Plan is in no way a replacement for these important, detailed plans. Rather, it is an overarching document that folds the major issues, goals and priorities of these various plans into one document. This ensures that various plans are working together to achieve the overall community vision. A summary of previous plans is presented in **Table 1-1**.

This new Comprehensive Plan, prepared during 2006 with the assistance of the consulting firm Wilbur Smith Associates, is designed to acquaint the reader with the City by documenting existing conditions and characteristics while identifying the community's goals, expectations, and priorities for the next 20 years.



Table 1-1
Previous Plans for the City of Conroe

	1991 Comprehensive Plan	2003 Parks and Recreation Master Plan	2005 Downtown Development, Marketing & Branding Plan
Source	University of Houston Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering	Lloyd Lentz	Destination Development, Inc.
Purpose	To provide information about future growth needs based on previous planning and infrastructure studies.	To guide future development and fiscal planning for the City of Conroe’s park system for the next 5-10 years.	To provide a marketing/feasibility assessment of the facilities and actions needed to revitalize downtown Conroe.
Major Themes	The 1991 plan primarily focused on infrastructure, facilities and services that would be needed to meet a growing population.	The plan identifies several shortcomings of the City’s park system through the needs assessment. Most noteworthy is the unequal distribution of parks which results in severe deficiencies of park space in the northwest and southwest areas of the City.	The plan identifies the City’s potential to brand itself as the “Music Capital of Texas”. Based on this theme, the plan provides specific recommendations about the types of entertainment facilities, public infrastructure and retail amenities needed to support a vital downtown.
Relationship to Comprehensive Plan Update	The 1991 plan provides important background information by documenting the growth projections, issues and infrastructure needs of the City at that time. This provides a helpful understanding of issues that are new to Conroe, and those that are long-standing.	The parks plan identifies potential bike and trail corridors along key waterways. The plan notes that these should be developed in conjunction with the City’s drainage and storm water management efforts. The updated Comprehensive Plan has elements dealing with both of these topics (including a master thoroughfare map that incorporates proposed pedestrian/cycling trails).	This plan outlines specific capital improvement needs and implementation strategies for a key area of the City. This affects both the physical and economic development of the community—two key components of the updated Comprehensive Plan.



The Comprehensive Plan also includes specific action strategies for achieving these goals. It addresses the physical aspects of planning such as land use and development, transportation facilities and improvements, and parks and recreation. In addition, it provides long-term policies that will guide everyday decisions regarding development review and approval, budgeting and fiscal management and capital improvements programming. The Comprehensive Plan also sets the stage for more focused planning efforts, providing long-term perspective and highlighting how actions in one area, such as the extension of roads and utilities, can have implications in other areas, such as land use, annexation and neighborhoods.

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING AUTHORITY

While cities in Texas are not required to maintain long-range development plans as in some other states, the Texas Legislature provided the following guidance to cities through Chapter 213 of the Texas Local Government Code related to Municipal Comprehensive Plans:

The powers granted under this chapter are for the purposes of promoting sound development of municipalities and promoting public health, safety and welfare.

State statutes enabling long-range urban planning by Texas cities also leave it to these municipalities to determine what topics will be covered in their plans. Chapter 213 advises that a comprehensive plan may:

- ◆ Include but is not limited to provisions on land use, transportation and public facilities
- ◆ Consist of a single plan or a coordinated set of plans organized by subject and geographic area
- ◆ Be used to coordinate and guide the establishment of development regulations

WHY SHOULD THE CITY OF CONROE PLAN?

Local planning allows the City of Conroe to have some degree of control over its destiny rather than simply reacting to change. Planning allows the City to proactively manage future growth and development as opposed to reacting to development proposals on a case-by-case basis without adequate and necessary consideration of community-wide issues.

The process required to develop the Conroe Comprehensive Plan may be more valuable to the community than the product itself, since the Plan is ultimately only a snapshot in time. The planning process involves community discussion about how much growth will likely occur, where growth will occur, the nature of future growth, and whether the community can afford to provide the necessary public services and facilities to support this growth. This leads to pivotal discussions about what is "best" for the community and how everything from taxes to "quality of life" will be affected.

The Conroe Comprehensive Plan provides an opportunity for elected and appointed officials to step back from pressing, day-to-day issues and clarify their ideas on the kind of community



Conroe should be. The Plan development process provides a chance to look broadly at programs for neighborhoods, housing, economic development and provision of public infrastructure and how these concerns may relate to one another. The Conroe Comprehensive Plan represents a "big picture" of the City, one that can be related to the trends and interests of the broader region as well as the State of Texas.

Local planning is often the most direct and efficient way to involve members of the general public in describing the community they want. The process of plan preparation provides a rare opportunity for two-way communication between citizens and local government officials as to their vision of the community and the details of how that vision is to be achieved. The process also results in a series of goals and policies that, ideally, will guide the City in administering development regulations; in determining the location, financing and sequencing of public improvements; and, in guiding reinvestment and redevelopment efforts. The Plan also provides a means of coordinating the actions of many different departments and divisions within the City.

To recap, reasons for planning in the City of Conroe include:

- ◆ To ensure adequate facilities to meet the demands of future growth and development
- ◆ To ensure the long-term protection and improvement of the image and appearance of the community
- ◆ To maintain the community's local heritage and culture
- ◆ To involve local citizens in the decision-making process and reach consensus on the future vision of the City and its ongoing development
- ◆ To help develop an annual work program by identifying and prioritizing community improvements

INTENDED USE OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Conroe Comprehensive Plan contains various components and serves numerous functions such as providing information, identifying existing conditions and characteristics, and establishing local governmental policies and strategies. It is a definitive source of information regarding the existing and future conditions and characteristics of the community. By its nature, the Plan is intended to serve all interests of the community and thus offers the following benefits:

- ◆ It states the intentions of the City's governing body regarding the area's physical development and infrastructure investment, which creates a level of certainty for landowners and developers.
- ◆ It establishes local policy and provides guidance toward future growth and development, which may be utilized by the City and others in various types of decision-making.
- ◆ It identifies programs and initiatives in the form of specific statements of action, which may form a coordinated work program for the departments of the City.
- ◆ It identifies capital improvement needs and priorities, which may be



utilized by City management in annual budgeting and capital programming.

- ◆ It forecasts the potential direction and nature of future development and coordinates improvements, thereby making citizens aware of the anticipated pattern of development and its potential influence on private property.
- ◆ It serves as the “blueprint” for the area’s future economic and physical development, which is useful to other local, State and Federal agencies engaged in the provision of programs, services and facilities.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Conroe Comprehensive Plan was developed using a combination of research and data analysis and consultation with stakeholders and public officials. The latter activity is extremely important to ensure that the Plan is consistent with community values, issues and priorities. The following activities were conducted through the planning process to ensure the Plan is true to the City’s goals and needs:

- ◆ Key Person Interviews were conducted early in the process with small groups of community leaders, civic and neighborhood organizations, community service organizations, business and industry leaders, major landowners and developers, and other community members. The purpose of these small group interviews was to solicit the input of local residents concerning common perceptions,

issues, problems, opportunities, constraints, assets and challenges in the City. This input was invaluable toward understanding the underlying issues and needs of the City and specifically the values and priorities of those who know best—citizens.

- ◆ The Conroe City Council and Planning Commission were involved as key participants in developing the plan through several meetings and workshops that took place throughout the planning process. The Council and Commission were given regular progress reports and reviewed drafts of the Plan through each stage of the comprehensive planning process.
- ◆ Numerous working sessions were held with City staff who provided insight into the plan development process, reviewed each plan element and provided suggestions to ensure the Plan adequately addresses issues facing Conroe.
- ◆ A Joint Workshop was held with City Council and the Planning Commission to review and discuss each element of the Comprehensive Plan. A key task of the workshop was a “priority setting” exercise to establish an initial work program and develop strategies for implementation.
- ◆ The final stage of the planning process included a formal Public Hearing prior to consideration of the recommended Comprehensive Plan by City Council and the Planning Commission.



A CONTINUOUS PLANNING PROCESS

The Conroe Comprehensive Plan is a principal part of the overall, ongoing planning process of the City. The Plan should not be considered a static document but rather the result of a continuous process to gather and evaluate information and make informed decisions based upon constantly changing conditions.

The Plan is intended to be reviewed on a regular basis and updated as needed to maintain its applicability to current conditions and priorities of the City. At a minimum, the entire Plan should be revisited every five years and revised as needed to ensure that it continues to reflect the true values and direction of the community. However, while the Plan must be flexible to respond to changing needs, the community should remain steadfast in its vision and support for the core goals and policies contained in the Plan.

ESSENTIAL ASPECTS OF A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

A thorough understanding of the City's past, present and future is needed to identify key issues and trends and formulate realistic goals, workable policies and effective action plans. Ultimately the Plan provides a solid foundation for making informed and fiscally responsible decisions regarding the community's future growth and development and the adequate provision of facilities and services.

The Plan is comprehensive in two ways:

1. geographically, since it considers the entire city limits and planning area, and

2. by the variety of issues and elements that are evaluated simultaneously to determine the best future course.

For these same reasons, the Plan is general, since it is not intended to provide definitive answers in every situation, nor in the midst of conditions that change over time. Instead, the Plan provides a policy framework to guide numerous public and private decisions.

Some elements of the Plan are especially long-term and will become permanent factors in the ongoing development of the City, such as where roads and infrastructure will be extended, where various types of development are likely to occur, and where park and recreation areas will be needed to serve a growing population.

The Plan should be optimistic and even inspirational—enough to challenge the community about its future. But it also must provide clear direction through statements of action that indicate how to achieve the City's desired vision. The sign of an effective plan is when it is frequently cited at Planning Commission and City Council meetings and regularly consulted in the business and development communities. City officials should embrace their Plan as the "road map" for the City in the years ahead, providing practical guidance for every municipal function.

Finally, the Conroe Comprehensive Plan should not be confused with zoning. Zoning is a legal mechanism cities may enact whereby land is classified for specified uses. The Comprehensive Plan is a more general guide for future growth and development. As discussed in Chapter Six, zoning is one tool among many that the City may consider



adopting to manage land and infrastructure development to achieve the goals identified in the Comprehensive Plan. Even without land use regulation, it is “just good business” for a city to maintain a long-range plan.

ORGANIZATION OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Conroe Comprehensive Plan is organized into nine individual plan elements, which address the existing conditions, issues, goals and action plans for various facets of the community. These elements include:

- ◆ **Chapter One: Introduction**—outlines the purposes of comprehensive planning and background on the plan development process.
- ◆ **Chapter Two: Community Profile**—documents the existing socioeconomic conditions and characteristics of the City. It includes data relating to historical, current and forecasted population and other significant trends.
- ◆ **Chapter Three: Vision and Goals**—expresses the vision of what residents and community leaders want the City to be now and in the future. The vision statement is intended to be general in order to provide an overall guide for the specific elements of the Comprehensive Plan.
- ◆ **Chapter Four: Growth Capacity**—documents the City’s ability to meet existing and future needs based on available information regarding the capacity of water, wastewater and storm drainage systems.
- ◆ **Chapter Five: Transportation**—identifies the functional classes of existing and proposed major thoroughfares and highlights necessary thoroughfare system improvements. This chapter includes a Thoroughfare Plan map that considers future thoroughfare, bicycle and pedestrian needs.
- ◆ **Chapter Six: Urban Development**—illustrates the anticipated urban growth potential and likely directions of growth. This chapter includes a general inventory of existing land use and development within the city limits and planning area. The chapter also includes a short discussion about land management alternatives that can be used to guide growth and development in the City of Conroe.
- ◆ **Chapter Seven: Economic Opportunity**—documents key issues and recommendations aimed at strengthening the local tax base and diversifying the economy.
- ◆ **Chapter Eight: Parks and Recreation**—summarizes findings and supports priorities and implementation strategies from the City’s recently completed Parks and Recreation Master Plan to ensure that the Comprehensive Plan corresponds with the Parks Plan.
- ◆ **Chapter Nine: Implementation**—includes specific actions that are linked to the goals and policies of each of the plan elements; the timeframe for completing each action; and strategies for successful Plan implementation.