

CITIZEN PLANNING SERIES

Who's Who in Planning

Our local government officials are at the front lines of land use issues—working with the public, developers, neighboring communities, and many others to ensure that their communities’ interests are served. This is a delicate balancing act that requires strong relationships between the public and their representatives.

For anyone that would like to become involved in local land use issues, it's therefore very important to become familiar with the key players. Depending on the issue you're interested in, you may need to get to know the local legislative body, planning commission, zoning board of appeals, and local government staff.

Legislative Body

The local legislative body is elected by the public every 2-4 years to represent the community. These bodies—including boards, councils, or commissions—make the final decisions on zoning, and in some cases (but not all) they are the final authority on plan adoption. They also control, through appointments to the planning commission and oversight of staff, how local ordinances are administered. Their responsibilities include:

- Adopting plans and ordinances
- Setting the tax rates

- Authorizing expenditures and borrowing
- Hiring administrative staff
- Providing oversight of public facilities and infrastructure
- Appointing members to the planning commission and zoning board of appeals
- Other duties as necessary

Planning Commission

The planning commission is an important advisory group that is appointed by the legislative body to develop plans. For communities with zoning authority, it also prepares and makes recommendations on zoning ordinances, zoning changes, special use or planned developments, and site plans. The planning commission can serve as the final authority on some of these matters - but only when authorized by the zoning ordinance.

Gov't	Legislative Body	Elected Legislative Officials	Elected At-Large or By District?	Other Elected Officials	Appointed Bodies
County	Board of Commissioners	Commissioners	District	Clerk Register of Deeds Treasurer	Planning Commission Parks & Recreation Zoning Board of Appeals
Township	Board	Trustees Supervisor Treasurer Clerk	At large		Planning Commission Parks & Recreation Zoning Board of Appeals
City	Council or Commission	Council/Commission members Mayor	At large or by district	Clerk Treasurer	Planning Commission Parks & Recreation Zoning Board of Appeals
Village	Council	Council Members Village President	At large	Clerk Treasurer (both may also be appointed)	Planning Commission Parks & Recreation Zoning Board of Appeals

Northwest Michigan COUNTY PLANNING

While few counties in Northwest Michigan have zoning authority, our county planning commissions and staff are a resource to local governments and the public alike. Contact your planning department for more information on land use and planning in your county.

Antrim County	231-533-6265 antrimcounty.org
Benzie County	231-882-9671 benzieco.net
Charlevoix County	231-547-7234 charlevoixcounty.org
Emmet County	231-348-1702 emmetcounty.com
Grand Traverse	231-922-4622 grandtraverse.org
Kalkaska County	231-258-3367 kalkaskacounty.net
Leelanau County	231-256-9812 leelanau.cc
Manistee County	231-723-6041 manisteecountymi.gov
Missaukee County	231-839-4967 missauke.org
Wexford County	231-779-9453 wexfordcounty.org

What Does A Planner Do?

Planning staff—including zoning administrators and planners—are hired to interpret and enforce the zoning ordinance. Staff reviews and processes applications for land use permits, site plan review, and other zoning issues. They also provide advice and assistance to the planning commission, the legislative body, and the ZBA.

Staff has no authority over changes to the plan, zoning ordinance, or other local policies – authority rests with local officials. But by providing assistance to government bodies, staff plays an important role in local decision-making.

Planning commissions are made up of 5-11 citizen volunteers that serve a 3 year term. Some members may have a land use background like engineering, architecture, or development, but this experience isn't required, and many planning commissioners don't have this background.

In order for the commission to be fair and objective, planning commissioners should represent diverse interests and backgrounds. Planning commissioners may be appointed based on their ability to represent different segments or interests of the community—such as schools, farming, or business.

Depending on the capacities and activities of the community, a planning commission is generally expected to:

- Develop and maintain a master plan
- Make recommendations on approval of the plan, and in some cases adopt the plan
- Develop, upon direction from the governing body, capital improvement plans, recreation plans, and other community plans
- Develop a zoning ordinance and map
- Make recommendations on changes to the zoning ordinance and map
- Review rezoning applications, site plans, and planned unit development applications
- Review the community's property purchases and development projects

Zoning Board of Appeals

All zoned communities must appoint a zoning board of appeals, or ZBA. The procedures and makeup of the ZBA are outlined in the zoning ordinance.

The ZBA hears appeals on requirements or on zoning decisions, and can grant **variances** to regulations in order to change one or more requirements of the zoning ordinance. In order to receive a variance, the property owner must show that the zoning regulation creates a hardship or prevents the development of the property.

On request, the ZBA also provides interpretation of language in the zoning ordinance.

The responsibilities, makeup and procedures of planning commissions and elected officials vary from community to community. However, regardless of the community's individual government structure, and whether officials are elected, appointed, or hired, it is the imperative of local government and staff to serve the interests of the community. Citizens are encouraged to contact their local officials and staff to communicate their interests, learn about local issues, and find out how they can get involved.

Where can I find more information?

This series is intended to provide basic information to citizens that haven't been closely involved in the planning process, but would like to shape future changes in their community. **This is introductory information only.** There are many additional resources available for those that need more in-depth information or would like to be more closely involved in the planning process.

The remainder of this planning series is available on the New Designs for Growth website, which also includes links to a variety of local, state, and national planning resources. Visit www.newdesignsforgrowth.org, or contact the Northwest Michigan Council of Governments at (231)929-5000 for more information.

We encourage you to take advantage of these resources, or to contact your local planning department to learn more about specific issues and get involved.