



## New Official Orientation



**MICHIGAN ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

### *What you will learn:*

*Questions to ask staff  
before your first planning  
commission meeting*

*Documents you should ask  
for so you can do your job  
as commissioner*

Most officials are appointed with little or no experience or understanding of their new responsibilities. Frequently, these officials are appointed, given a copy of the master plan and the zoning ordinance, and expected to learn on the job without other training, guidance, or resources.

Often, new officials are taught only by more seasoned planning commissioners or ZBA members – who also may not have been properly trained. Consequently, many new officials may be confused about what decisions they are responsible for, the planning and review process, and even how they ended up being an appointed official in the first place.

Once an official is appointed, it is important to schedule some time to meet with the staff person who will be at the meetings and/or the person who is responsible for meeting packet preparation. This person(s) has a wealth of knowledge.

Questions for new officials to ask staff:

- What are the current issues or activities (master plan or zoning ordinance amendments or development proposals) on recent agendas?
- When will I receive my packet prior to the meeting? What information is typically in the meeting packet? Can we review a typical packet prior to the meeting to see if I have questions?
- How can I contact you if I have questions?
- What are the statutory duties and procedures of the planning commission and/or ZBA?
- How are officials trained and kept up-to-date on planning and zoning issues?

## What the Law Says:

The Michigan Planning Enabling Act says this about appointing planning commissioners with “experience”: The membership of a planning commission shall be representative of important segments of the community, such as the economic, governmental, educational, and social development of the local unit of government, in accordance with the major interests as they exist in the local unit of government, such as agriculture, natural resources, recreation, education, public health, government, transportation, industry, and commerce. The membership shall also be representative of the entire territory of the local unit of government to the extent practicable.

The Michigan Zoning Enabling Act says about appointing zoning board of appeals members with “experience”: The members selected shall be representative of the population distribution and of the various interests present in the local unit of government.

- How can I visit the site of a proposed development prior to the meeting?

Ask for copies or links to the following documents:

- The current master plan and any other adopted plans, for example, parks and recreation plan, downtown plan, corridor plan, and other subarea plans.
- The current zoning ordinance and zoning map.
- The current capital improvement program.
- Planning commission bylaws and/or zoning board of appeals rules of procedure.
- Some communities may have ordinances for subdivisions, ethics, tree preservation, or signs, as well as other studies that officials should be familiar with.

Review these documents and make notes. You don't need to be an expert, and sometimes reading a map or circumnavigating an ordinance or master plan can be tricky, but familiarize yourself with the plans and policies you will regularly use. Ask if you have questions.

Prior to the first meeting, it would be worthwhile to review agendas and minutes from the legislative body, the zoning board of appeals, and the planning

commission. This will give you an idea of current activities, items commonly discussed, and the flow of the meeting. Many communities have the meetings recorded so you can watch the meetings as well. Remember, as an appointed official, no one expects you to know everything about planning and zoning. Your municipal staff or consultants are there to help you, so use them as a resource! They are always glad to work with you and want you to be successful.

*The Michigan Association of Planning (MAP) has several helpful publications for appointed officials including the Planning Commissioners Toolkit and the Zoning Board of Appeals Toolkit. One of MAP's most popular workshops, Planning and Zoning Essentials, includes a detailed overview of an official's role, such as statutory planning and zoning duties, conflicts of interest, effective decision-making, and discretionary powers.*

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.

