



Michigan Association of Planning
A Chapter of the American Planning Association

Excerpted from the Michigan Planner, June 1999 Issue.

Planning Basics: Site Plan Review and Zoning Ordinance

The Zoning act defines a site plan as, “the documents and drawings required by the zoning ordinance to endure a proposed land-use or activity is in compliance with local ordinances and state and federal statutes.” The act also indicates a community may “require the submission and approval of a site plan before authorization of a land use or activity regulated by the zoning ordinance.”

The zoning act requires the following three provisions be specified in the zoning ordinance to permit site plan reviews to be accomplished:

1. The activities which require site plan review and the body or official charged with reviewing and granting approval.
2. The requirements and standards upon which decision on requests for site plan review will be based.
3. The procedures and supporting materials required for application, review, and approval.

The zoning ordinances must state which land uses or activities will need site plan approval and the conditions under which a site plan will be reviewed. For example, the zoning ordinance may require that all uses permitted by right require a site plan review; or a site plan review may be required for all projects over a certain square footage or acreage.

Ultimately, it is up to the community to decide what zoning districts/uses will require review. Typically, single and two-family dwellings on individual lots and accessory buildings are not reviewed. However, a site plan review must be conducted for all special land uses (SLU) and planned unit developments (PUD). Although site plan review can take place at the same time as other reviews, there should be separate motions, one for approval of the PUD or SLU, and a separate one for the approval of the site plan.

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The ordinance must specify the “body, board, or official” who will review site plans. Review responsibilities can be divided; the planning commission may review certain plans and the zoning administrator others. The legislative body may also be made the final decision-maker for site plans, if desired. The board of appeals cannot conduct site plan reviews since they may have to hear an appeal of a site plan decision.

The zoning act offers no specific guidance as to the standards for site plan review. Typical standards will address traffic circulation, landscape preservation, the adequacy of public facilities, drainage, lighting, and similar items. The standards that are used to make a decision on the plan must be in the zoning ordinance. If the plan conforms to these standards and other requirements of the ordinance, it must be approved.

The zoning ordinance should describe the minimum application requirements, which will normally be the same as those for other zoning reviews. Site plans should be submitted far enough in advance to allow the reviewers sufficient time for site visits, etc. Site plan reviews by staff can have different submission and application procedures for “administrative” reviews normally conducted with the building department process.

A final site plan should be as complete as possible, including details on utilities, curb-cut design, drainage, signs, etc., to ensure compliance with the ordinance and other community regulations. An application for review should not be accepted without ensuring that the items required by the ordinance are on the plan.

The zoning act does not require a public hearing for site plan reviews, although some communities elect to have one. If a hearing is to be held, the ordinance should specify the notice procedure to be used. At a minimum, the notice should contain a description of the property, the proposed use, the time and place of hearing, and where the plan may be reviewed and/or comments submitted.