



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

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*Excerpted from the "Gathering Information" 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.*

### **Public Input Techniques**

One of the most important responsibilities of the planning commissioner is to educate the public and involve them in the planning process. There are a number of methods for accomplishing this.

**Public Hearings.** Public hearings are required by law for various planning processes, including rezonings, special land uses, and planned unit developments. They are a minimum standard, and many communities develop extensive public input processes that engage the public in the planning process. The purpose of the public hearing is to provide citizens with the opportunity to comment on development proposals. There are specific notification requirements as enumerated in the zoning enabling acts (PA 110 of 2006). These requirements include direct mailings to surrounding property owners and notification in an official newspaper of general circulation announcing the public hearing, including specific timing requirements. It is imperative that strict adherence to these notification requirements be maintained, as failure to do so can place planning commission decisions in legal jeopardy.

**Other Public Input Techniques.** A successful community planning program will involve people by employing communication methods designed to promote openness and honesty from all concerned individuals, organizations, and businesses. Information about the community can be shared in a number of different formats. A community can use any of the following methods to facilitate the exchange of information. Some methods would be applicable during a master planning effort, others relevant during a basic site plan consideration, but in any case provide an opportunity for public comment beyond the minimum State requirements.

- ◆ Workshops/open houses. An informal workshop can be held to allow planning commissioners to answer questions in small group or one-on-one discussions. The meeting should be scheduled so people can attend at any point during an extended time period. No formal presentations are offered, although periodic explanations of the workshop's format and general content are helpful. These are valuable before or after a major plan update, when considering a highway corridor or sub-area plan, or when seeking public input on a major policy change, such as implementing a purchase of development rights program
- ◆ Neighborhood meetings. In some communities neighborhood-oriented meetings may be useful to discuss local issues, such as new parks, expansions of neighborhood businesses or planned roadway improvements. As with the workshops, these meetings should be relatively informal and planned to allow as much interaction as possible between the planning commission and neighbors.
- ◆ Joint meetings with elected officials. The planning commission should periodically meet in a joint session with the elected body. The elected officials participate as representatives of the residents and as the chief decision-makers. It is recommended that these meetings be held at least once each year. These meetings must also meet the Michigan Open Meetings Act and Americans With Disabilities Act provisions.
- ◆ Design Charette. This planning technique involves community participation in the development of designs for physical improvements. Typically, commissioners and citizens work with design professionals to create alternatives and solutions for high profile projects.
- ◆ Focus groups. The community may also choose to specifically invite representatives from neighborhoods, local schools, businesses, agriculture and other areas of interest to participate in the planning process at informal focus group meetings. This is particularly valuable when attempting to identify the community's vision of its future as part of the master plan process. Focus groups may also be used to address specific planning issues, such as agricultural preservation, where public input and support from specific interest groups is critical to the program's success.
- ◆ Surveys. A carefully crafted community survey can provide a reasonably accurate picture of community attitudes and opinions. The advantages of a survey will vary, depending on the technique used to develop and administer it. Random sample surveys, for example, can be very accurate, but limit the number of people given an opportunity to respond. Mass mailed surveys allow everyone to participate, but may not provide as high a confidence level in the results that comes with a random sample, depending upon the response rate. Surveys are very useful at the start of a new master plan or when important policies are proposed.

In a sidebar box with the design charette photo:

**What is a Charrette?** A charrette is a visually engaging, interactive, and collaborative series of public workshops, focus groups, field condition inventories, and design sessions. It offers opportunities for friendly, informal discourse and debate among community citizens, and the process achieves workable visions and solutions for specific neighborhoods or a whole community.