



Michigan Association of Planning
A Chapter of the American Planning Association

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The Officially Yours feature provides local appointed and elected officials with both basic and advanced topics addressing issues unique to the role as a local government representative.

THE COMMUNITY PLANNING PROCESS

A major task of planning commissions is to develop and periodically to update the master plan. Many planning commissioners, however, join a planning commission that already has a plan, and as a result, never have a chance to develop a master plan from “scratch.” Members who serve two or three terms, though, should become involved in a major review and updating of the master plan. Still, a real danger for nearly all planning commissions is that they get caught up in the short-term pressures and concerns and never really step back as a group and make a broad based assessment of what has happened.

WHY SHOULD PLANNING OCCUR?

Planning should take place for a number of reasons. Some of the key ones are as follows:

- *State planning acts require local planning commissions to develop a master plan.* This requirement may be important if a dispute arises and develops into court proceedings.
- *Planning permits communities to make choices and set goals* rather than just accept what happens. Planning, thus, contributes to orderly growth and development.
- *Planning helps prevent wasteful expenditure* of public and private funds. Planning enables local governments to anticipate service demands and to plan, locate, and build public service facilities accordingly. Costly mistakes are thus eliminated or at least reduced.
- *Planning is a key way to allocate scarce resources.* Without a public planning process, decisions that determine how land and other community resources are used are largely private decisions. Planning, thus, permits the community at large to have a say in how the community develops.
- *Planning helps to protect property values* largely by controlling the impact of one land use on a different use on adjacent or nearby land.
- *Planning contributes to economic development.* It provides information and data to those considering major investments in a community. It allows prospective investors to access the

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ability of a community to meet its needs for public services as well as provide amenities the company's employees may require.

The list of reasons for community planning could go on but these are sufficient for planning commissioners to insist on energetic and consistent community planning. It will always be difficult to demonstrate how planning contributes to the efficient and economical use of public and private funds. Showing the cost of mistakes that did not occur because of planning is not always possible. But planning commissioners need not be timid in asserting that investments in planning provide a solid return.

WHAT IS THE PLANNING PROCESS?

Planning is a way of achieving specific goals, solving existing problems, and preventing undesirable conditions from developing. A close look at the process reveals eight distinctive phases.

Identifying problems or issues-The list of problems, or conditions to be avoided, will be long in communities just beginning the process. In places needing to update the master plan, the list will be much shorter.

Research and analysis-This step involves gathering information and data, analysis of which should produce a clearer understanding of the problems.

Formulating goals and objectives-In this phase, the group seeks to define or describe the goals and objectives to be sought on behalf of the community.

Identify and evaluate alternatives-Here the purpose is to develop and assess several possible plans or programs to achieve the goals agreed upon.

Selecting a course of action-The planning commission must next decide upon a series of policies or steps to deal with a specific problem or group of related problems. It may take the form of a policy statement in the master plan or a recommendation to the legislative body for a change in an ordinance.

Implementing approved plans-In this phase a planning commission considers proposals for development against its master plan.

Evaluation-Here the planning commission evaluates its own actions as well as those of public and private decision makers to assess progress toward goals.

Adjusting plans and programs-Mainly this phase involves making minor adjustments unless major problems requiring significant new data needs and analysis are identified.

The planning process, then, is a problem-identifying and problem-solving procedure that enables a group to make interrelated choices. It is a goal-directed way of thinking about the future.

Developing a community's very first master plan can be a major undertaking. But if you are working to update a plan that has proven its value, your effort will likely be more limited, focusing on particular

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problems such as traffic, survival of industrial plants, periodic flooding, or other conditions defined as problems or situations for which new goals and objectives are sought.

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