



# How to Prepare for a Meeting



**MICHIGAN ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

## *What you will learn:*

*What is in a planning commission “packet”*

*Why, how and when to review the “packet”*

*If you have questions, who should you ask*

*Tips to organize your “packet”*

*When and how to visit a site before the meeting*

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*This summary speaks to the planning commission, but most of the tips in this tear sheet can apply to legislative bodies, zoning boards of appeals, or other municipal committees.*

Prior to a meeting, you will receive a packet of information including the meeting’s agenda. These are the items that will be deliberated at the meeting. *Before the meeting*, you will want to read and review these materials. Make sure you have the materials necessary to review any items including the master plan, zoning and other ordinances, and bylaws.

The meeting packet may be delivered to you via email, mail, delivery or you may pick it up at the municipal offices. The agenda must be posted at least 18 hours prior to a meeting. Most likely, you will have a meeting packet available to you several days before the meeting.

Packets (whether paper or electronic) are typically organized as follows: agenda, minutes from last meeting, report (either one big one or several shorter ones, each pertaining to a case or agenda item) and finally the application or back up material for each agenda item. For instance, a site plan includes both the physical design plan, along with professional staff comments from various consultants or departments. A proposed ordinance amendment will include the ordinance to be changed and also reports from departments regarding the rationale for the new ordinance.

Read through your packet as soon as you can. Your effectiveness at the meeting depends upon your preparation prior to the meeting. You simply will not be as good a commissioner as you can be if you are reading the packet while the meeting is happening.

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

### **The Michigan Planning Enabling Act:**

The legislative body may remove a member of the planning commission for misfeasance, malfeasance, or nonfeasance in office upon written charges and after a public hearing. Before casting a vote on a matter on which a member may reasonably be considered to have a conflict of interest, the member shall disclose the potential conflict of interest to the planning commission. The member is disqualified from voting on the matter if so provided by the bylaws or by a majority vote of the remaining members of the planning commission. Failure of a member to disclose a potential conflict of interest as required by this subsection constitutes malfeasance in office. Unless the legislative body, by ordinance, defines conflict of interest for the purposes of this subsection, the planning commission shall do so in its bylaws.

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

A member of the zoning board of appeals may be removed by the legislative body for misfeasance, malfeasance, or nonfeasance in office upon written charges and after a public hearing. A member shall disqualify himself or herself from a vote in which the member has a conflict of interest. Failure of a member to disqualify himself or herself from a vote in which the member has a conflict of interest constitutes malfeasance in office.

Once you've acquainted yourself with the agenda and made a cursory review of the contents, it's time to visit any site(s) that are on the agenda.

When reviewing the packet consider if you have questions for staff. Is some piece of information or history missing that may be helpful for everyone to have? Staff will appreciate not being surprised by this question at the meeting. If they can get the requested additional materials to everyone ahead of time, the meeting will go smoother. It is appropriate for a planning commissioner to call staff or the consultant ahead of time and ask questions. Sometimes the questions are relatively straightforward and staff can get the necessary information to everyone. Sometimes, the question is more philosophical, like "is this really the direction we want to go in with this ordinance change?" Staff will still appreciate a "heads up" about that. A good commissioner lets staff know: "I'm going to ask about that".

At the meeting, ask the question again, and say publicly, "I called staff (consultant) and asked for this information." Staff will then be able to answer the question promptly with any background information. Had that commissioner waited, staff may not have had the answer right away (maybe it would have taken a

few hours of research) and the agenda item might have ended up postponed.

If your community does not have staff or a consultant that regularly provides reports, you can develop your

### ***Ex Parte Contact***

Commissioners and ZBA members should not discuss proposals or applications with the property owner, neighbors, or applicant outside of the public meeting. The intent of information gathering is to ensure that everyone has the same information to evaluate the petition. Staff's job is to field questions and concerns and to present (when applicable) those concerns to everyone at a public meeting. If the applicant or others contact an appointed official, the official should tell them which staff person or consultant is the proper person to address concerns OR they should encourage them to come to the meeting or to submit their comments in writing. If ex parte contact cannot be avoided, the appointed official should report it to the rest of the members during the meeting, along with the general content of the conversation.

## Site Visits

Before making any decision, it is necessary that those charged with that responsibility have an adequate amount of information to allow a reasonable conclusion. Visiting the site is often critical in rendering a good decision. Still, some precautions should be used. A site visit by a majority of the membership of a decision-making body must be preceded by notice under the Open Meetings Act and the requirement to allow the audience to also attend the site visit --something a private property owner may not want to allow due to liability and insurance reasons.

Given the potential problems associated with Open Meetings Act compliance, as well as other regulations, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), site visits by individual members is a suitable preferred option.

Two cautions for individual visits: 1) do not go onto the site unless specific written permission has been granted by the property owner or the site is otherwise available to the public (such as an existing shopping center); and 2) do not talk to the property owner, neighbors or applicant outside of the meeting. This is known as an “ex-parte” contact (or from only one point of view) and can be perceived as prejudicial. See side bar on ex parte contact.

Details to look for during a site visit include traffic conditions, natural features, surrounding land uses, and general neighborhood characteristics. Visits at different times and days are useful. At the public meeting, you should describe your findings to the rest of the commission or board so that they may have the benefit of your observations and comments. Photographs or Google may be a good option, particularly for larger, inaccessible sites.

own checklist. Most professional planners use their own lists to ensure that they review everything on that site plan, rezoning, special land use, etc.

Compare the application or item to the ordinance and the master plan. If there are other plans related to the proposal or case (DDA plan, for instance), check that as well. All proposals or cases will have applicable standards in the zoning ordinance.

A note regarding ordinances: ordinances are working documents (kind of like cookbooks). Use 3M strips, tabs, and book marks to help you organize it. If you can, make notes in the margin referencing other sections. It can be frustrating remembering that there is

a section of ordinance that you know is relevant, but not being able to find it again.

As you review the applications, consider if there are questions you have for the applicant. Make a note of those, too. Mark up that site plan in red pen and be ready to ask questions if the site plan isn't clear to you.

Before heading to the meeting, organize your packet with paper clips and rubber bands, or with tabs on the screen if using a computer, so you can easily move from one item to the next. You will be in good shape to not only make findings, but also move to approve, deny or postpone.

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.

