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**A Chapter of the American Planning Association**

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The Planning and Zoning Officials Academy provides local elected and appointed officials with both basic and advanced topics addressing issues unique to the role as a local government representative. The article is used with permission by the American Planning Association. "Zoning for a Better Community" by Jeri Parish (*The Commissioner*, Winter 2006).

**Zoning for a Better Community**

**Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA)**

*By Jeri Parish*

As a member of my community's ZBA for 13 years, I have watched my community change and have helped it accommodate that change. An equally important part of the job is resisting granting variances to our ordinances that are not in the best interest of the community's character or that do not comply with the law.

Our board deals primarily with variances related to property, such as extending a driveway or overly tall fences. From time to time we also deal with requests for variances that have larger implications, such as the request for a taller building to house senior citizens. More recently, we have been responding to the need to accommodate more commercial buildings, which is important for our community's economy. Developers are planning to build a large commercial strip area with a theater, gas station, stores, and a Wal-Mart on previously vacant land. The project required numerous variances and stirred a lot of interest and even controversy in the community.

It is important when acting as an official to remember that not all decisions will make everyone happy. Decisions also need to be specific to the site and the circumstances;

we are not setting precedents and making long-term policy. We are applying the code, the law, and the plan to the specific case.

Participating in government in a small town has its challenges. Staying impartial is important; if a close neighbor is applying for a variance, I will sometimes recuse myself to avoid a conflict of interest.

What advice can I offer my fellow planning officials after 13 years of service? Get training! My community is committed to training and twice a year we attend live workshops.

What do officials need to know? Zoning, first and foremost. But it is also very important to know how to run public meetings, how to encourage the public to participate, and how to manage that participation. Also, learning how to create and prepare findings of fact is crucial.

*How can you get educated? Attend a Michigan Association of Planning (MAP) regional workshop or schedule an MAP on-site workshop. Purchase MAP's new Zoning Board of Appeals Toolkit, or any of a number of books offered by the APA Planning Press. Regardless of your community's budget, education is one expense that pays dividends.*