

INTRODUCTION

Serving on a Planning Commission provides an opportunity to impact the community by planning for its future. Being a good Planning Commissioner requires commitment to ensuring a promising future of the community coupled with hard work, patience, and the willingness and ability to make decisions. An effective Planning Commissioner should have an understanding of the following basic topics:

- The Role and Importance of Planning
- The Authority and Duties of the Planning Commission
- The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC)
- The Pennsylvania Sewage Facilities Act and the Pennsylvania Storm Water Management Act Planning Commission Procedures
- Legal Aspects of Planning Commission Conduct
- Standards for Planning Commission Decision Making
- Basic Planning Terminology
- The Comprehensive Plan
- The Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance
- The Zoning Ordinance

This purpose of this handbook is to provide the information listed above. While this booklet was created to supplement a training program for new Planning Commission members, its broad coverage of planning topics allow it to be utilized as a resource for any citizen planner in the Centre Region, regardless of their length of service.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO PLANNING—WHAT IS PLANNING?

According to the American Planning Association, planning is *“a dynamic discipline that works to improve the welfare of people and their communities by creating more convenient, equitable, healthful, efficient, and attractive places for present and future generations. Planning enables civic leaders, businesses, and citizens to play a meaningful role in creating communities that enrich people’s lives. Good planning helps create communities that offer better choices for where and how people live. Planning helps communities to envision their future. It helps them find the right balance of new development and essential services, environmental protection, and innovative change.”*

Planning is the act of looking to the future, identifying what is desired, and then taking actions today to achieve identified goals. As noted in the American Planning Association’s definition, planning is a dynamic discipline that can focus on a wide variety of issues that relate to creating and sustaining communities that are beneficial to the people that live, work, and visit them. Planning can take place at varying scales, from planning for development at the block or neighborhood scale to planning for major issues at the state or national level. In the Centre Region, planning is done at both the municipal level as well as at the multi-

municipal (regional) level. This unique approach to planning began in the early 1960s when the Centre Region municipalities sought to plan for growth and development at a scale that extended beyond their individual municipal boundaries. By planning for growth and change at both the local and regional level, the Centre Region has been able to maintain an attractive, vibrant community.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PLANNING

Planning played an important role in human history and development, contributing to the initial success of the earliest civilizations. Evidence of planning has been unearthed in the ruins of cities in China, India, Egypt, Asia Minor, the Mediterranean, and South and Central America. Evidence of planned urban development in early cities includes orderly street systems that are rectilinear and sometimes radial; division of communities into specialized functional quarters; development of commanding central sites for palaces, temples, and civic buildings; and advanced systems of fortification, water supply, and drainage.

While planning in the 21st century is far more advanced than during the classical period, modern planning in the United States can trace its origins back to these early civilizations. Planning played an important role in the initial settlement and continual development of the United States. Planning in early communities often followed regimented rules which mirrored European precedents.

Early American settlements were typically located along major waterways and were provided with ports that would allow for the shipment of goods and materials. Many early communities in the United States were commonly designed with a grid pattern of streets and central squares that could be used as market places. Civic structures such as courthouses and churches were prominent features of early American settlements.

Planning in the United States became more prominent in the late 19th and 20th centuries as immigration, the move away from an agrarian economy, and industrialism resulted in the increased population of towns and cities. Early zoning laws were focused on public health, safety, and welfare in response to unsanitary living conditions as well as incompatible land uses being located adjacent to or in close proximity to one another.



Mohenjo-daro, located in Pakistan's Indus Valley, dates from the 25th century BC. The city had a planned layout based on a street grid of rectilinear buildings, public water provided through community and individual wells, and covered drains that conveyed wastewater away from the community.



Early zoning laws sought to address public health and safety issues. A good example of such an act is the New York State Tenement House Act of 1901—one of the first laws to ban the construction of dark, poorly ventilated tenement buildings in the state of New York.

As more jurisdictions enacted zoning ordinances to protect the public, challenges were made to their legality. In the 1926 landmark ruling by the Supreme Court in the case of *The Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Company*, zoning ordinances were upheld as constitutional extension of a community's policing power.

Planning in the United States became more prominent in the second half of the 20th century. The general prosperity that followed World War II, the creation of the National Highway System, and the increased usage and ownership of automobiles resulted in suburbanization throughout the country.

In recent years, the emphasis of planning throughout much of the nation has focused on addressing some of the consequences of suburbanization and growth outside of suburban areas. Revitalization, redevelopment, and focusing development in areas where infrastructure currently exists have been core principles of planning in the 21st century. Planning issues also frequently revolve around issues related to quality of life, accessibility, affordability, and impacts on the environment.

WHY DO WE PLAN?

As human beings, we plan for just about everything. From what we hope to accomplish in a given day, to what we plan to eat within a given week, to how much money we will need to retire, planning permeates most aspects of our lives. The act of identifying what we want or hope to accomplish is then met with actions that help us reach our goals. Planning provides a sense of control on the future and provides those that plan with a methodology for achieving what is envisioned.

Community planning relies on the same process of goal identification and actions to achieve a desired outcome. Planning provides direction on how growth and change should be managed in order to benefit everyone who lives, works, or visits a community. The importance of planning goes beyond the neighborhood or municipal level. Planning at both the micro and macro level helps to ensure that processes and actions are harmoniously working towards the same end.

There are many tangible benefits related to planning that go beyond making great places and communities. Some benefits that are realized through effective community planning include but are not limited to:

- **Saving Money.** One of the key benefits of planning for the future of a community is the ability to anticipate and budget for needed improvements and services that are often provided or maintained by the municipality. Water, sewer, fire, police, and road maintenance are services that growth and development often require. If growth is not carefully planned for, the costs to provide these services increase and ultimately, are passed on to rate and tax payers. The Centre Region's longstanding policy of directing the majority of growth to areas within a defined Regional Growth Boundary have resulted in greater efficiencies in providing these types of services.
- **Establishing Ground Rules for Development.** Planning creates ground rules that define how growth and development can occur within the community. These ground rules can send a clear signal to both property owners and developers on what is anticipated and required. This can help to minimize conflicts and provide developers with an understanding of what to expect when a development proposal is submitted.

- **Promoting Community Design.** Beyond planning for growth is the need to plan for how development should look and relate to its surroundings. Community design attempts to provide a balance between uses, architectural styles, building scale and massing, and the built and natural environments. For example, if a tall multi-story steel office building were located adjacent to a historic district, this type of design could have negative impacts on the character of the area and would create a design problem. Good community design helps to minimize conflicts and maintain a character and sense of place throughout the community.



Planning can help ensure that a community is attractive, accessible, and relates well to its surroundings. Good community design helps to minimize conflicts and maintain a character and sense of place throughout the community.

- **Protecting Property Values.** Similar to the benefits obtained by good community design, planning can help protect property from negative impacts and help to stabilize property value. A good example of this would be if a heavy industrial use was located adjacent to a single family residential area. There is a high likelihood that residential property owners that lived adjacent to the industrial use would be impacted by noise, pollution, and other nuisances related to higher intensity uses. The value of these homes would likely decrease, since the livability of the neighborhood would have been greatly affected. Community planning can help protect property and its value by ensuring that land uses are compatible with their surrounding built and natural environments.
- **Protecting Natural and Environmental Resources.** Planning can help ensure that natural and environmental resources are protected and made available for future generations. Prior to the advent of modern planning, many natural and environmental resources were exploited without the understanding that these resources were vital to a community's well-being and would be difficult if not impossible to restore. Developing near natural and environmental features may result in additional hazards that could easily be avoided. In central Pennsylvania, developing near waterways or on steep hillsides can result in the destruction of private property and harm to the environment. Planning can help strike a balance between the built and natural environments, protecting the both the community and flora and fauna.



Planning should seek to address the protection of natural and environmental resources. The Centre Region is at the headwaters of Spring Creek, which is designated as a high quality cold water fishery. The stream is recognized for its wild brown trout population, which attracts anglers from around the world.

MUNICIPAL AUTHORITY TO PLAN

In Pennsylvania, the authority to plan is established by the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC), which delegates the responsibility for planning to each municipality and county. The MPC specifically grants municipalities with the authority to create and abolish, through ordinance, a planning agency. The MPC outlines several options for establishment of a planning agency including a citizen led planning commission, a professional planning department, a planning committee comprised of elected officials, or a combination thereof. The most common form of planning agency in Pennsylvania is the citizen led planning commission, which is governed by municipally adopted bylaws. In the Centre Region, each municipality has an established planning commission and several municipalities have planning departments (State College Borough and Ferguson Township). The Centre Regional Planning Agency, in addition to regional planning services, provides local planning assistance to College, Halfmoon, Harris, and Patton Townships.

