



**Michigan Association of Planning  
A Chapter of the American Planning Association**

Planning and Zoning Officials Academy Vol. 11, No. 4

Excerpted from the "Meetings" chapter of the Michigan Association of Planning's **Planning Commissioner's Toolkit**. To purchase a copy of the Toolkit, contact MAP at (734)913-2000.

### **Conducting Effective Public Meetings**

People today are very busy. It is expected that a meeting will proceed smoothly and efficiently to accomplish the agenda. It is also expected that the meeting will be run according to some standard of order, and that the public will be treated fairly and given reasonable opportunity to speak.

Although statutory requirements vary depending upon the type of governmental unit, planning commission meetings should be held monthly on a regularly scheduled date and hour. The meeting should begin on time and follow a written agenda. It is the role of the chair to keep commission members focused on the agenda and complete each item before moving on to the next. The commission should follow an agreed upon process for conducting business, such as Robert's Rules of Order. The commission accepts public comment at an established point in the agenda, and may choose to limit speaking time.

### **Statutory Requirements**

- .. All meetings must be conducted within the requirements of the Open Meetings Act.
- .. The Municipal Planning Act requires at least 1 meeting per month; Township and County Acts require not less than 4 regular meetings each year.
- .. Other state and federal laws may also be applicable. For example the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) has specific requirements for ensuring that special needs are met that will allow everyone to participate fully in the governmental process.

### **The Agenda**

The agenda should include the following, as a minimum. The order of business may be altered as needed:

- .. Call the meeting to order
- .. Approval of the minutes of the previous meeting
- .. Approval of the agenda
- .. Old business
- .. New business
- .. Public hearings
- .. Officer reports
- .. Committee reports (standing or special committees)
- .. Adjournment

### **Role of the Chair**

The role of the chair is to maintain order throughout the meeting and enforce meeting procedures. Since public hearings can become emotional, strict adherence to this policy is important. The chair should announce each agenda item and note the rules that apply to the hearing. During the meeting, the chair should ensure that courtesy is maintained and that speakers are not interrupted.

### **The Public Hearing Process**

Having a set procedure for meetings helps keep the decision-makers focused and allows the meeting to proceed in an orderly fashion. The following is a suggested process to follow for each public hearing.

- .. Chair opens public hearing and announces subject.
- .. Chair summarizes procedures/rules to be followed during the hearing, and explains if questions will be answered individually, or if the commission just intends to listen to comments and react later.
- .. Staff/Chair presents main points of application and recommendation.
- .. Correspondence or persons speaking in support of application are recognized, beginning with the applicant.
- .. Correspondence or persons speaking in opposition to the application are recognized.
- .. Applicant responds (if appropriate or desired).
- .. Chair closes public hearing, explains the next steps, and clarifies that the commission may or may not make a decision that night.
- .. Planning commission deliberates and reaches a decision – approve, deny, approve with conditions, or table.

### **Hints for a More Orderly Public Meeting**

- .. Print public participation rules on the back of the agenda. Each planning commission may provide for how zoning hearings will be conducted. These rules should be written and included in the by-laws.
- .. Do not attempt to answer every question; some comments cannot be answered.
- .. If things get out of hand, take a recess.
- .. Do not feel compelled to make a hasty decision the night of the hearing. Everyone should feel comfortable with his or her vote; if not, obtain whatever additional information is needed before proceeding with the decision.
- .. Remember, you represent the interests of the entire community, not just those at the public hearing.
- .. Limit speaking time, when necessary. If there are many people who wish to speak, it is appropriate to limit the time of each speaker, with the exception of the applicant. The applicant should be given as much time as needed, within reason, to present his or her case. If questioned, the Chair should indicate that the applicant is but one person (or a few people) and the people wishing to speak (generally against) are many.
- .. Limit the number of times one person may speak. Generally, each person need only be given a single opportunity to speak. At the discretion of the Chair, persons may be allowed to speak a second time to respond to earlier comments. However, the Chair should emphasize that repeat comments are unnecessary. Your rules may also require sign-up sheets for those persons wishing to speak, with the Chair recognizing those who have signed.
- .. The Chair may also ask if there is a spokesperson for the audience and ask that the spokesperson speak for the others present who agree with his/her point of view. The Chair should allow those for whom the spokesperson is speaking to be recognized, either through a show of hands or by standing. The spokesperson may be given additional time in recognition of his/her role.

After the public hearing is closed, the public is not involved in the discussion unless you bring them into it, which is not always a sound idea.

In a text box, please:

### **Sample Public Hearing Procedure**

Welcome to this public hearing. We appreciate your taking the time to present your opinions. Everyone will be given an opportunity to speak. In order for us to have an effective public hearing, we ask that you abide by the following rules:

1. Please wait for the Chair to acknowledge you before you speak.
2. Begin by stating your name and address (sign in cards are available).

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3. Give us your comments, opinions or questions on the issue being discussed.
4. To ensure that everyone has time to speak and that we can address other items on tonight's agenda, we may limit an individual's speaking time to 5 minutes. If time permits, we may allow you one additional time period to provide new information.
5. Please be respectful of the planning commission, council, or board, the applicant and your neighbors.

Again, thank you for attending.

Chair