



Board & Commissions Training Strategy

Village of Vernon | 2021

Prepared: December 2020 |
Redevelopment Ready Communities

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Introduction

The Village of Vernon engaged with the [Redevelopment Ready Communities](#) program in March 2017 to help enhance its local planning, zoning, and development review processes. Since that time, the village has made steady progress toward achieving certification but faces many of the same challenges as other smaller Michigan communities when it comes to training for local officials.

In recognition of the village's self-investment in other RRC Best Practices, RRC staff has dedicated time and resources to providing this training strategy as a direct form of technical assistance to the village. The village incurred no cost for this project aside from a small amount of time to coordinate with RRC staff and asking officials to take a brief survey and review the draft document prior to finalization.

RRC Best Practice Four focuses on building capacity for boards and commissions which make development-related decisions. For Vernon this includes:

Council
Planning Commission
Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA)
Downtown Development Authority (DDA)

Specifically, this best practice encourages communities to adopt a more **strategic approach** to training to ward off fatigue, apathy, and general time constraints that can hinder delivery of necessary training for board members to stay up to date on the information needed to make informed decisions.

Customized for Vernon & Tailored for Small Communities

The strategy was built specifically with Vernon in mind and has not been copied over from any other community. The average size of an RRC community is under 4,000 residents which allows RRC to both understand the capacity of smaller communities and to also have a wide perspective on what is possible when communities take a strategic approach with set goals and frameworks which can expand a community's capacity. The village is always welcomed to alter this strategy if it determines the current structure does not work for Vernon but RRC encourages the community to give it a year before doing so.

Using this strategy

The outcome of this project is series of recommendations to help the village more strategically approach training based on data, existing goals, and available resources. While the strategy does not get into a level of detail that suggests specific events or month-by-month schedule, it does provide a framework which will help village officials and staff identify priority training activities that will best help it further its established goals. Specifically, this strategy should be referred to when:

1	Scheduling at-meeting training
2	Considering financial support requests to attend training/events
3	Deciding whether to forward training information received from various agencies
4	Reviewing progress and making updates

It is also important to note that the exclusion of a topic or training method does not mean the village should reject opportunities when they fit the overall goals of the village. But this strategy does aim to identify what is most helpful and fits within the capacity determined from the existing conditions survey.

At the end of 2021, the village should review the strategy and identify what worked, what did not and what could change. The strategies for each board could then be updated for the following year. The framework on the next page includes questions to consider during that annual update.

Existing Conditions Survey

As part of this strategic, local officials took a brief online survey to help RRC better understand their experience, desires for serving, understanding of core topics, interest in additional topics, and constraints to getting training. Full results are found in Appendix A. RRC does not anticipate that the village will need to conduct a survey each year, but every 3-4 years would be prudent, depending on official turnover.

Training Framework

While most attention around training often goes to actual training events, a successful training strategy not only recommends specific training events but also establishes a culture that encourages ongoing training and information sharing. Under RRC Best Practice Four, this includes several aspects such as identifying training funds, consistently encouraging training and more. This section makes several recommendations for an updated training framework in Vernon which aligns with Best Practice Four and more efficiently uses officials' limited time while adding a level of accountability.

Funding Training

There is no specific amount of training money which needs to be set, but the village should continue to budget for some level of training each year for staff and officials as a **dedicated line item(s)**. Ideally the village will assess its training needs at the beginning of each year and budget as close to those needs as possible. The village should also explore other funding methods including:

Scholarships	Training scholarships from organizations such as MML or MAP; these are commonly event specific.
Insurance Funds	Training funding through the village's insurance company; some offer funds to encourage training and therefore reduce their risk exposure.
Pooling Resources	Pooling resources with nearby communities to pay for training; this can often bring additional partners to the table too.
State Support	Working with state level partners such as RRC to potentially pay for training

Training Records

The Village Clerk has established an **Excel spreadsheet** to track training activity for staff and officials. This sheet should be updated at each meeting and reviewed annually when the village is assessing training needs for the upcoming year. The Village Clerk has also indicated a desire to create an online form which can be used to track outside training.

Consistent Encouragement and Reminders

The village should **add training as a standing agenda topic** for all its boards and commission. This encourages consistent reminders about upcoming trainings and report outs from recent training events.

Establishing Annual Training Targets

RRC encourages the village to **establish annual training targets** for members. Doing this in the form of hours allows the village to measure progress but also affords flexibility to members to meet those goals in whatever way is easiest for them. Based on feedback from the survey, RRC recommends the following targets for 2021 (note: many members though more were needed so future increases should be considered):

Council	4 hours annually
Planning Commission	4 hours annually
Zoning Board of Appeals	2 hours annually
Downtown Development Authority	4 hours annually

RRC encourages the village to incorporate these training targets into bylaws for each board. This adds a level of accountability.

Annual Joint Training

The village should establish a tradition of holding at least one **annual joint training event** on a topic of common interest to officials. This can be scheduled well in advance each year. The 2020 survey identified several topics which were of interest to multiple boards.

Organizational Memberships

Many planning and development related organizations offer community memberships which allow access to resources for multiple staff and/or officials. Common memberships in Michigan include the [Michigan Association of Planning \(MAP\)](#), [Michigan Municipal League \(MML\)](#), and the [Michigan Downtown Association \(MDA\)](#). Vernon should annually determine if a membership(s) is appropriate for the village as a whole or even just for a few members. Many of these organizations offer resources available to the public as well but the value of a membership is widely exceeded in access to resources “behind the firewall.”

Annual Update

Training priorities will likely shift from year to year depending on emerging trends and the community’s planning goals. As such, this document should be reviewed each year and adjusted for the upcoming year. The following steps should be taken:

STEP	DETAILS	TIMING
Update Records	Ensure that training activity records are up to date.	Late October
Analyze Results	Analyze the records to determine if goals were met for the year.	Early November
Assess Outcomes	Review the outcomes. If goals were not met, why? Compare against priority topics and identify ones that have been met or new ones that should be added.	November meetings
Update Strategy	Update the strategy document	Early December
Review	Officials review document, make any needed edits	December meetings
Distribution	Final version distributed	End of Year

Implementing Year 1

The key to any successful strategy is implementation. The village should use the list below to ensure all aspects of this strategy are addressed in 2021:

Task	When	Complete?
Add training as a standing agenda item to each board's agenda	Q1 2021	
Establish training records system	Q1 2021	
Schedule joint meeting	Q1 2021	
Schedule at-meeting trainings	Q2 2021	
Inquire if the village's insurance company provides training funds	Q1 2021	
Update bylaws to include training expectations	Q3 2021	
Conduct annual review & update	Q3 2021	

2021 Training Strategies

This section contains training recommendations for each board for 2021 based on the results of the survey, plan goals, available resources and known training availability. These are meant to be fluid strategies but should be used to assess any training funds requested by individuals to ensure those funds are being used to meet established goals. **These strategies do not include any major conferences or off-site events**, a nod to the time and cost concerns identified in the 2020 survey.

These strategies are not intended to be restrictive but identify priorities. Officials should feel welcome to attend training outside of these topics and methods when time permits.

Planning Commission

The Planning Commission plays a major role in the city’s development process by overseeing the master plan process, drafting zoning changes, and reviewing site plans. Planning Commissioners make legally binding decisions that can have impacts on the physical development of the community for years (and decades) to come. The Planning Commission meets once a month in the evening.

2020 survey results showed the Planning Commission’s preferred methods of training to be at-meeting, followed by reviewing plans, and then articles or online training (tied for third). Most of the commission has less than three years’ experience. Keeping survey results in mind, this plan recommends the following training approach for 2020:

Annual Goal	4 Hours		
Delivery Methods	Joint Meeting (1 hour); At-meeting training (2 hours); personal preference (1 hour)		
Priority Topic	Identified via	Potential Delivery Methods/Resources	
Capital Improvements Planning*	Master Plan Goals	MAP Workshops (off-sit, in Vernon or online), RRC CIP Guide , RRC CIP Quick Sheet , Open Gov CIPs 101 , Reviewing other communities’ CIPs (see RRC Library for examples)	
Zoning Refresher	Master Plan Goals	Enabling Better Places Zoning Guide , MAP Workshops (off-site, in Vernon or online), MSU Citizen Planner (online), RRC Zoning quick sheets , American Planning Association	
Placemaking*	2020 Survey	AARP Pop Up Placemaking Toolkit , Congress for New Urbanism , MML Placemaking Site (use online resources or invite speakers)	
Redevelopment-specific Tools*	2020 Survey	MEDC MiPlace , EGLE Brownfields Program (could use online resources or speakers)	
State Level Financing Tools*	2020 Survey	In addition to MECD and EGLE, check out USDA Rural Development and MDOT Economic Development Office (reach out to state partners for countless other options if there’s a specific area of focus needed)	
Other resources for the Planning Commission	Vernon Master Plan, Vernon Downtown Plan, CityLab , Planetizen , Strong Towns , 880 Cities		

**Possible topics for a joint training or to at least invite other boards to if done at a PC meeting*

Village Council

Village Council is responsible for several aspects of the development experience: approving the master plan and zoning ordinance, amendment the zoning ordinance (including rezoning), approving the use of economic development incentives (when applicable), and ensuring essential services are provided via in-house staff or contractors. The Village Council meets once a month in the evening. This plan assumes it typically has a full agenda already.

Preferred methods of training were reviewing local plans and ordinances, at-meeting training, and online methods. More than half the council has been in the position for less than a year which provides an opportunity for general training on items such as meeting protocol, open meetings considerations, ethics, etc. Keeping survey results in mind, this plan recommends the following approach:

Annual Goal	4 Hours	
Delivery Methods	Joint Meeting (1 hour); At-meeting training (1 hour, likely split into smaller 15- or 30-minute sessions over the year); personal preference (2 hours)	
Priority Topic	Identified via	Potential Delivery Methods/Resources
Council Norms (meeting essentials, ethics, key laws, etc.)	2020 Survey	Michigan Municipal League (options vary)
Capital Improvements Planning*	Master Plan Goals	MAP Workshops (off-sit, in Vernon or online), RRC CIP Guide , RRC CIP Quick Sheet , Open Gov CIPs 101 , Reviewing other communities' CIPs (see RRC Library for examples)
Fiscal Sustainability for Municipalities	2020 Survey	Michigan Department of Treasury Fiscally Ready Communities program (format for 2021 TBD)
State Level Financing Tools*	2020 Survey	Essentially any state agency; for a broad overview – contact MEDC Community Assistance Team to help organize an overall presentation or get contacts to invite in over time. Many state agencies offer online resources as well.
Resiliency/Sustainability*	2020 Survey	Likely online via webinars or podcasts from a multitude of resources including MAP , MML , American Planning Association , A Strong Towns Response to the Pandemic Toolkit
Local Plans and Ordinance Reviews*	2020 Survey	Vernon Master Plan, Downtown Plan, Zoning Ordinance, etc. Could be a joint meeting, independent study, etc.
Other resources for the Village Council	National League of Cities , AARP Livable Communities Initiative	

*Possible topics for a joint training or to at least invite other boards to if done at a PC meeting

Downtown Development Authority

The Downtown Development Authority (DDA) in Vernon is responsible for implementing the DDA Development and TIF plan as well as the 2015 Downtown Strategy. While the DDA does not have direct authority for zoning or development incentives, its efforts to promote downtown as a community gathering spot and economic engine are essential to fostering a high quality of life in Vernon which in-and-of-itself is an essential part of any economic development strategy.

2020 survey results saw only a 33% response rate from the DDA (3 out of 9 total seats), but showed some interesting trends such as a higher willingness to participate in more outside-the-box or in-person training activity such as visiting other communities, podcasts and mentorship opportunities though the highest ranked were at-meeting training, articles and online resources. Given the business background of this group, feedback backs up the idea that time is the biggest challenge. Keeping these factors in mind, the DDA could pursue the following strategy for 2021:

Annual Goal	4 Hours	
Delivery Methods	Joint Meeting (1 hour); At-meeting/off-site training (2 hours); Personal preference (1 hours)	
Priority Topic	Identified via	Potential Delivery Methods/Resources
Michigan Main Street	2017 Downtown Strategy	Michigan Main Street Online Training (in-person may also be available in 2021)
State Level Financing Tools*	2020 Survey	Essentially any state agency; for a broad overview – contact MEDC Community Assistance Team to help organize an overall presentation or get contacts to invite in over time. Many state agencies offer online resources as well.
Placemaking*	Downtown Trending Topic	AARP Pop Up Placemaking Toolkit , Congress for New Urbanism , MML Placemaking Site (use online resources or invite speakers)
Events Planning	DDA Primary Role	Meet with nearby DDAs to talk about their events
Other resources for the DDA	Michigan Downtown Association (MDA), AARP Livable Communities Initiative	

**Possible topics for a joint training or to at least invite other boards to if done at a PC meeting*

Zoning Board of Appeals

Unlike other boards, the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) does not meet regularly and as long as the zoning ordinance is kept up-to-date and aligned with the master plan, the ZBA likely won't need to meet much at all. When it does though, it is to make legally binding decisions that can often make or break a development project. This presents a unique challenge from a training perspective since opportunities for training are less, yet the content is often much more nuanced than other boards due to its judicial nature.

Furthermore, only one member of the ZBA answered the 2020 survey making it impossible to identify overall trends. Considering these factors, the recommended approach for the ZBA looks different than the other boards:

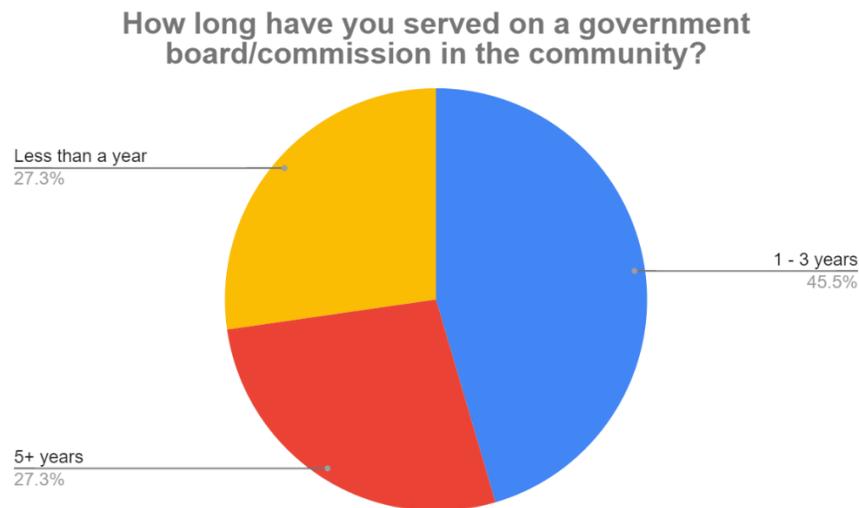
Annual Goal	2 Hours
Delivery Methods	Annual ZBA Meeting (1 hour); Personal preference (1 hour)
Annual Meeting	
During an annual meeting, the ZBA should complete the following:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Review any changes made to the zoning ordinance in the past year2. Review any variances granted in the past year3. Review any prominent court cases around planning and zoning from past year (Check out MSU Extension for a summary)4. Review the overall purpose and meeting norms of the ZBA5. Review on-demand training resources available for ZBA members	
Ongoing Training	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• MSU Extension Planning & Zoning Court Cases• MAP ZBA Training (commonly an off-site workshop)• Any other planning or zoning topic that would keep the issue fresh in a member's mind	

Appendix: Survey Results (October 2020)

The following is a summary of an online survey emailed to all board and commission officials in Vernon.

In total there were 15 officials at the time and 11 responded to the survey (73% response rate). Highest response rate came from Village Council (5 members), following by the Planning Commission (4), DDA (3) and ZBA (1).

Over 70% of responders indicated they have less than 3 years of experience serving on a board in the village. This suggests a need for core basic training instead of specialized focus areas.



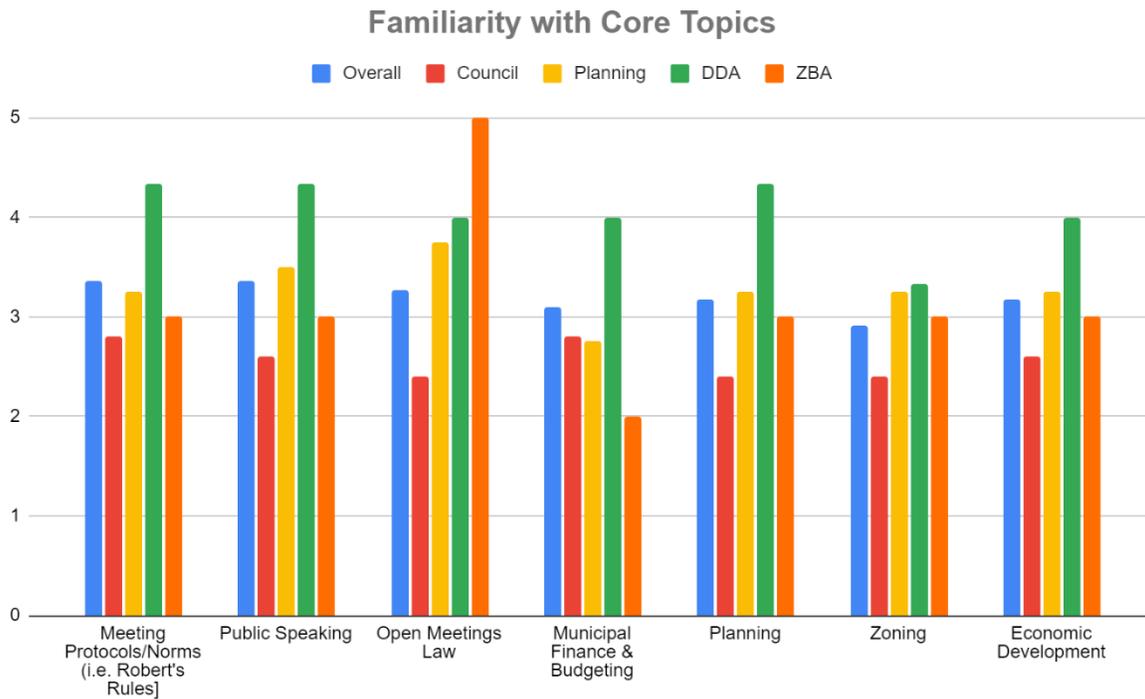
When asked why a respondent choose to service on a government board/commission, common themes emerged such as **service to the community and to have input on decisions**. One respondent indicated they were asked to serve. The list below includes all answers to this question.

- To have input in the community development
- I wanted to be a part of the decisions made for my community.
- Was asked to.
- service to the community
- I believe that been on a government board such as this helps me, help Vernon become and stay healthy and strong.
- To help bring business to Vernon, Be a part of the community
- To have a say in the direction of the Village
- service to the community
- Interested in serving
- Community involvement
- Community involvement

The next question asked respondents about their familiarity with some core topics that commonly come up for municipal officials. Respondents rated their comfort level on a scale of 1 – 5 with 1 being completely unfamiliar, 3 being “some training but limited and 5 being very familiar.

Overall, officials were most comfortable with meeting norms and public speaking (each rated an average of 3.36). Behind that was Open Meetings Law (3.27), Planning (3.18), Economic Development (3.18), Municipal Finance and budgeting (3.09) and finally Zoning (2.91). There were some differences between boards that are worth factoring into training priorities, in particular a need for some of the newer council members to receive training on open meetings and norms.

The chart below shows the overall level (blue) and the level broken down by board.



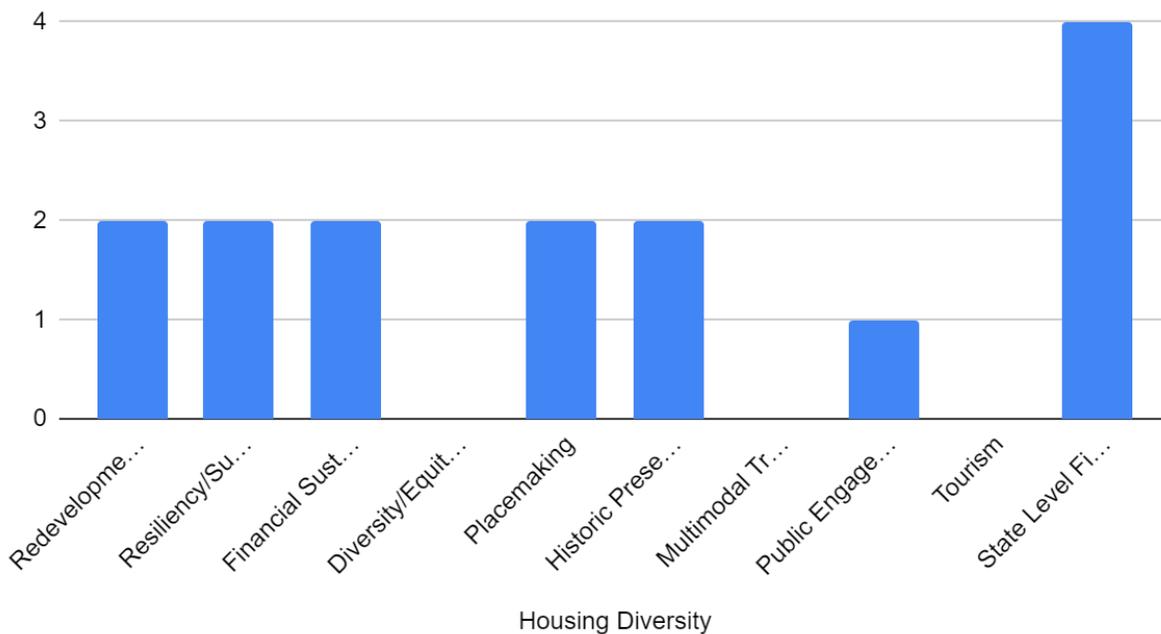
The survey also attempted to get an idea of what training events or resources officials had attended in the past. Of the list, three were checked:

- RRC Best Practices Training (in-person or online) (4)
- MML Convention (1)
- MEDC Toolbox Event (2)

Because the community is engaged in the Redevelopment Ready Communities process, this survey included a question regarding which plans have been referenced in the past year to make decisions. Reviewing plans is a great, locally focused, and free training opportunity. **The master plan was the most cited (9 responses) and the only one to be referenced by all four boards.** The downtown plan was mentioned by one Planning member and all three DDA members. One respondent also mentioned the Recreation/Parks plan. Given the importance of the downtown to the village, a joint meeting on downtown goals could be valuable within the next year.

In addition to plans, the survey provided a range of potential topics for training and asked participants which they might be interested in receiving more information on. The most popular was “State Level Financing Tools (MEDC, MDOT, DNR, etc.)” with four responses. Other topics with interest included placemaking, historic preservation resiliency, financial sustainability for municipalities and redevelopment tools & processes. A few topics received no interest, including some which are popular right now at conferences and webinars. Know that there is little interest in getting information on these topics (multimodal transportation, diversity/equity/inclusion, and housing diversity) can help the village filter through training offerings.

Interest in Various Topics

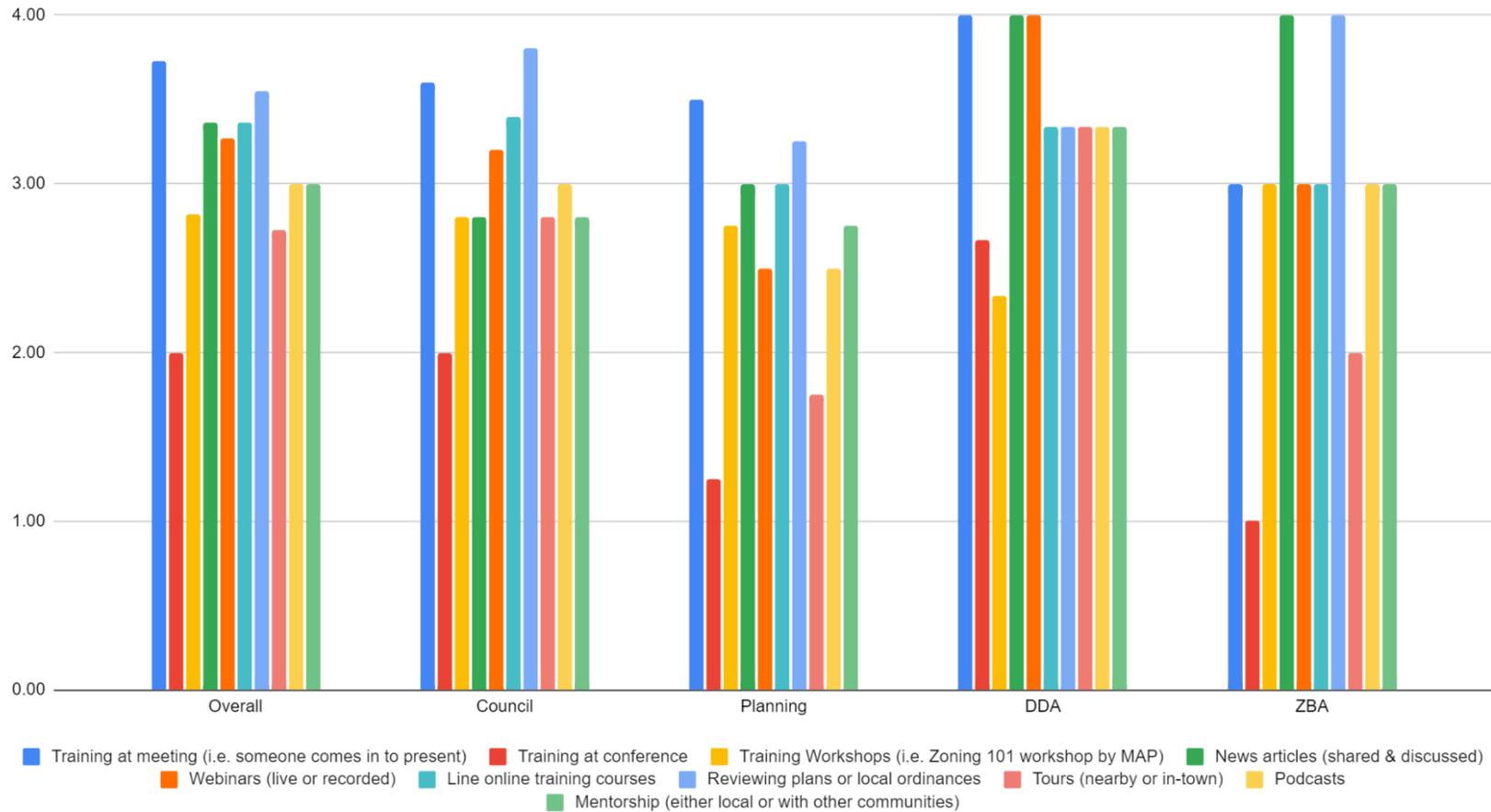


In addition to topics, respondents were asked about their preferences for how training is delivered. **Here, a clear winner emerged: training at meetings.** Coming in behind that was reviewing local plans or ordinances, online training opportunities (webinars and live), and sharing news articles. The least popular option is, ironically, the one that is most cited by most as training: training at conferences.

Interestingly, some of the less conventional methods such as podcasts, mentorship, and in-person tours were ranked higher than expected. These three ranked particularly high for the DDA, suggesting more options for training with that board in particular.

The graph on the next page shows the data for preferences, averaged overall and by each board.

Training Method Preferences



Finally, the survey asked about constraints/challenges to training. This open-ended question resulted in numerous answers, almost all tied to time:

- Time
- Time is a big factor. After working all day my mind is really not set for a training.
- Time
- Making sure it is relevant to our community
- Sometimes availability
- Running my own business requires me to be there every day
- time
- time
- Working full-time
- Time
- Unpredictable work schedule

This was not a surprising answer but backs up the idea of conducting training in flexible ways like recorded webinars or podcasts in addition to conducting training at meetings where participants have already blocked off their schedule to attend.