

## MAKING A PLANNING COMMISSION DIFFERENCE

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(Adapted from session at Fall GPA Conference)

Planning occurs within the framework of the public and private sectors. The public sector provides a regulatory framework, infrastructure and a public forum for all planning procedures. The private sector serves to assess market demand, determine the projects to build and provide capital for projects. Within this environment of planning, several tools are key to making good, sound decisions that will benefit your community.

The **comprehensive plan** is a crucial document in communities that have adopted one. In Georgia, the comprehensive plan is required to include three sections.

- Community Assessment: presents data and information to provide an objective foundation upon which the rest of the plan is based;
- Community Participation Program: describes the local government's strategy for ensuring adequate public and stakeholder involvement in the preparation of the Community Agenda portion of the plan; and
- Community Agenda: the community's vision for the future as well as its strategy for achieving this vision.

Planning commissioners and elected officials should have an understanding of the comprehensive plan, as it includes information on future housing, land use and transportation issues. Officials should also know how maps and policies are used to guide zoning decisions.

The **zoning ordinance** is also key to planning in our communities. Planning commissioners and elected officials should have an understanding of the zoning that is in place, how a zoning change occurs and why. Officials should over time become familiar with legal decisions affecting planning and zoning.

**Meeting planning** is an important part of making sure the planning commission is effective and prepared to decide on each issue. The goal of such meetings should be to provide adequate information on each issue and adequate time for questions and comments. Below are some key tips:

- Know the site and the area
- Know the community plan and needs
- Understand the project
- What are likely impacts and costs?
- What are the benefits?

In addition to these steps, copies of the hearing procedures and zoning standards should be distributed at all meetings. All relevant documents referenced in the meeting should be available in advance for review.

It is beneficial for staff to provide clear recommendations at each meeting on each item, based on adopted plans. Clear recommendations from the planning commission should be forwarded to relevant elected officials.

As planning commissions seek out best practices in planning, it is helpful to be connected with other resources. The following are Smart Growth Network Principles and are useful in creating more balanced, community-friendly places.

- Mix land uses
- Compact building design
- Housing choices
- Walkable neighborhoods
- Communities with a sense of place
- Open space and environmental protection
- Direct development to existing communities
- Transportation choices
- Development decisions predictable and cost effective
- Stakeholder collaboration

The effective planning commission member, when armed with an understanding of each of these tools, will have a positive impact on planning in his or her community.

## Upcoming Events

**Georgia Municipal Association/Association County Commissioners of Georgia Joint Training Course**  
**November 14, 2008**—Macon, GA  
For more information visit [www.gmanet.com](http://www.gmanet.com)

**Georgia Department of Community Affairs Housing Georgia 2008 Conference**  
**November 20, 2008**—College Park, GA  
For more information visit [www.magnoliaawards.org](http://www.magnoliaawards.org)

**Association County Commissioners of Georgia Newly Elected Commissioners Conference**  
**December 2-5, 2008**—Athens, GA  
For more information visit [www.accg.org](http://www.accg.org)

**Community Planning Academy: Green Communities**  
**December 9, 2008**—Atlanta, GA  
This workshop will facilitate information sharing on why and how communities are increasingly going green and promote discussion on research, approaches, strategies and operational issues related to green practices. Examples from across the Atlanta region will show green practices in action.  
For more information call **(404) 463-3211** or visit [www.atlantaregional.com/communityplanningacademy](http://www.atlantaregional.com/communityplanningacademy)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

American Planning Association  
[www.planning.org](http://www.planning.org)

Georgia Planning Association  
[www.georgiaplanning.org](http://www.georgiaplanning.org)