



**Michigan Association of Planning  
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**A Matter of Interpretation**

One of the responsibilities of the zoning board of appeals (ZBA) is to interpret the zoning ordinance when there are questions about the intent and meaning of text, or zoning map. Once an official interpretation is made, it becomes the standard by which the subject appeal and subsequent actions are determined. Many times the ordinance is subsequently amended to reflect the official interpretation. Before the ordinance is amended, a community may wish to research the broader community impacts of the interpretation before adopting the ZBA's findings as a text or map amendment.

When making an interpretation, the following guidelines should be considered:

- Interpretations should be narrow and should not have the effect of amending the ordinance.
- MAP interpretations should be based on ordinance rules and relevant historical information. Refer to prior editions of the zoning map and current and prior editions of the master plan map for help in making map interpretations.
- If the ordinance is silent on a particular use, which is not similar to others already listed in the ordinance, the applicant should be advised to seek an ordinance amendment.
- Reasonable interpretations by administrative officials, which have been consistently applied over a long period of time, should be given strong consideration.
- Seek planning and legal advice as needed.
- Keep good records of all interpretations to help ensure consistency between past and future decisions.

**Michigan Association of Planning  
219 South Main Street, Suite 300 Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104  
Phone: 734.913.2000 Fax: 734.913.2061 web: [planningmi.org](http://planningmi.org)**

- If the intent of the regulation is unclear and the facts of the case can support more than one interpretation, the benefit of doubt should go to the property owner.