

CITIZEN PLANNING SERIES

Getting Involved

The planning process is designed to allow the public to take an active part in shaping the futures of their communities. Unfortunately, many citizens don't get involved until late in the process, when there's controversy over a proposal in their community. But the stage is usually set for these decisions long before this point, and it may be difficult to change the outcome by the time a proposal is presented.

Local governments must follow adopted ordinances and policies—which means that some development proposals may be approved even if they're not supported by the public. In other cases, seemingly beneficial or well-received proposals may not meet all the requirements of the ordinance, and must be denied. For this reason, the public sometimes feels disenfranchised from the local decision-making process.

But even if a particular proposal's outcome isn't ultimately determined by public input, there are many ways citizens can engage in the planning process in order to effect long-term change and improve the community as a whole:

- Stay informed. By attending meetings, reading written records of meetings, and talking with staff and elected officials, citizens can stay up-to-date on community land use issues.
- Take part in the creation of plans and zoning ordinances. This is one of the best ways to influence your community over the long-term, and gives the public a strong voice in guiding development before it occurs. You can help create plans and ordinances by participating in visioning sessions, commenting on draft plans and ordinances at public hearings, or by serving on committees that are working to develop them.



STAYING INFORMED: The Open Meetings Act & Freedom of Information

To effectively influence the decision-making process, citizens must be well-informed of local issues and activities. By attending public meetings and reading the minutes, or written records, of those meetings, citizens can stay up-to-date on issues that are facing their community, and can determine whether or not their interests are being served. Public access to these meetings and information is protected by two important laws:

The Open Meetings Act requires all meetings of public bodies to be open to the public. Notice must be posted for all public meetings - all of which must be held in a place available to the general public, with at least one opportunity available for public comment.

The Freedom of Information Act ensures public access to records kept by all public bodies. While most public records are easily accessed at local offices, if necessary, you can obtain other documents through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request.

Public Hearing Pointers

Public hearings are an important way for citizens to make their voice heard—but the nature of a public hearing sometimes results in a confrontational approach to public comment. In order to negotiate your position effectively—with either the local government or a developer—it's important to take a factual, focused, unemotional approach. Some key points to remember when making public comment:

- Protect your credibility. Avoid personal attacks or statements that cannot be verified.
- Be prepared with a short speech that highlights the critical issues.
- Be clear and concise, with specific suggestions about the proposal.
- Focus on the issues. If the topic is a development proposal, focus on whether or not the proposal meets the standards of the ordinance.
- Use good research and rely on facts, rather than assumptions or emotion.
- Don't make statements in favor of excluding some types of people. Zoning, by law, can't exclude different types or classes of people.
- Make sure you thoroughly understand the proposal that you are commenting on. If you're not sure how to interpret parts of the proposal, work with staff or consult other planning resources.
- Show support for your position by encouraging participation from other citizens that share the same position.

How Can a Development Be Approved If the Public Doesn't Support it?

Even if there is no public support for a proposal, if it meets the requirements of the zoning ordinance, **it must be approved**. By the same token, if a proposal doesn't meet the requirements of the ordinance, it can't be approved—even if the community supports it.

While this limits the effect that public input may have over some decisions, citizens can still play an important role in the decision-making process, by staying well-informed of local issues and becoming involved early in the decision-making process. For some proposals, the public may be able to work directly with the developer or applicant at the beginning of the process, in order to communicate concerns or negotiate their case. Because developers recognize that public support is critical to their projects' success, working with a developer early in the process may change the details of a developer's proposal.

- Attend public hearings or send written comments to elected and appointed officials. Public hearings are required by law for some types of development proposals, master plan and zoning ordinance updates, rezonings, and other community activities.
- Attend visioning sessions or design charrettes. These events are great ways to take part in the design of an important site or project in your community.
- Work with local government officials and staff. Local officials are elected or appointed to represent the interests of the community; and staff can provide a great deal of information on planning in general and on specific proposals.
- Seek elected or appointed office. Almost any citizen over the age of 18 can run for local office or apply for a seat on the planning commission, zoning board of appeals, or other committee.
- Join or begin a citizen's network to stay engaged on community activities.

Regardless of how you choose to get involved, your role in planning is critical. Public participation is the only way to ensure that new development is part of a shared vision of what the community wants and needs. By staying engaged throughout the planning process, you can not only help create that vision, but also work to make it a reality.

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 additional planning resources, or to contact your local planning department to learn more about specific issues and get involved.