



Michigan Chapter | American Planning Association

Karen B Smith Chapter Achievement Award

Michigan is not immune to the housing supply crisis that plagues the US. Local government leaders increasingly recognize that restrictive zoning codes and outdated land use regulations suppress housing supply, drive up housing costs, and widen racial and economic disparities. Exacerbated by lengthy and unpredictable development review processes, vociferous residents who oppose new development that isn't single family, and elected officials who are reluctant to stand up to a density-resistant constituency complicate an already difficult situation; it is difficult to bring new housing to many markets. Implementing zoning reforms and easing restrictions can play a major role to increase housing supply that meets the needs of current and future residents.

Unlike other states which are advancing state-level legislative reforms, Michigan's current political climate is not yet ripe for that intervention. Regulatory fixes can take two forms: amendments to state statutes like the Michigan Zoning Enabling Act, or changes to local municipal zoning codes and other development regulations. This project focuses on local change, and the myriad solutions that can be implemented, now, without amending state statutes. Local government has more flexibility – and political will and desire - to adapt to housing supply issues, and understands how lack of housing supply affects livability, economic prosperity, quality of life, and fairness.

In Michigan, some progress is being made, as larger municipalities in particular amend local codes to make building housing easier. But there are far more small towns, medium sized cities, and rural townships that recognize increasing local housing stock is necessary, but are unsure how to proceed and lack political will, capacity, funding or professional acumen to move forward. The Zoning Reform Toolkit is for this audience: lower population or limited capacity communities who see the need for change but don't know where to start.

With a goal of providing Michigan Chapter members with solutions to address housing supply challenges, the Chapter leveraged our long standing and strong relationship with the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) and secured a \$110,000 grant to research and develop the Zoning Reform Toolkit for Housing Choice and Supply. The Chapter worked with planning consultants from Progressive AE and Housing Next, and created a diverse steering

committee to guide product development. The project was completed in June 2022, and Sample code language, and a matrix that matches solutions to unique community needs and characteristics is included in the guide book. The Toolkit will put into the hands of community planners and other decision makers like city and township managers, and elected and appointed officials a guidebook to implement zoning reforms to ease regulatory restrictions that stymie the development of new housing units.

The Zoning Reform project comes on the heels of nearly three years of exploratory work done at the Chapter level, including Board of Directors meetings with other professional disciplines including banks and CDFI's, manufactured housing, non-profit housing providers, state agency leaders, developers, and community leaders to learn more deeply about the issues, and really understand what the Chapter could do to help planners focus local efforts on the most impactful solutions using zoning reform tactics. The final product was the culmination of a yearlong effort with the Michigan Chapter, a 15-member steering committee, and deep research from the management team.

The management team and steering committee settled on 15 tools separated into three categories: Zone Districts, Form and Context, and Processes. Each tool can stand on its own, but often would work more effectively in conjunction with another tool or two. Each category includes 1) an explanation of the tool, what it is; 2) why it impacts housing; 3) how it is used; 4) a paradigm shift; 5) case studies; and 6) identification of possible obstacles to design and implementation. A communications strategy is included, which will be useful in building support. There are many additional zoning tools and approaches that have not been included in phase 1 of this Toolkit, and we will seek funding for additional phases of the project.

In the first chapter, we lay out the elements of the housing crisis and create a case for zoning reform as a necessary intervention. We focus on the context of the crisis from an economic and historical perspective and detail the changing policy and demographic contexts that frame the issue. We then address communications strategies for discussing the housing shortage and detail fifteen zoning tools to address it. In the last chapter, we will look toward the future, sharing tips on how municipalities can get started with zoning reform, and next steps.

Quality. This comprehensive Zoning Reform Toolkit for Housing Supply and Choice provides the historical context for how we arrived where we are today, including the regulatory system that systematically reinforces racial inequities; provides master plan language to tee up regulatory change; identifies and describes how to implement 15 zoning tools that can expand local housing supply –without changes to the state planning or zoning enabling acts; and provides communications strategies to overcome density resistant residents. Each tool includes rationale for the paradigm shift that is necessary in most communities to effect real change, and a matrix that simplifies how and in what context each tool can be used. The publication is being disseminated in both hard copy form, an electronically as a pdf, and since it is funded by a state agency – the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) – is free to all takers. The content, including selection of which 15 tools to highlight, was vetted with a diverse

steering committee that met 4 times over the year to provide input as the product evolved. The Zoning Reform Toolkit project includes a robust web page with access to a carefully curated list of resources, articles, case studies, and research that users can access to implement the suggestions in their municipality. This high-quality, simple to use publication will direct planners to regulatory solutions, and provide context, history, and a clear path to local solutions.

Relevance. The relevance of this publication cannot be underestimated. Planners desperately need the tools, spelled out simply. They need the historical context (many decision makers and professionals remain blissfully unaware of the harmful effects of zoning and other historic government policies on communities of color.) Housing supply is at a critical juncture currently, and at least some of the blame can be placed squarely on historic zoning practices that have resulted in predominantly single family zoned neighborhoods and other exclusionary practices. The Zoning Reform Toolkit is timely, comprehensive, and structured so that one or all or some of the tools can be selected and implemented.

Originality. We know of no other approach that identifies and explains the specific steps a municipality can take to amend outdated codes that restrict housing supply. The Toolkit takes complex, legal and policy issues that municipal leaders and planners struggle with and breaks them down into meaningful and digestible parts. It is not a one size fits all approach, but provides a planner with a range of options to select the best fit with the most likelihood of implementation. The work can be done incrementally, and allows a municipality to “ease into” the solutions.

Significance. The Zoning Reform Toolkit has the potential to touch quite literally hundreds of municipalities across the state and when its recommendations are implemented, can drive new housing development. The endorsement of MSHDA elevates this product, and will provide broader recognition of the tool. MSHDA’s recently adopted 5 Year Housing Plan includes direct reference to zoning reforms – the Chapter was represented on the steering committee that guided development of the plan for more than a year and is responsible for inclusion of that language. Our Zoning Reform Toolkit further amplifies state policies, reinforcing state agency work, which will in turn facilitate distribution of the toolkit, and bring recognition to our Chapter and to the planning profession.

Resourcefulness. The Michigan Chapter strategically integrated program elements into the overall project scope that cover the costs of deliverables we already provide to our members and other stakeholders. We leveraged the grant to cover an issue of the Michigan Planner magazine devoted to the project that informs our members about the Toolkit, and drives them to the website to secure a link to the publication, and also provides a robust collection of resources about housing, and additional sources to address housing mismatch and shortages locally. We over-printed the magazine to use at training workshops that will be developed to teach to the Toolkit. Grant funding also covered the cost of national speakers – Shane Phillips and Jenny Scheutz – to speak out our annual Spring Institute, which in May was delivered as a Housing Summit to more than 150 professional planners. Other speakers included the

consulting team hired to develop the Toolkit, and a panel of State Agency directors with whom we frequently work, providing them the opportunity to share their policy priorities and to demonstrate the Chapter's acumen in the Zoning Reform space. We will look to them for Phase II and III grant funds to further implement the Toolkit. The funds also covered Chapter staff time to manage the project, and fees of the consulting team that worked with us to develop the Toolkit.

Transferability. The Michigan Chapter is excited to share our Zoning Reform Toolkit with other APA Chapters. While state planning and enabling laws may vary across the country, the tools highlighted in the guidebook have scalability across the US, particularly in states like Michigan that have not yet advanced the state legislation that mandates more contemporary changes, and Chapters that represent smaller or less populous states. Funded by a grant, we will happily share a link to the final product, access to the Housing Summit recorded sessions, and access to a growing webpage filled with resources. The Toolkit introductory context alone provides an excellent overview that is useful to any planner wishing to explain the rueful history of zoning inequity. Coupled with the communications section, which identifies talking points and tips on how to discuss issues that are often fraught with misunderstanding, mistrust, and fear, it is a powerful set of tools. These approaches are valuable for planners in any state.