



## Getting What You Want: Master Plan to Zoning to Development



**MICHIGAN ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

### ***What you will learn:***

*How the master plan  
relates to zoning and to  
development*

*How robust engagement  
early on can lead to a  
streamlined development  
approval process*

*How to communicate with  
stakeholders to ensure  
quality development*

Good development does not just happen. Good development is achieved when a municipality plans for it, and then adopts the codes and regulations to implement the plan. With the ebb and flow of prosperity in Michigan over many generations, some municipalities might be happy for any development, believing that a vacant lot, now developed, will yield not only new tax revenues, but attract more development, and more people to core commercial areas. Sadly, a poorly conceived and constructed development project can do more harm than good. But with proper visioning, planning and implementation, high quality developments that align with your community's values can be the rule, not the exception.

Values inform the community vision and serve as the basis for planning. Planning provides the legal foundation for zoning. Together they serve as the standards against which new development proposals are reviewed. While it is easiest to conceptualize this as a linear process – vision – plan – codes and regulation to implement vision and plan – development - it is not necessarily so.

### ***How do we get there?***

The best master plans articulate a clear vision for the future that emphasizes a community's priorities and values. Ensuring your community attracts the types of development it wants starts with establishing a strong foundation in a master plan that is then articulated in your regulations to guide development.

Creating stronger feedback loops, fostering trust and transparency, and developing a structured approach to change management will help your community plan for and attract the type of development you want and deserve.

Published by the  
**MICHIGAN ASSOCIATION OF PLANNING**

Summer 2020  
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## **What the Law Says:**

### **Michigan Planning Enabling Act**

#### Article III, Section 31

(2) In the preparation of a master plan, a planning commission shall do all of the following, as applicable:

- (a) Make careful and comprehensive surveys and studies of present conditions and future growth within the planning jurisdiction with due regard to its relation to neighboring jurisdictions.
- (b) Consult with representatives of adjacent local units of government in respect to their planning so that conflicts in master plans and zoning may be avoided.
- (c) Cooperate with all departments of the state and federal governments, public transportation agencies ,and other public agencies concerned with programs for economic, social, and physical development within the planning jurisdiction and seek the maximum coordination of the local unit of government's programs with these agencies.

#### Article III, Section 33

(1) A master plan shall address land use and infrastructure issues and may project 20 years or more into the future. A master plan shall include maps, plats, charts, and descriptive, explanatory, and other related matter and shall show the planning commission's recommendations for the physical development of the planning jurisdiction.

(2) A master plan shall also include those of the following subjects that reasonably can be considered as pertinent to the future development of the planning jurisdiction:

- (a) A land use plan that consists in part of a classification and allocation of land for agriculture, residences, commerce, industry, recreation, ways and grounds, subject to subsection (5), public transportation facilities, public buildings, schools, soil conservation, forests, woodlots, open space, wildlife refuges, and other uses and purposes.
- (b) The general location, character, and extent of all of the following:
  - (i) All components of a transportation system and their interconnectivity including streets and bridges, public transit including public transportation facilities and routes, bicycle facilities, pedestrian ways, freight facilities and routes, port facilities, railroad facilities, and airports, to provide for the safe and efficient movement of people and goods in a manner that is appropriate to the context of the community and, as applicable, considers all legal users of the public right-of-way.
  - (ii) Waterways and waterfront developments.
  - (iii) Sanitary sewers and water supply systems.
  - (iv) Facilities for flood prevention, drainage, pollution prevention, and maintenance of water levels.
  - (v) Public utilities and structures.
- (c) Recommendations as to the general character, extent, and layout of redevelopment or rehabilitation of blighted areas; and the removal, relocation, widening, narrowing, vacating, abandonment, change of use, or extension of streets, grounds, open spaces, buildings, utilities, or other facilities.

## **What the Law Says, continued:**

(d) For a local unit of government that has adopted a zoning ordinance, a zoning plan for various zoning districts controlling the height, area, bulk, location, and use of buildings and premises. The zoning plan shall include an explanation of how the land use categories on the future land use map relate to the districts on the zoning map.

(e) Recommendations for implementing any of the master plan's proposals.

### **Michigan Zoning Enabling Act**

#### **Article II**

125.3201 Regulation of land development and establishment of districts; provisions; uniformity of regulations; designations; limitations.

(1) A local unit of government may provide by zoning ordinance for the regulation of land development and the establishment of 1 or more districts within its zoning jurisdiction which regulate the use of land and structures to meet the needs of the state's citizens for food, fiber, energy, and other natural resources, places of residence, recreation, industry, trade, service, and other uses of land, to ensure that use of the land is situated in appropriate locations and relationships, to limit the inappropriate overcrowding of land and congestion of population, transportation systems, and other public facilities, to facilitate adequate and efficient provision for transportation systems, sewage disposal, water, energy, education, recreation, and other public service and facility requirements, and to promote public health, safety, and welfare.

(2) Except as otherwise provided under this act, the regulations shall be uniform for each class of land or buildings, dwellings, and structures within a district.

(3) A local unit of government may provide under the zoning ordinance for the regulation of land development and the establishment of districts which apply only to land areas and activities involved in a special program to achieve specific land management objectives and avert or solve specific land use problems, including the regulation of land development and the establishment of districts in areas subject to damage from flooding or beach erosion.

(4) A local unit of government may adopt land development regulations under the zoning ordinance designating or limiting the location, height, bulk, number of stories, uses, and size of dwellings, buildings, and structures that may be erected or altered, including tents and recreational vehicles.

From municipal staff to elected and appointed leadership, communities need to be willing and able to:

- Understand the intersections and overlaps between community values, planning, zoning, and development review.
- Communicate these intersections to the public early and often.
- Set clear boundaries on public engagement efforts.
- Talk in hypotheticals, but also ask hard questions.

#### **TIP**

Always keep implementation in mind. What resources, knowledge, technologies, or partnerships will you need to achieve your community's vision? It fosters public confidence and helps to focus the conversation. Engage your partners early to gain buy-in and input. If public funds are needed to support future development, consider potential sources early so that you can align your capital planning efforts or seek grant funding.

## **TERMS:**

**Change management** is the application of a structured process and set of tools for leading the people side of change to achieve a desired outcome.

**Vision** defines what the community seeks to become in the future.

**Values** describe the guiding principles and needs of the community that build towards achieving the vision.

“**Net zero energy**” means the total amount of energy used yearly by a building is equal to or less than the amount of energy created onsite through the use of innovative technologies and renewable power generation.

**Form-based Code (FBC)** is an approach to zoning that emphasizes the character of a district rather than the use of buildings and illustrates the values and vision instilling more predictability and flexibility into the development process.

### **Zoning plan**

- Links the master plan to the zoning ordinance
- A table comparing zoning to future land use districts
- A map showing recommended zoning changes
- Descriptions of future land use categories with a listing of applicable zoning districts and suggested changes to those districts

### **Design Guidelines**

- Illustrate building, site, and streetscape design expectations
- Limits haggling over materials, proportions, “look and feel” of development by establishing expectations up front

## **How Long Until We Get There?**

In planning, we often ask the question:

Where do you want to be in 20-30 years? While a transformational development project may take decades to pull together, most development decisions happen on a much shorter timeline, and have an incremental impact on your community, over many years. It is important for communities to have relevant data, current plans, and up-to-date ordinances to attract and respond to development opportunities.

*Where do you want to be in 5 years? What resources can you commit this next fiscal year? What can you realistically achieve this quarter?* While master plans are a long-range planning tool with a 20-30 year horizon, they are also a guide for years 0- 5. The implementation plan and the 5-year master plan review requirement are critical tools to make sure the plan is being used, remains relevant, and is still useful to guide development.

## **Values + Vision**

Values are a shared set of guiding principles that establish what a community understands to be its core beliefs. The values are the foundation upon which the community vision – and in turn the goals and objectives – are based. Determining values should be the first step in a community planning process, and should be created as an initial element of a participatory visioning process.

Specific values might include things like collaboration and inclusion, preserving historic and cultural aspects, natural environment, equity and inclusion, and a welcoming spirit. This might translate to a vision that encompasses small-town charm, accessible public gathering spaces, walkable neighborhoods, a preserved traditional main street, or bustling commercial area, things that can be planned for and regulated. There are many ways to identify your values, and conduct community visioning. Typically, it is the first step of a master planning process, after conducting

background studies. You must know where you've come from and where you are now before determining where you want to be in the future. The background studies will inform the conversations about your values and future vision.

### TIP

Take the time to listen and learn from your community members. Having tough conversations up-front builds trust, improves outcomes, saves time in the approval process, and clarifies to developers what is needed and expected by the community. These conversations often yield policy or regulatory recommendations.

A kickoff meeting for a master planning effort might start with a smaller group of representative stakeholders, perhaps a master plan steering committee or advisory group that will meet throughout the planning process. The conversation can next be expanded to the public. Well planned visioning exercises will set the context for why a community vision is important and how the community will benefit in the future.

Begin the visioning session with broad, open-ended questions like: where do we see our community in 20 years? What would your community be like if you had the power to make it any way you wanted? Where would people live? Where would they work? How would they get to their schools and workplaces? On their days off, where would they go and what would they do? What kind of a house would you live in? Where would you shop? How would you get there? What kind of energy would be used for heating? For transportation?

Follow the vision brainstorming session with more focused discussion of values and create a working definition of the ideas presented. Next, prioritize the values through voting or consensus. The final value statements may benefit from a set of adjectives, graphics or images, and potentially some tangible examples of actions, partners, and/or overarching goals. Concrete examples are useful to support layman's understanding of abstract ideas.

Community values and visioning exercises are generally positive, and future-focused, but this is also a critical time to talk about fears, uncertainty, and past or current failings. Setting a realistic course to achieve your vision requires first articulating the barriers you face. Language and context matter; your values should be unique to the social, economic, historic, and physical conditions of your community.

### TIP

Think about your community in terms of scales and systems:

**Scales:** Site, Neighborhood/Corridor, District, City/Township/Village, County/Region

**Systems:** Natural/Open Space, Mobility/Transportation, Infrastructure/Services, Employment, Education

### Master Plan

Your master plan is your policy blueprint to land use and physical development. The Michigan Planning Enabling Act requires Michigan municipalities that have zoning to have a master plan which guides future zoning decisions. During the master planning process the community vision is translated into policies statements and recommendations. A master plan is your roadmap, and it should be referenced for consistency with every development proposal or rezoning application that is considered by the elected and appointed bodies.

It is therefore critical that the master plan integrate the vision into goals, objectives and strategies that activate the vision to realize your community's values. If a goal is to strengthen and direct development toward your downtown, the master plan will also include objectives to that end: promote new development and redevelopment in vacant downtown buildings; promote existing businesses and create programs to attract additional businesses; and develop a variety of retail, cultural and entertainment uses with appropriate pedestrian and vehicular access while preserving the character of downtown.

## **Resources:**

“Implementing community vision requires detailed strategies.” by Brad Neumann. MSU Extension. April 1, 2016.

Master Plan Update Guide by Redevelopment Ready Communities

AARP Roadmap to Livability Collection by AARP

Smart Codes: Model Land-Development Regulations. by Marya Morris, FAICP. PAS Report 556. American Planning Association.

Design Review: Guiding Better Development. by Mark Hinshaw, FAICP, Marya Morris, FAICP. PAS Report 591. American Planning Association.

Equitable Development Principles & Scorecard. The Alliance for Advancing Regional Equity.

The Project for Code Reform: Coding solutions that enable great places. Congress for the New Urbanism.

The Michigan Association of Planning offers workshops on community engagement, master planning, and zoning administration. Each of these workshops has companion reference manual available for sale.

## **BACKGROUND STUDIES**

Every master plan must consider its history; population trends and predictions; number, type and condition of housing units; socioeconomic characteristics like educational attainment levels, employment, income, age distribution, racial composition. Existing land use is a necessary element, because the way we use the land changes over time. Community facilities like public building, road systems, utilities and other infrastructure must be inventoried and evaluated for age and condition. And an existing land use map is a critical evaluation tool to explore if the current configuration of land uses meets the needs of the community or if changes should be made. When evaluated comprehensively, the background studies help a community see development and redevelopment potential.

### ***Development and Redevelopment***

Background study data will reveal many relevant considerations. If your population is growing, do you have sufficient housing stock, at various price points and sizes, to accommodate more residents? If not, where will it be located, and what will it look like? An evaluation of the existing land use map will show the locations of obsolete or underutilized

properties, maybe a vacant big box, or a parcel on the edge of town not yet connected to utilities? Perhaps there are building vacancies or gaps between buildings in your downtown; how did you envision enlivening and reactivating these spaces? Spell this out in the master plan to set the stage and provide justification for zoning ordinance changes to implement your vision, and to pave the way to get the development you want.

A traditional master plan may be supplemented by **area- or content-specific components** that focus on specific elements that require deeper study like neighborhood revitalization, infrastructure capacity, mobility, resilience, conservation, housing, and/or economic development. These focused studies strengthen the future land use and planning recommendations and provide greater clarity on the character, type, and size of development or redevelopment the community seeks.

Successful redevelopment means looking beyond the boundaries of the site. **Neighborhood area plans** can support equitable development through focused conversations with neighboring residents and businesses to identify needs, opportunities, and potential barriers and hone the community value statements to incorporate the historic, social, or economic context of that neighborhood.

Communities should formally adopt all plans and **integrate those sub-area or topical plans** to the greatest extent possible into the master plan. Adopting plans provides a critical link in translating values and land use policies into ordinance changes, capital infrastructure improvements, funding allocations, and program implementation – the factors that shape development.

The master plan must also include a **zoning plan**. A zoning plan may be a table that compares the future land use categories to zoning categories, descriptions of comparable zoning districts in the land use descriptions, or a plan for all new zoning districts if the current zoning requires an overhaul to meet the master plan's vision.

### TIP

How are your other codes and ordinances supporting your Community Values? Consider topics such as:

- Green infrastructure
- Historic preservation and adaptive use
- Housing affordability
- New economy
- Transportation and mobility
- Sustainability

### Zoning

The master plan is a long range guide for the physical arrangement of land uses and the appearance of a community, and is used to guide future development. Many of the plan recommendations will be implemented through amendments to the zoning ordinance text and map. A carefully developed master plan, based on data and community input and engagement, will clearly articulate actions and policies to implement the plan goals.

Zoning is one of the primary tools used by local government to implement the master plan. While many other regulatory and programmatic approaches are used to advance the policies of the plan, zoning is an important and powerful tool to realize your community vision.

According to the Michigan Zoning Enabling Act, a zoning ordinance shall be based upon a plan designed

to promote the public health, safety, and general welfare, to:

- Limit the improper use of land
- Conserve natural resources and energy
- Ensure appropriate locations of land uses
- Avoid the overcrowding of population
- Provide efficient transportation systems and networks
- Reduce hazards to life and property
- Facilitate adequate provision of public utilities and services

A zoning ordinance shall be made with reasonable consideration of the character of each district, its peculiar suitability for particular uses, the conservation of property values and natural resources, and the general and appropriate trend and character of land, building, and population development.

In addition, a zoning ordinance should be logically organized and consistent; incorporate modern best practices; reduce annual rezoning or variance requests; include graphics and charts for ease-of-use; and provide regulations that support community values and redevelopment goals.

Zoning should be a tool for creating healthy, resilient, vibrant places, not inhibiting them. If your zoning ordinance does not support the type of development your community wants, it is time to amend your codes.

During your master planning process, you should have identified which districts, or parts of the community, are facing the most development pressure, and where the top priorities are for investment. Municipal planners and community and economic development staff will know the most about problematic or controversial development sites. Concentrate on zoning revisions to these districts and supplemental standards. Embed the community values into intent statements, use tables, and design standards. For example:

If your master plan identified walkability and pedestrian friendly priorities, translate those priorities into zoning regulations that deemphasize parking, require sidewalks and sidewalk connections, and encourage a mixture of uses. Require more from development where it matters the most. A form-based code can be a particularly useful tool to

## **WHAT COMMUNITIES ARE DOING THIS?**

**City of Dearborn:** Downtown Dearborn Visioning Survey (2020) – DDA hosted stakeholder conversations followed by a public survey with social media blasts.

**City of Kalamazoo:** Kalamazoo Master Plan – Alignment between Vision and Master Plan

**City of Flint:** Flint's master plan led directly to a zoning ordinance overhaul, so the plan included a map illustrating where existing zoning was incompatible with the plan's future land use plan

**City of Fenton:** Fenton had an applicant contemplating a traditional suburban-style pharmacy for a key parcel downtown. Instead, they showed what was desired per the plan and code and now the Cornerstone Building is an anchor of new mixed-use development downtown. Source: CIB Planning

**City of Grand Rapids:** The City's Development Center offers electronic plan submission and review through ePlan Room. This online application is fully integrated into Citizen Access, the City's existing permit portal. With ePlan Room, customers can submit their permit application online and upload plans at the same time.

**City of Menominee:** Menominee plans to retrofit some of its existing districts and add a few new districts. The master plan's future land use types explain the vision that is backed up by planned use and form changes in its Zoning Plan.

**Village of Lexington:** Lexington planned for and adopted Master Plan, Zoning Ordinance, and Capital Improvements Plan simultaneously in 2020, ensuring the vision directly influenced two key implementation tools

**City of Detroit:** Detroit Islandview Greater Villages Neighborhood Framework Plan – Area specific Development and Zoning Recommendations. July 8, 2020.

**Michigan's Coastal Communities:** Survive and Thrive: Lessons from Michigan Coastal Communities Planning for Resiliency. Michigan Chapter of the American Planning Association. March 2019.

**Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN:** Created an Equity Scorecard any community can use and build upon as an evaluation tool for scoring future development proposals

translate a community's vision into code that also eliminates uncertainty for a developer. Consider design guidelines as adopted policy to showcase the community's expectations and illustrate best practices to prospective developers. Find ways to educate both local leaders and community residents about changes to zoning, and the benefits of the change moving forward.

A straightforward and streamlined application process incentivizes development, but does not lower community development standards.

### ***Development***

Your community deserves good development. Beware the myth of "any development is good development – we need the taxes" argument — these

projects will impact your community for decades to come.

### ***Engaging Developers***

Whether you're dealing with a local or out-of-town developer, your community values, master plan, and zoning ordinance provide a resource for developer matchmaking.

- Share your vision. Encourage all leaders to promote the community values.
- Showcase successes and celebrate your plan.
- Look for opportunities to engage local property owners, developers, and real estate experts during the planning and engagement process. Communities should feel empowered to set expectations, but communities also need to be realistic about their vision and understand

- potential barriers from the developer perspective.
- Reference the master plan and zoning ordinance intents to ensure the proposal meets the community's vision.
- In addition to zoning, develop design guidelines to illustrate the intent of the master plan and zoning ordinance. Illustrate principles more difficult to regulate, such as proportion, balance, rhythm, and articulation.
- Host constructive pre-application meetings with staff to share expectations and minimize hurdles through the process.
- Encourage neighborhood meetings when a development will be particularly impactful.
- Embed community values into developer RFP/Q for publicly owned sites.

### ***Engaging the Community***

Balancing public input during the development review process can be challenging. Every developer desires a speedy and smooth approval process, but without proactive community outreach new project proposals often spark neighborhood and community concern and opposition. By engaging the community early in the visioning and planning stage, and using your community values as standards for new development, you can reassure the public and focus the conversation. Transparency of process and alignment of values go a long way.

Here are a few additional tips to incorporate public feedback in the development process:

- Public Benefit:** New development should serve a need and improve the character and function of the community. The community may also require additional public benefits like sidewalks, open space, green infrastructure, or affordable housing. Ideally, these requirements should be written into the zoning ordinance.
- Planning and Zoning:** The master plan process

is a great opportunity to engage neighbors in the visioning of the proposed redevelopment sites. If applicable, proactive rezoning or zoning text amendments immediately following a planning process helps build transparency in the redevelopment process.

- Community Benefits Agreement:** A community benefits agreement may work in some communities, but the best outcomes typically come from a willing developer and a very focused community need that is reasonably related to the proposed development or the history and context of the site.
- Competing Values:** In the end, communities will likely need to make tough decisions between two or more community values. For instance, a private developer may not be able to provide affordable housing, transit services, public open space, and a net zero building on one site without significant subsidy or a sacrifice to quality. Communities are encouraged to raise the bar but also create a transparent decision-framework for these situations.

Once a conceptual plan has been vetted through early public input, the developer can proceed with detailed plans that meet the ordinance. Assuming the legwork is done up front, both by the community (with their thorough master planning and zoning process) and the developer (seeking early input from neighbors), the actual development review process should be fast and predictable.

Want to help your community plan for and attract the type of development you want and deserve? Plan for it, don't wait for it.

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.

