



## Streamline Development without Sacrificing Quality



**MICHIGAN ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

### *What you will learn:*

*The importance of auditing  
your community's approval  
process*

*The importance of adopting  
requirements and standards  
ahead of time*

Communities want high quality development. Developers want to develop quickly. There is a way forward that reconciles these seemingly opposing ends!

For a developer, time is money, but so are materials and design revisions. Creating a predictable development review process can expedite the proposal through to approval AND assure that municipal policies and codes are honored.

For a community, proper due process and public engagement take time. From legally required public hearings to meaningful citizen input on a new development, transparency in governance should be a priority.

But where does development review get stuck? Where can efficiencies be introduced for a smoother process?

One likely sticking point is the public meeting. Does that mean that development should happen in a smoke-filled, closed-door back room? No. But it means that the community must do its homework ahead of time to figure out what kind of development is acceptable and desirable. This means having a lot of meetings and discussions with staff, the commission, the legislative body and the public to hash out what everyone wants to see in the community. Use, density, landscaping, screening, building materials all need to be figured out well in advance. For this hard work to be realized in future buildings, these standards need to be codified in the zoning ordinance. Ideally, these concepts are also embedded in the master plan.

Once those particulars are established and adopted, you are well on your way to a streamlined process.

Published by the  
**MICHIGAN ASSOCIATION OF PLANNING**  
Summer 2020  
1919 West Stadium Boulevard, Suite 4  
Ann Arbor, Michigan, 48103  
734.913.2000 | [www.planningmi.org](http://www.planningmi.org)  
[info@planningmi.org](mailto:info@planningmi.org)

## ***What the Law Says:***

### **The Michigan Zoning Enabling Act**

**Site Plans:** A decision rejecting, approving, or conditionally approving a site plan shall be based upon requirements and standards contained in the zoning ordinance, other statutorily authorized and properly adopted local unit of government planning documents, other applicable ordinances, and state and federal statutes.

**Special Land Uses:** The body or official designated to review and approve special land uses may deny, approve, or approve with conditions a request for special land use approval. The decision on a special land use shall be incorporated in a statement of findings and conclusions relative to the special land use which specifies the basis for the decision and any conditions imposed.

A request for approval of a land use or activity shall be approved if the request is in compliance with the standards stated in the zoning ordinance, the conditions imposed under the zoning ordinance, other applicable ordinances, and state and federal statutes.

The developer will know clearly what is expected of them, and how much the required development will cost. This takes the guesswork out of what will be permitted. If the developer knows that 80% of the building's façade needs to be masonry and that the city will grant a density bonus if 100% of the building is brick, the developer can then do the math. The community wins because they know they are going to get the pre-approved minimum in terms of use/density and aesthetics without having to go to the mattresses at a contentious planning commission meeting.

Project approval (zoning, site plan, special land use) at the local level is typically the first step in a development approval process. But there are often other entities who must approve a development or business (public health, road commission, state). Sometimes these other agencies cause the approval process to bottleneck. These agencies have their own timeframes and responsibilities; it can be difficult for a local unit of government to persuade a county agency to reprioritize county resources. But if the local unit of government informs the developer about other required applications and approvals, the developer can submit

the required materials ahead of time. In so doing, the local government builds good will with the developer and also shaves off days or even weeks of the review process.

Administrative site plan review offers yet another way to streamline the development process. Most communities already have administrative review for single family home construction; if the house meets the zoning ordinance requirements, it is permitted. Determining whether it meets the ordinance requirements is left to building department staff. This is covered more in depth in Administrative Approvals.

The desire to streamline a development approval must be embraced throughout departments in a community. If zoning approval is fast, but the building or sewer permit is not, the project is still delayed. Is there an opportunity to make the process more efficient? More office hours, more personnel, better tools, different priorities, concurrent reviews, reasonable deadlines, checklists? Do a careful audit of your community's internal processes to determine what changes are necessary.

This tear sheet was developed by the Michigan Association of Planning (MAP) for the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC). The Michigan Association of Planning is a 501 c 3 organization, dedicated to promoting sound community planning that benefits the residents of Michigan. MAP was established in 1945 to achieve a desired quality of life through comprehensive community planning that includes opportunities for a variety of lifestyles and housing, employment, commercial activities, and cultural and recreational amenities.

