



Michigan Association of Planning
A Chapter of the American Planning Association

Planning and Zoning Officials Academy Vol. 12, No. 11

The Planning and Zoning Officials Academy provides local elected and appointed officials with both basic and advanced topics addressing issues that are unique to the role as a local government representative. To suggest a topic, please contact Kelly McIntyre at (734) 913-2000.

WHAT IS A SITE PLAN?

A site plan is a drawing that presents information showing what an applicant wants to do on a parcel, including existing and proposed man-made structures as well as natural features. Site plans are prepared in accordance with local specifications that shows the arrangement, layout, and design of the proposed use of a single parcel of land.

According to Michigan's Zoning Enabling Act (Public Act 110 of 2006), a site plan includes *"the documents and drawings required by the zoning ordinance to insure that a proposed land use or activity is in compliance with local ordinances and state and federal statutes."*

Site plan review is the process of reviewing and approving the site plan.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A SITE PLAN?

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

The development of individual parcels must conform to zoning ordinance use and dimensional requirements. However, simple zoning regulations do not contain specifics regulating the details of a site's overall development as it relates to the protection of public health, safety, and welfare. Elements to consider include land use, setbacks, vehicular and pedestrian access, the provision of appropriate landscape features and buffers, and the location of parking areas, and sidewalks. Site plan specifications go beyond those of zoning and protect adjacent areas and community residents by insuring that the development of individual parcels of land does not have an adverse impact on adjacent properties or the surrounding neighborhood. It provides clear assurance to the community as to: how a development will be laid out; its relationship to public roads, utilities, other services and to adjoining land uses; what the physical design of the site will be.

Site plan review is a way to assure the physical development design standards of the community, as established in the zoning ordinance, are implemented as each property is developed or altered. Zoning requirements for setback, height, bulk, lot, and density greatly affect how a community appears and how it functions. Site plan review is the way to make certain these standards, as well as other site-related elements, are implemented on a site-by-site basis. In this way the community can ensure that a parcel's development fits properly into the community and is consistent with the community's master plan.

Site plan review is a technical process. The proposed site plan is compared to community design standards that are stated in the zoning ordinance, and the degree of conformance or nonconformance is established. For this reason, site plan review takes professional assistance and well trained decision makers to be utilized most effectively.

WHAT IS THE STATUTORY AUTHORITY FOR SITE PLAN REVIEW?

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The authority for site plan review comes from the Michigan Zoning Enabling Act. The Act states that the *“local unit of government may require the submission and approval of a site plan before authorization of a land use or activity regulated by a zoning ordinance. The zoning ordinance shall specify the body or official responsible for reviewing site plans and granting approval”*. Furthermore, the Act requires that *“the procedures and requirements for the submission and approval of site plans should be specified in the zoning ordinance”,* and *“decisions rejecting, approving, or conditionally approving a site plan shall be based upon requirements and standards contained in the zoning ordinance, other statutorily authorized and properly adopted local unit of government planning documents, other applicable ordinances, and state and federal statutes”* (Section 125.3501).

WHAT DEVELOPMENTS REQUIRE SITE PLAN REVIEW?

The local zoning ordinance specifies exactly what developments are subject to the site plan review process. The Zoning Enabling Act requires site plan review for all special land uses (also known as special uses or conditional uses) and all planned unit developments (PUDs). Some communities require site plan review with conditional rezoning applications.

Site plan review is conducted after it is determined that the proposed use is permitted under the terms of the zoning ordinance and that a site plan review application is required. Most communities specify thresholds of size or impact to establish which additional developments go through site plan review. Typical thresholds include:

- All new principal commercial and industrial uses.
- All uses with greater than a specified number of parking spaces.
- All structures with more than a specified number of square feet.
- Changes in most non-residential land uses.
- Commercial and industrial facility expansions.
- Increases in the intensity of use.

- Moving structures onto or off of a site.

SITE PLANS VS SKETCH PLANS

The construction of individual single family homes and two family homes are usually exempted from site plan review, although a sketch plan is still typically required for a building permit. A sketch plan, also known as a plot plan, is a drawing that accompanies zoning permit requests for uses that do not require site plan review. Instead of having the drawing certified by an engineer, architect, or land surveyor (as is typically required for site plans), a sketch plan can be drawn by the property owner. It typically only shows the location and size of any structures as well as proposed setbacks, points of access and parking. The primary differences between a sketch plan and a typical site plan are the lesser degrees of detail, and the fact that site plans are usually presented in larger blueprint form. A sketch plan is typically acceptable if it is reproducible and meets the ordinance requirements.

Want to know more about site plans? Contact MAP for more information on how we can bring a Site Plan Review class to your community. Michigan Association of Planning (MAP) on-site training workshops *work* for you. We bring an instructor comes to *your* location, at a time and date convenient for *your* participants, and present one of our comprehensive educational programs, addressing the specific needs of *your* community. The workshop handouts, supplies, and presentation are shipped *directly to you*, along with certificates of completion for all participants. Call 734.913.2000 to make arrangements.