

Planning Census-designated Places.

Planning Unincorporated City-like Places like Cities.

Many counties in the United States have areas of urban or suburban development with housing and shops that are not within an incorporated municipality. The U.S. Bureau of the Census calls these unincorporated urban/suburban areas “census – designated places [C-DPs]”. The task is to plan these areas as though they were cities even though they are not. They do not generally have an organizing body such as a city government, any revenue sources or any specific standing within the county budgeting process.

There are exceptions. Some C-DPs have been addressed as special districts with one or all of the municipal functions such as C-DP specific land use controls, taxing systems or budgets all within the host city’s purview. Whenever and wherever C-DPs become unique, substantial places, such an approach is warranted. The creation of a special status has two benefits.

First, the C-DPs’ urban services can be funded largely by the residents and businesses within the designated place relieving countywide property owners of the burden of carrying this urban/suburban place to a standard beyond the normal countywide offerings. Second, the designated property owners can have some semblance of self-government by establishing unique land use controls and determining levels of facility services desired and the accompanying funding system. A designated area can be like a city without being a city.

Definition from the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

“Census designated places (CDPs) are statistical geographic entities representing closely settled, unincorporated communities that are locally recognized and identified by name. They are the statistical equivalents of incorporated places, with the primary differences being the lack of a legally defined boundary and an active, functioning governmental structure, chartered by the state and administered by elected officials. CDPs defined for the 2020 Census will also be used to tabulate American Community Survey, Puerto Rico Community Survey, and Economic Census data after 2020, and potentially data from other Bureau of the Census (Census Bureau) censuses and surveys. The Census Bureau is publishing this notice in the Federal Register to announce final criteria for defining CDPs for the 2020 Census. In addition to CDPs, the program also encompasses the review and update of census tracts, block groups, and census county divisions.”

LINK: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2018/11/13/2018-24571/census-designated-places-cdps-for-the-2020-census-final-criteria>

The geographic boundaries of a C-DP determined by the Bureau of the Census is solely for federal statistical purposes. It is a starting place. Boundaries can be tailored to “on the ground” conditions with adjustments suitable to the affected property owners – residential and commercial. Once a C-DP has been identified, planning can proceed from the top-down with the county initiating the process; or from the bottom-up with local constituents initiating process. In both cases there needs to be a partnership between the property owners and the host county.

Planning Process. Like cities, most urbanized/suburbanized C-DPs consist of neighborhoods, corridors, centers and environmental/open lands. A traditional approach is the starting point with a vision for the entire place supported by a development/preservation strategy and a series of action plans. Within the holistic approach to the entire place, special focus can be given to neighborhoods, corridors, centers and open lands.

Like citywide plans, a plan for a C-DP needs a financial plan and an operating/maintenance plan. The finance plan consists of the sources and uses of funds specific to the C-DPs. These may include funds from county sources plus state and federal funds, as well as funds generated by properties and activities within the C-DP.

The development/preservation plan for the designated place may include:

- A land use element reflecting developed properties, vacant properties, natural and historic sensitive lands and the restrictions placed on each with land use and zoning regulations.
- An infrastructure plan including the sources and systems for potable water distribution, wastewater and solid waste collection and disposal, parks and trails, internet and phone service, electric and gas power sources and stormwater management.
- A mobility plan that encompasses streets, bikeways, trails and transit.
- Places with extensive commercial or industrial uses will require special treatments to plan the development and preservation of these areas. A balance seems to always be necessary to reap the employment and tax benefits while mitigating the congestion, unsightliness and disruptions of intense areas.

The long-range, comprehensive finance plan identifies sources and uses of funds. Uses are usually straight-forward. Certain facilities and services are desired or necessary and their costs are definable. Creativity comes in on the sources side. Continuing to get the “fair share” of county money is important. Additional funds from special taxing or benefit districts designed for the designated place can provide additional funds for additional services.

Philanthropy from within the designated place or beyond often occurs along with special grants for state and federal agencies for on-gong or demonstration projects. Attracting institutional uses and activities can also benefit the designated place residents and businesses whether the institution is a place of worship, a YMCA or Boys and Girls Club, a charter school or a new business that creates jobs and tax revenues within the designated place.

A management plan helps. Some one or group of some ones will be required to advocate for the designated place for the county’s attention, to organize community workshops to discuss visions and actions and to be the communication conduit that keeps residents, employees and business owners informed of activities that affect the C-DP. This person could be a county staffer, a local volunteer or an employee of the special district created for the designated place; but someone needs to be in charge.