

## 9. Collaboration and Communication

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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.

Much of the recent discussion of land use planning and regulation in Pennsylvania has focused on how much (or little) collaboration there is between municipalities. The very large number of municipalities in Pennsylvania means land use decision making is widely dispersed among relatively small jurisdictions. But many Pennsylvania land use issues such as ground-water protection and road congestion cross municipal boundaries, which means land use planning decisions in one municipality can have a major effect on surrounding municipalities.

Some critics of current land use planning in Pennsylvania suggest that greater coordination among municipalities would make planning efforts more effective. A critical element for developing and sustaining such coordination is good communication, both *within* a local government and *among* local governments. Without the sharing of information between decision-making bodies such as neighboring planning commissions, effective collaboration is difficult to create and sustain. Such sharing is vital for communities who want to anticipate and plan for the effects of change. Improving land use planning in Pennsylvania cannot be accomplished without directly considering the important role of communication and taking steps to improve the flow of information between decision-making bodies.

## Communication Among Local Governments

Other bulletins in this series have indicated that too many municipalities and counties do not communicate well or collaborate with other jurisdictions. The survey responses consistently demonstrate that too many local governments fail to take advantage of important (and relatively easy) steps to increase and improve communication across municipal borders, a necessary precursor to collaboration and improved planning coordination. Some of these missed opportunities include:

### **1. Referring subdivision and land development plans to other municipalities**

It is standard practice in only 11 percent of the municipalities with a subdivision and land development ordinance to send development plans to neighboring municipalities for review.

### **2. Planning commissioners from different municipalities meeting together**

In only seven percent of the municipalities with planning commissions do the members meet with their counterparts in adjacent municipalities. Such meetings need not be formal, but can help commissioners stay informed about concerns and issues in neighboring communities and know personally the people involved in local decision making.

### **3. Planning commissions sending representatives to each others' meetings**

Attending another municipality's planning commission meetings requires a larger time commitment from commissioners, but is a very useful way of improving communication and coordination. This strategy is used by only 2 percent of municipalities who have a planning commission. Another easier technique is to share written meeting reports or minutes.

### **4. Membership in joint planning commissions**

Only 8 percent of municipal planning commissions are members of joint planning commissions, as formally defined by the Municipalities Planning Code. Without such a formal link between municipalities, the informal links such as referring development plans and occasionally meeting together become even more important.

### **5. Contacts through the county planning agency**

County planning agencies are the primary link between planning commissions in one fourth (26 percent) of Pennsylvania municipalities. This is a useful and important role for the county planning agency, but it is better for municipalities to rely upon the county as a supplement to their own direct contacts rather than as their sole source of communication with adjacent municipalities.

### **6. Creating and sustaining joint comprehensive plans**

The vast majority of comprehensive plans were prepared solely by and for the municipality itself, rather than in cooperation with adjacent municipalities. Only 14 percent of Pennsylvania municipalities reported that their comprehensive plan was prepared jointly with another municipality. And of these 14 percent, only one in five (19 percent) reported that they still worked closely together with the other municipality after the plan was developed. The missed opportunities include creating joint comprehensive plans, and more importantly, sustaining support for a joint plan once it has been created. Without identifying and addressing issues of why joint plans fail, simply using grant money to create new joint plans will not be effective in the long run.

### **7. Providing feedback and participating in preparation of county comprehensive plans**

Missed communication opportunities also exist between municipalities and county planning agencies. The preparation of county comprehensive plans, which is a mandated county responsibility, is a critical time for feedback and interaction between municipal governments and the county. However, only half of the county planning agencies reported that municipalities within their county participated in the process. In addition, only 63 percent of the counties received and/or asked for comments from municipal planning commissions on the county plan.

## **Communication Within Local Governments**

Despite the low level of communication and collaboration among Pennsylvania local governments, this is not entirely the reason for ineffectual land use planning in Pennsylvania. The survey results suggest the problem also stems from a lack of communication *within* local governments. Poor communication among a local government's own planning commission, zoning hearing board, sewer or water authorities, and the governing body can create severe planning problems and ineffectiveness. Missed opportunities for improving communication within local governments include:

#### **1. Planning commission and governing body meeting on a regular basis**

Only 23 percent of municipal planning commissions meet regularly with the governing body in the township. It is unusual to find that the planning commission and governing body have a good face-to-face working relationship. Too many do not interact to discuss planning issues and policies.

#### **2. A representative of the planning commission attending regular meetings of the governing body**

Only about 40 percent of municipal planning commissions send a representative to regular meetings of the governing body. The presence of such a person can be helpful in explaining details of commission recommendations. Officials can ask questions of the representative about the comprehensive plan, zoning, and subdivision and land development provisions. Always having a representative at such regular meetings is an excellent way to make it easy for the governing body to

refer issues to the planning commission, and it also makes it harder for the governing body to dismiss planning commission recommendations.

Finally, it is useful for the planning commission to be a standard agenda item at meetings of the governing body. Written reports from the planning commission should supplement attendance by a representative, rather than be a replacement for having someone physically at the meeting.

### **3. Planning commission providing information to the governing body**

Surprisingly, only 78 percent of the planning commissions reportedly provide information to the governing body, even though this is one of the most important functions of the planning commission. (Ideally, the number should be 100 percent—why else should a planning commission exist?) That almost one-fourth of the planning commissions do not provide such information could result from either the governing body or the planning commission members' not fully understanding the role of the planning commission.

Part of this problem results from the governing body's failure to refer matters to the planning commission, or to request information about special topics under consideration by the planning commission. There is very limited use of the planning commission other than to process subdivisions and prepare the comprehensive plan, zoning ordinance, and the subdivision and land development ordinances.

### **4. Planning commission preparing an annual report for the governing body**

The Municipalities Planning Code mandates that the planning commission provide an annual report of its activities to the governing body not later than March 1. This report is an important way of communicating to elected officials and citizens. Only 26 percent of the planning commissions report submitting such a written annual report to the governing body.

The annual report should include:

- An annual review of the comprehensive plan to identify changes or activities that may require changes to the plan.
- An overview of the general activities of the planning commission, summarizing the minutes; this should include the number of plans reviewed and some characteristics of those plans (such as added streets and the number of lots).
- Prospects or activities suggested for the upcoming year, with cost estimates, purpose, etc.
- Key regional issues that may affect the municipality
- A set date for an annual workshop with the governing body. This should be in August or September, to permit budgeting in upcoming budget preparations.
- An accounting of what was accomplished during the year by the planning commission
- A proposed program for the upcoming year or two
- Expenditures by the planning commission and volunteer hours contributed
- Copies of minutes

### **5. Giving the planning commission a role in recommending improvements or capital projects**

Only 33 percent of planning commissions are asked to recommend improvements or capital projects for the comprehensive plan—even though they are the experts on the plan, and these decisions can affect land use patterns. Through their work developing, updating, and implementing the comprehensive plan, the planning commission members have a unique understanding of its strengths and weaknesses, so it makes little sense that they not be involved in providing input to such important implementation decisions.

### **6. Meeting with water or sewer authorities to discuss water or sewer needs**

The availability of public sewer and water affects where development occurs, so decisions by municipal authorities can have a major effect on the pacing and location of development in a municipality. But in only 25 percent of the municipalities that have both a planning commission and a sewer or water authority do both meet to discuss water and sewer needs. About the same low percentage (28 percent) request input from the authority when developing new plans and ordinances, or provide the authority with copies of new plans and ordinances (26 percent).

At a minimum, the authority should be sent subdivision and land development plans for comment—but this occurs in only 40 percent of these municipalities. Without communication among the governing body, planning commission, and water or sewer authorities, important decisions within the municipality affecting land use will be disjointed, uncoordinated, and not cost effective.

One way to increase communication and collaboration is to have the planning commission prepare the Act 537 Sewerage Plan with the help of the sewer authority. This Act 537 plan should be adopted as part of the comprehensive plan.

## **7. Zoning hearing board and planning commission meeting occasionally**

It is very useful to have the zoning hearing board, planning commission members, and zoning officer meet occasionally to perform an annual review of the ordinance or to discuss zoning matters in the municipality. This gives the zoning hearing board a better understanding of the reasons for some of the zoning provisions. In 70 percent of Pennsylvania municipalities with zoning, such a joint meeting never occurs.

## **8. Seeking input from other departments and stakeholder and citizen groups**

Feedback from other parts of the local government, as well as stakeholder and citizen groups, is similarly important to ensure that land use planning decisions are appropriate for the community and that the plan is understood and acceptable by those affected by the decisions. About one-third of the county planning agencies reported that other county departments did not participate in developing the comprehensive plan, which means important input likely was missed in those counties. Twenty-five percent of the counties similarly did not use stakeholder and citizen group comments when developing the plan. Failure to initiate and maintain contacts with potential “users” of the plan probably means that the planning commission operates in a reactive rather than proactive mode.

## **Conclusions**

The survey responses suggest that lack of communication is a serious problem for land use planning in Pennsylvania. This includes communication *among* local governments, which affects the ability of those governments to coordinate and work together effectively on land use planning issues, and communication *within* local governments themselves. The tragedy is that most of the missed opportunities for improving communication could be corrected by local governments at little or no cost, and this is encouraged—not restricted—by state law.

Local government officials seeking to improve their community's land use planning and regulation should think carefully about the quality of communication within their local government, giving particular attention to the planning commission, zoning hearing board, zoning officer, municipal authorities, and the governing body. The list of missed opportunities outlined in this bulletin can be used as a guideline for improving communication. In addition, the governing body should consider having an annual internal workshop, including all those within the municipality involved with planning, to help promote better coordination and communication. A similar work session should be held with adjoining municipalities to exchange information and concerns.

Some studies of collaboration among local governments suggest that a good way to improve communication and coordination is to build upon the small successes and linkages that already exist among communities. These can include existing cooperation among municipal police forces,

road maintenance and plowing, sewerage or public water, or even volunteer fire departments. Use these linkages and the trust that has developed around them to explore other ways of working together on land use issues.

Good communication is vital for effective land use planning to occur. If land use planning and regulation are to improve in Pennsylvania, initiative must be taken both within and across local governments to increase the flow of information among those involved in land use decision making. These steps cannot be legislated, but will require the voluntary cooperation and concern of planning commissions, zoning hearing boards, municipal authority members, and local elected officials in every Pennsylvania local government.

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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/>

## Land Use Planning in Pennsylvania: Materials List

1. An Inventory of Planning in Pennsylvania
2. Municipal Planning Commissions
3. County Planning Agencies
4. Comprehensive Plans
5. Zoning
6. Subdivision and Land Development Ordinances
7. Training for Local Government Officials
8. Barriers to Effective Planning in Pennsylvania
9. Collaboration and Communication
10. How Effective is Land Use Planning in Pennsylvania?
11. How to Make Land Use Planning Work for Your Community