



7. Training of Local Officials and Planners



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This Penn State Cooperative Extension publication is one in a series of bulletins intended to help you better understand the current use of land use planning tools in Pennsylvania. The series uses information from a comprehensive study of Pennsylvania land use regulation and planning, which was made possible in part by a grant from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly.

The comprehensive land use study involved three separate but related surveys that were conducted in late 1999. The first and largest survey was sent to all 2,511 boroughs and townships in Pennsylvania. Forty-two percent, or 1,057 of these surveys were returned. The second survey was sent to all 65 planning directors in Pennsylvania (with the exception of Philadelphia County). Fifty-four surveys were returned, for a response rate of 83 percent. The third survey was sent to all 395 members of the American Institute of Certified Planners who are listed in Pennsylvania. Of these, 181 were returned, for a response rate of 46 percent. The three surveys provide a composite overview of planning effectiveness from a variety of perspectives.

Most of the tables in this publication use data from the state or regional level. For county-level results, visit the Land Use Planning in Pennsylvania Web site at <http://cax.aers.psu.edu/planning/>

Most people making planning and land use regulation decisions in Pennsylvania have no formal training in planning or using the various available land use planning tools. As a result, most planning commission and zoning hearing board members must rely upon their own abilities and life experiences, and they basically learn “on the job.”

But municipal and county planning and land use regulations are complex, often technical, and based on important legal prescriptions. Without knowledge of the various methods of planning, the different land use tools, and how to integrate planning with other municipal and community activities, planners will find it difficult to plan effectively. The relative disuse of many currently available land use planning tools in the Commonwealth—even among municipalities with planning commissions, comprehensive plans, subdivision and land development ordinances, and zoning—should not be surprising, simply because the tools require understanding to be useful.

Given the complexity of planning and land use regulations, training of municipal officials may be one of the most important methods of improving the effectiveness of land use planning in Pennsylvania. There are organizations and groups that provide training to officials who want it, but in many communities there is no requirement that planning commission, zoning hearing board, or elected officials participate. As a result, many officials do not take advantage of training opportunities.

Because of the role of training in making land use planning effective, it is important to consider how many Pennsylvania communities require it,

and for whom. This publication examines these questions, as well as whether local officials and planning experts believe mandatory training would make land use planning more effective.

In all three surveys conducted for this publication, respondents were questioned about the training of local planners, zoning officials, and elected officials. For example, they were asked what the status of training is in their municipality, and whether the level of training of individuals with key planning roles is a barrier to successful planning. They also were asked if training could be required. The responses from all respondent groups makes it clear that training of local officials and planners is a critical issue.

Do Municipalities Require Training?

Most municipal governments in Pennsylvania do not require training for their local officials (elected and non-elected) involved in land use planning decisions. For example, only about 9 percent of municipalities require such training of planning commission members (see Table 1). Zoning officers most often participate in mandatory training, but this occurs in less than one-third of municipalities.

Of the municipalities requiring training, the vast majority (around 88 percent) pay for it, making the requirement less burdensome on the officials (see Table 2).

Table 1. Required Training for Municipal Officials (percent of responses)

Official	Training Required	No Training Required	Don't Know
Planning commission members	9%	89%	2%
Zoning hearing board members	8	89	3
Zoning officer	31	66	3

Table 2. Required Training for Officials Paid For by Municipalities (percent of municipalities requiring training)

Official	Training Paid For	Training Not Paid For	Don't Know
Planning commission members	88%	8%	4%
Zoning hearing board members	89	11	0
Zoning officer	82	16	2

Table 3. Difficulty Recruiting and Keeping Volunteers (percent of responses)

Does your municipality have. . .	Yes	No	Don't Know
Difficulty recruiting planning commissioners?	37%	62%	1%
Frequent turnover of planning commissioners?	21	77	2
Difficulty recruiting zoning board members?	32	66	2
Frequent turnover of zoning board members?	16	82	2

Difficulty Recruiting and Keeping Volunteers

A relatively large number of municipalities report difficulty in recruiting and retaining planning commissioners and zoning board members. About 37 percent say they have difficulty recruiting planning commissioners, for example, and about 21 percent report frequent commissioner turnover (see Table 3).

There are no significant differences between rural and urban municipalities, although the municipality type is related to the amount of reported difficulties. Overall, boroughs are more likely to experience difficulties recruiting volunteers and to have higher turnover than townships (see Table 4). About half of all boroughs with planning commissions report having difficulties recruiting members, compared to only one-third of townships of the second class.

Effect of Required Training on Recruitment

One typical argument against mandatory training of planning commission and zoning board members is that such a requirement might make it even harder to recruit and retain volunteers for positions that already are difficult to fill. But the experience of municipalities that require training suggests that this argument might be weak. These municipalities have no more difficulty recruiting volunteers than do municipalities not requiring such training (see Table 5). About 35 percent of the municipalities that require training for planning commissioners, for example, have difficulty recruiting members, compared to 37 percent of municipalities that do not require training.

Table 4. Difficulty Recruiting and Keeping Volunteers, by Municipal Type (percent of responses)

Does your municipality have. . .	Yes	No	Don't Know
Difficulty recruiting planning commissioners?			
Boroughs	51%	47%	2%
Townships of the first class	10	90	0
Townships of the second class	32	67	1
Frequent turnover of planning commissioners?			
Boroughs	29%	69%	2%
Townships of the first class	7	93	0
Townships of the second class	17	81	2
Difficulty recruiting zoning board members?			
Boroughs	44%	54%	2%
Townships of the first class	6	94	0
Townships of the second class	27	71	2
Frequent turnover of zoning board members?			
Boroughs	20%	79%	1%
Townships of the first class	3	97	0
Townships of the second class	15	83	2

Table 5. Impact of Requiring Training on Recruiting Volunteers for Two Agencies (percent of responses)

Planning Commission	Difficulty Recruiting?		
	Yes	No	Don't Know
Municipalities requiring training	35%	63%	2%
Municipalities not requiring training	37	62	1
Zoning Board	Difficulty Recruiting?		
	Yes	No	Don't Know
Municipalities requiring training	30%	66%	4%
Municipalities not requiring training	32	67	1

Turnover in County Planning Agencies

Turnover of planning professionals is a problem for 40 percent of county planning agencies. This is a high number and should be of concern, particularly if county planning agencies will be expected to play an increasing leadership role in regional and multicommunity planning.

Potential Usefulness of Required Training

Respondents to all three surveys generally feel that requiring training of officials would be useful to make planning and land use regulations in Pennsylvania more effective. Most think that mandating such training would be useful or very useful (see Table 6). Of the three groups of respondents, county planning officials and AICP members are the most enthusiastic about the usefulness of such a requirement.

Table 6. Rank of Usefulness of Actions to Increase Effectiveness of Pennsylvania Planning and Land Use Regulations (percent of each response on a scale of one to five)

	Not Useful		Very Useful			Don't Know
	1	2	3	4	5	
Require training for planning commissioners						
Municipal responses	6%	7%	21%	25%	37%	3%
County responses	0	7	22	31	37	2
AICP member responses	3	1	22	34	39	1
Require training for zoning hearing board members						
Municipal responses	6%	6%	19%	25%	40%	4%
County responses	2	4	9	31	52	2
AICP member responses	1	3	19	32	43	1
Require training for zoning officers/administrators						
Municipal responses	4%	3%	15%	26%	47%	4%
County responses	2	2	6	20	69	2
AICP member responses	1	3	9	28	58	0
Require training of elected officials on planning and land use regulations						
Municipal responses	5%	6%	23%	25%	39%	2%
County responses	2	0	20	37	41	0
AICP member responses	4	1	11	42	42	0

Conclusions

Municipal officials, county planners, and AICP members all indicate strong support for mandating training of planning commission members, zoning hearing board members, zoning officers, and elected officials. Such an action may be perceived as an unfunded mandate by some municipalities, but the survey results indicate that most municipal officials think it would be useful. Only through training will officials be able to take full advantage of complex land use planning tools.

Despite the strong support of the officials, only a relatively small number of municipalities currently require training for their planning officials. This includes only 9% requiring training for planning commissioners and the same amount for zoning hearing board members. Municipal officials currently have the authority to require training for their own commission and board members, but relatively few have done so despite indicating strong support for such training.

One possible explanation for this discrepancy could be a fear that requiring training would make it even more difficult to find volunteers to serve on planning commissions and zoning hearing boards. The survey results suggest that communities with mandated training do not have a harder time finding volunteers, which implies that difficulties recruiting and keeping volunteers may be more a result of the small size of the municipalities (and their smaller recruitment pools). Small communities can address this problem by reducing the number of board members to the absolute minimum (three apiece for planning commissions and zoning hearing boards), or by forming joint operations with other municipalities.

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The Land Use Planning in Pennsylvania series will help you better understand the current state of planning and land use regulation in Pennsylvania. It is based on a comprehensive study of municipal and county planning and land use regulations, conducted by Penn State Cooperative Extension with the financial support of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly. The study included surveys of municipal officials, county planning agencies, and members of the American Institute of Certified Planners who reside in Pennsylvania.

Through a series of 15 meetings, a project advisory committee of 29 professional planners from throughout Pennsylvania provided feedback during the survey development, assisted with reviewing the preliminary results, and reviewed the investigators' findings and commentary.

The publications in the series focus on state- and regional-level information. County-level information from the study that corresponds to the publication series is available at the Land Use Planning in Pennsylvania Web site at <http://cax.aers.psu.edu/planning/>

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