



RRC GUIDE

BOARD & COMMISSION TRAINING PLAN

redevelopment ready
communities®

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INTRODUCTION

RRC Best Practice 4 (Boards & Commissions) focuses on helping communities build a strong foundation for supporting local staff and officials in making planning, zoning, and economic development decisions. **Criterion 4.6** focuses specifically on ensuring that officials have access to ongoing training opportunities, which align with local goals and help prepare officials for the decisions they are asked to make.

But training is easier said than done, thanks to numerous barriers such as time constraints, a lack of funding, geographic distance, or unclear expectations.

The approach included in this guide will help communities clearly meet the intent of RRC Best Practice criterion 4.6. The core expectations for this criterion are the same for the Essentials and Certified designations, with the exception for how often a strategy should be reviewed and updated.

4.6 Training Strategy

Developing a training strategy identifies opportunities and encourages on-going training aligned with the community's goals, needs, and capacity.

CRITERIA: The community has a documented training strategy.

ESSENTIALS EXPECTATIONS

- The strategy identifies training goals and expectations.
- The strategy identifies funding sources.
- The strategy identifies how training participants share outcomes with other officials and staff.
- The strategy identifies how the community consistently encourages training.
- The strategy is reviewed every two years.

CERTIFIED EXPECTATIONS

- The strategy identifies training goals and expectations.
- The strategy identifies funding sources.
- The strategy identifies how training participants share outcomes with other officials and staff.
- The strategy identifies how the community consistently encourages training.
- The strategy is updated annually.

DON'T JUST TAKE RRC'S WORD THAT TRAINING IS IMPORTANT.

Michigan State University Extension strongly advocates for ongoing training of local officials as a key component of a risk mitigation strategy. Check out this [2019 article](#) from MSU-E for more information.

Ongoing training is also highlighted by the efforts of the Michigan Municipal League.

REDEFINING TRAINING

Before diving into how to create a training strategy, it is important to define “training.” When the word “training” comes up in conversation, it almost always includes the same four components:

- Some type of **formal event or program**.
- A **specific time or location** which we either travel or log into.
- Led by some type of **expert** with outside knowledge and experience.
- Introducing **new** knowledge.

While events like conferences, webinars, in-person workshops, and other formal events have their place in the training canon, it is extremely limiting to use those factors as parameters to define training overall. Instead, RRC encourages communities to adopt a more open-ended definition of training; this recognizes the value of not only formal events or programs, but also

general information sharing, refreshers, locally guided discussions, and more. For example, an RRC community could instead define training as, “Training in our community is any activity which is specifically intended to foster information sharing and learning to help officials and staff further the community’s goals.”

Under this definition, the pool of training options opens dramatically to include tools such as at-meeting discussions, podcasts, mentorship pairings, reviewing existing plans, and more. The image below shows just how wide the training toolbox can be when a community expands its definition.

Expanding the toolbox not only provides more options, **it also increases a community’s ability to tackle common challenges like cost, time, and geography.** Tackling these challenges is essential to fostering an environment of ongoing training—we will cover this in more detail further in this guide.



CREATING A TRAINING STRATEGY

Training strategies can run the gamut from a few pages based on conversations and some quick research to detailed strategies based on surveys, multiple feedback rounds, detailed implementation, and more. This guide will focus on the first approach, with a goal of helping the user be able to compile a full draft in just a couple of hours.

WHAT IS INCLUDED IN A TRAINING STRATEGY?

RRC Best Practice 4.6 lays out clear expectations for what to include in an RRC-aligned training strategy. These include:

- Training goals and expectations
- Funding sources
- Ongoing encouragement and report-outs
- Priority topics
- Preferred methods
- Updates to the strategy

While this guide will discuss each of these, the ultimate outcome will put the results into two areas: an overall training framework, and priorities for each board.

Maybe you've heard this before, but whatever your goals are, just a friendly reminder that they should be as "**SMART**" as possible:

Specific
Measurable
Achievable
Relevant
Time-bound

SETTING GOALS & EXPECTATIONS

It is difficult to plan out a strategy without understanding where you are starting from and where you want to go. Doing so is like deciding you want to bake a dessert but having no idea what ingredients you have or what you need to buy at the store. Goal setting for training does not need to be complicated, though it should be specific enough to achieve and activity-based (i.e., measurable). For the first strategy in your community, consider selecting a few from the following list:

- Have each member complete XX hours of training throughout the year.
- Ensure all members receive ethics training this year.
- Hold at least XX at-meeting training discussions/events this year.
- Hold at least one joint training this year.
- Have each member provide at least XX article(s) for a meeting packet throughout the year.
- [Almost any other local goal you can think of]

Related to goals, expectations create a board culture which naturally results in training. This can be achieved by including ongoing training in the position description, setting clear training expectations in the board's bylaws, and identifying whether board liaison, board chair, or individual member is responsible for implementing the training plan. What you'll need to set for expectations will vary greatly based on the training culture your board is starting with.

FUNDING SOURCES

RRC Best Practices do not set a certain amount of funding that should be allocated to training, but do look to see some type of financial support to demonstrate the community values training. Many communities understandably have very small budgets for such activities.

RRC encourages the community to build a plan before a budget is adopted, so each board can make a specific budget request for training. Having a documented strategy can help build the case for that ask. In some cases, the budget may already be established, and the plan will need to work within those existing parameters.

The local budget is not the only source of training funding. Also consider the following (see the [RRC library](#) for some resources on scholarships in particular):

Scholarships	Training scholarships from organizations such as MML or MAP; these are commonly tied to specific events.
Insurance Funds	Training funding through the community's insurance company; some offer funds to encourage training and therefore reduce their risk exposure.
Pooling Resources	Pooling resources with nearby communities to pay for training; this can often bring additional partners to the table too.
State Support	Working with state level partners such as RRC to potentially pay for training

CREATING A TRAINING STRATEGY

ONGOING ENCOURAGEMENT & REPORT-OUTS

These two expectations often go together. The reason RRC includes these as expectations is to help the community maximize its return on investment—both in financial and time—by ensuring the plan is used and that officials can spread the workload out over time.

These can be incorporated into the community in several ways (likely a mix of these):

- Add training as a standing agenda item to continually remind and offer a reminder to verbally report out
- Have a standing policy to always include training opportunities in meeting packets
- Send a monthly email to your boards focused on training resources
- Have a formal report-out form training participants complete post-training
- Require that handouts from a training are provided to staff to be distributed to all board members

IDENTIFYING PRIORITY TOPICS

This is the real meat of the training strategy, as it is where the community truly connects its goals to training resources.

The first step here is to open the community's plans to see what projects are supposed to be the focus in the next year or two. Which plans are included in this step will vary depending on each board, but they'll likely include at least the following:

- Master plan
- Downtown plan
- Parks and recreation plan
- Economic development strategy
- Strategic plan (if your community has one)

Outside of the plans themselves, the board should also assess its core functions to determine if a refresher is in order. For example, the planning commission may have several new members and could benefit from a training about the basics of site plan review. Or council may benefit from asking MML to provide a refresher on local

government meeting norms or resources. You may even find that several topics show up as priorities for multiple boards—a great chance for a joint training!

If your community would like to go above and beyond, you could also conduct a survey of your current officials to set a baseline for their current level of knowledge and to identify priority training topics. RRC has an online survey, which can be customized to each community to help facilitate this deep dive.

DELIVERY METHODS

How to deliver training is arguably the most prominent barrier to meeting training goals. It's no secret that most officials have lives outside of their municipal roles, and taking an entire day or weekend to attend training is not feasible in many cases. While the recent explosion in online training options is one way to address that, it is not effective for those without strong Internet connections or who do not like that method for one reason or another. Because of this, understanding preferences around training delivery is vital to success. Remember back to the first section when we talked about expanding your definition of training? That's where that concept really comes into play.

Have a discussion with your officials and figure out how to overcome barriers. Most RRC communities who are successful in this arena have moved to arranging for at-meeting training opportunities. It removes the time barrier and is often much more cost-efficient, especially if done jointly. Many state and local organizations are happy to provide quick training sessions for free or very cheap under this model. Or perhaps putting articles in the meeting packet for discussion is the way to go. For someone with a long commute, directing them to podcasts could be a good avenue. The possibilities are endless.

Most communities will end up with a hybrid approach, consisting of at-meeting training and self-led training outside of those meetings as well.

CREATING A TRAINING STRATEGY

IMPLEMENTING & UPDATING THE PLAN

As is true of all plans, implementation is where the true magic happens. Throughout the year, the community should check in with the training plan to see where members are at in meeting the goals. For RRC Certified communities, the plan itself must be updated at least annually. For RRC Essentials, a full update needs to occur every other year.

While RRC no longer has a formal expectation to track training activity, it is a logical thing to do as a way of ensuring the community is hitting its goals. A spreadsheet is an easy way to do that, so all the data is in one place.

While every community will follow a slightly different update process, the plan should identify when and how updates will occur. Below is an example from the village of Millington.

STEP	DETAILS	TIMING
Update records	Ensure that training activity records are up to date.	Late October
Analyze results	Analyze the records to determine if goals were met for the year.	Early November
Assess outcomes	Review the outcomes. If goals were not met, why? Compare against priority topics and identify ones that have been met or new ones that should be added.	November meetings
Update strategy	Update the strategy document	Early December
Review	Officials review document, make any needed edits	December meetings
Distribution	Final version distributed	End of year

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

Once you complete this process, you should end up with a single document, which includes an overall training framework as well as specific focus areas for each development-related board. RRC maintains a library of examples from communities across the state.

Below is an example table from the village of Vernon's training plan, which identifies goals, delivery methods, and priority topics for its DDA.

ANNUAL GOAL	4 hours
DELIVERY METHODS	Joint meeting (1 hour); at-meeting/off-site training (2 hours); personal preference (1 hours)

PRIORITY TOPIC	IDENTIFIED VIA	POTENTIAL DELIVERY METHODS/RESOURCES
Michigan Main Street	2017 Downtown Strategy	Michigan Main Street online training (in-person may also be available in 2021)
State level financing tools*	2020 Survey	Essentially any state agency; for a broad overview, contact MEDC Community Assistance Team to help organize an overall presentation or get contacts to invite in over time. Many state agencies offer online resources as well.
Placemaking*	Downtown Trending Topic	AARP Pop Up Placemaking Toolkit, Congress for New Urbanism, MML Placemaking Site (use online resources or invite speakers)
Events planning	DDA Primary Role	Meet with nearby DDAs to talk about their events
Other resources for the DDA		Michigan Downtown Association (MDA), AARP Livable Communities Initiative

*Possible topics for a joint training or to at least invite other boards to if done at a PC meeting

RESOURCES & TRAINING PROVIDERS

Michigan is fortunate to have numerous statewide and regional organizations providing training opportunities. Additionally, there are countless organizations at the national and international level that can provide valuable training opportunities.

The following list is not exhaustive but aims to provide a foundation for identifying organizations and opportunities that a community might use for training needs.

MICHIGAN-SPECIFIC RESOURCES AND PROVIDERS

These organizations are based right here in Michigan and provide general planning, zoning, economic and community development information. Many also offer online learning opportunities such as webinars.

Michigan Association of Planning (MAP): MAP provides numerous training opportunities for both member and non-member communities including its annual Planning Michigan Conference (usually September), off-site workshops throughout the state, on-site workshops upon request, meet-up opportunities, publications, and a planning magazine focused on Michigan issues. www.planningmi.org

Michigan Municipal League (MML): As the leading advocacy organization for Michigan's incorporated communities, MML provides a wide array of training opportunities including an annual convention (usually September), Capital Conference, Elected Officials Academy, legislative advocacy events, on-site workshops, and free publications. www.mml.org

Michigan Township Association (MTA): Michigan's 1,240 townships cover 96 percent of the state's land area and provide essential services to 51 percent of the state's population. MTA provides training and information essential for today's local leaders in providing effective, efficient programs and services. Offerings include an eLearning library, publications, annual conference(s) and in-person workshops. www.michigantownships.org

Michigan State University Extension—Planning: MSU Extension offers training courses on planning and zoning tools, policy options, land use, and environmental issues. All services are available to Michigan's 1,858 municipalities, 14 multi-county regions, and 12 federally recognized tribal nations. One of the most popular programs offered through MSU-E is the Citizen Planner program, which can be done in-person or online. www.canr.msu.edu/planning

Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC): MEDC's Community Development division (www.miplace.org) is dedicated to supporting vibrant, diverse and sustainable communities through both financial incentives and technical assistance. Offerings include in-person training events, workshops, webinars, and online resources. MEDC's Business Development division also offers in-person sessions on economic development tools. You can learn more about those tools and see future sessions at www.michiganbusiness.org.

Michigan Economic Developers Association (MEDA): With over 500 members, MEDA exists to advance economic development throughout Michigan, and increase the individual member's effectiveness in the economic development profession. The association's goal is to provide a variety of services and programs that will enhance ability and skills in economic development. The group sponsors in-person trainings, an annual meeting/conference, and advocacy events. Their website also contains general information on economic development. While MEDA is a membership organization, non-members are welcome to attend most events. www.medaweb.org

Community Economic Development Association of Michigan (CEDAM): CEDAM offers a variety of signature training events customized to fit the needs of the community economic development industry. Events include the Building Michigan Conference (each spring), Real Estate Development Bootcamp, poverty simulations, advocacy information, and webinars. www.cedamichigan.org

Michigan Downtown Association (MDA): MDA a state-wide, non-profit organization and a driving force in the interest and growth of downtowns and communities throughout Michigan. The MDA encourages the development, redevelopment and continuing improvement of Michigan communities and downtowns. Training opportunities include an annual conference (each fall), a state legislative advocacy day, and general online resources. www.michigandowntowns.com

RESOURCES & TRAINING PROVIDERS

OTHER RESOURCES AND PROVIDERS

While not Michigan-specific, you'll still find lots of great information from these planning and economic development-related organizations.

- 880 Cities: www.880cities.org
- American Planning Association (APA): www.planning.org
- AARP Livable Communities: www.aarp.org/livable-communities
- Congress for New Urbanism (CNU): www.cnu.org
- CityLab: www.citylab.com
- Form Based Code Institute (FBCI): www.formbasedcodes.org
- International City Managers Association (ICMA): www.icma.org
- International Downtown Association: www.downtown.org
- International Economic development Council: www.iedconline.org
- National Development Council: www.ndconline.org
- National League of Cities (NLC): www.nlc.org
- National Main Street Program: www.mainstreet.org
- Planetizen: www.planetizen.com
- Recast City: www.recastcity.com
- Smart Growth America (SGA): www.smartgrowthamerica.org
- StrongTowns: www.strongtowns.org
- Urban Land Institute: www.uli.org
- U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA): www.eda.gov

EXTERNAL SOURCES OF FUNDS

While the community's budget may not support extensive training, several organizations offer scholarship opportunities to help supplement local funding. Some Michigan-specific sources include:

[John Barr Leadership Education Scholarship](#)

(MML Foundation): The scholarship offers five yearly one-time scholarships of up to \$1,000 for training that provides local elected and appointed officials the knowledge and skills they need to lead and govern their communities. The training may not be partisan.

[Tim Doyle Scholarship Fund](#) (MML Foundation):

The Tim Doyle Scholarship Fund helps provide access to the most critical information for newly elected officials through the Elected Officials Academy (EOA) Core Weekender seminar. There they can learn about financial management, leadership skills, legal issues, and planning and zoning.

[Elected and Appointed Officials Scholarship Program](#)

(MAP): Scholarship recipients can select from a variety of MAP services, including workshops, books and publications, or even choose to apply the value of your scholarship toward the MAP annual conference. Scholarship values range from \$500 to \$1,500 per community, to be applied to the training and resources that you've identified would meet your community's unique training and information needs.

[Professional Training Scholarship](#) (MAP; members only):

Created to address the educational and training needs of professional planners, zoning administrators, building officials, and other positions related to planning and service to the planning profession in Michigan, Professional Planner Scholarship applications will be received throughout the year. Recipients can select from a variety of MAP programs: Transportation Bonanza, MAP Annual Conference, MAP Spring Institute, and other professional development events not yet scheduled.

[MEDA Scholarship](#) (MEDA; members only): Scholarships will be provided for education/training specifically in the area of economic development (training outside of economic development will not be accepted). Priority will be given to MEDA training. Requests made for training outside of MEDA will only be accepted if MEDA does not offer the same type of training. Twenty-five percent match required and maximum of \$750 per person per fiscal year.

