

Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities



DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

LEGIT August 2025

What is Planning?

Everyone plans. Planning is an activity that touches just about every aspect of life. Individual's plan their day, friends plan hunting trips, families plan for major purchases, businesses plan pricing, etc. The common thread that runs through these seemingly different activities is the time, effort, and expense that is saved in the future by thinking ahead and plotting a course of action today.



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Community Benefits

Planning benefits communities in the following ways:

- Shapes the future
- Identifies local issues
- Identifies public values
- Ties programs together
- Promotes public involvement
- Attracts appropriate development
- Increases certainty
- Protects natural resources
- Improves public service efficiency
- Minimizes land use conflicts
- Promotes good design



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

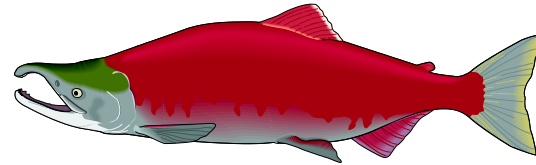
8/14/2025

Why do Communities Need to Plan?

Planning saves money.
Planning establishes ground rules.

Planning can support economic development.
Planning provides a forum for community consensus.

Planning can promote community design.



Planning can protect property and property values.
Planning can reduce environmental damage and conserve resources.



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Planning Characteristics

Creates order and predictability:

- Land use plan guides development policies and public investment in infrastructure.
- Coastal management plan prioritizes coastal use.
- City budget forecasts revenue collection and spending.

Promotes efficient use of resources:

- Locates new developments near existing utilities.
- Anticipates problems before they become crises.
- Coordinates and schedules capital improvements.
- Reserves scarce waterfront for water-dependent resources.



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Planning Characteristics (continued)

Identifies alternatives and procedures:

- Evaluates, accepts or rejects courses of action.
- Identifies steps that lead to plan realization.
- Combines vision with community needs.

Promotes community health and future viability:

- Inventories resources and analyzes planning alternatives.
- Community actively meets old goals and identifies new goals.
- Improved community leadership through enhanced knowledge, improved problem-solving skills, and critical analysis of alternatives.



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

The Opposite of Planning

Disorganization
Confusion
Redundancy
Lack of priorities
Poor decisions
**Waste of time,
money, land, and
resources**



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

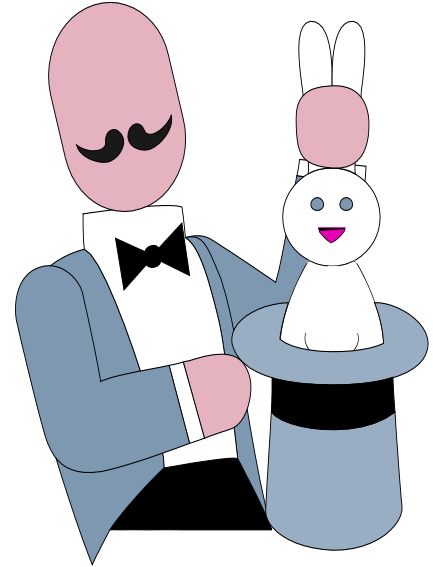
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Planning is NOT Magic

Planning Cannot:

- Produce miracles
- Exclude newcomers
- Succeed without implementing planned policies
- Restore economic health overnight
- Succeed without balance
- Work to the benefit of your community unless you want it to



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Brief History of Planning and Zoning

Planned Cities: Philadelphia, Washington, D.C.

Alaska examples: Anchorage, Palmer, Skagway

“Community design” vs. “community planning”

Ambler Realty v. City of Euclid (1926) set legal precedent for enforcing zoning

Standard City Planning Enabling Act (1928) impetus for land subdivision control

AS Title 29 establishes provisions for comprehensive planning, platting, and zoning



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

THE PLANNING COMMISSION



“What if we replace ‘What if?’ with ‘Heck yeah?’”



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

An Effective Planning Commissioner Knows:

- Planning commission authority and duties
- How a planning commission operates
- Standards for commission decision-making
- Legal aspects of commission conduct
- Comprehensive and other types of planning
- Zoning, platting, and land-use regulation



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

What is a Planning Commission?

Is an *advisory group* to the governing body on issues and activities related to planning, platting, land use regulation, and community development.

Has limited decision making power, but can have considerable influence.

Is responsible for keeping planning and land use related issues in perspective for the community.



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Planning Commission Authority

AS 29.40 and local charters or ordinances define the authority and responsibilities of commission members.

Commission duties vary from community to community depending on factors including support for planning, community growth rate, prospective infrastructure development, and responsibilities prescribed by ordinance.



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Planning Commission authority continued....

- **Prepare and submit to the assembly (city council) a proposed comprehensive plan in accordance with AS 29.40.030 for the systematic and organized development of the borough (or city).**
- **Review, recommend, and administer measures necessary to implement the comprehensive plan including measures provided under AS 29.40.040.**
- **Other duties as prescribed by local ordinance.**



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Planning Commission Composition

Each city or borough with a planning commission must pass an ordinance identifying:

- Membership quantity
- Member qualifications
- Commission duties
- Procedure for filling-vacancies
- Regular meeting frequency
- Dedicated staff person
- General operating procedures



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Planning Commission Duties

- Prepare a comprehensive plan
- Act as the platting authority
- Review and recommend land use regulations
- Review and recommend property rezones
- Act on variances and conditional use permits
- Review land acquisitions and disposals
- Hear appeals from administrative decisions
- Review and recommend capital improvements



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Planning Commission Duties (continued)

- Review annual planning budget
- Approve planning department's annual work program
- Initiate planning projects
- Coordinate with other agencies' plans
- Conduct public meetings and hearings
- Other duties as authorized by ordinance



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Characteristics of an “Ideal” Planning Commission

- **Balanced**
- **Skilled**
- **Understands community**
- **Understands public process**
- **Committed to planning**
- **Maintains objectivity**
- **Declared conflict of interests**
- **Balanced special interests**



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Characteristics of an “Ideal” Planning Commission

Having *motivated* and *responsible* members on the commission can be critical to its success as a productive and respected group.



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Planning Commission Roles

It is [or should be] a panel with knowledge of community character, local regulations, and community development practice.

Advisory Role - Advises the council or assembly.

Regulatory Role - Administers local land use regulations including zoning and subdivision ordinances.

Procedural Role - Conducts fair meetings and makes fair decisions.



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

The Commission's Relationship with Staff and Elected Officials

The most important aspect of the relationship between the planning commission and the governing body is the is the planning commission's *advisory role*.

The council or assembly has the authority to approve, deny, or change commission recommendations.

A commission that has a good working relationship with the council can play a key role in keeping the council informed and educated about planning and community development issues.



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Planning Commission Meetings

The planning commission has regular meetings, special meetings, work sessions, and town hall meetings.

Regular Meetings - decision-making meetings that are often public hearings. Schedule typically established by ordinance.

Special Meetings - held under conditions prescribed by ordinance. Typically chair or three members call a special meeting. Requires reasonable public notice.

Work Sessions - less formal and permit relaxed discussion.



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Planning Commission Meeting Guidelines

Every planning commission meeting should...

- Have an agenda
- Be publicly noticed with appropriate materials
- Be prefaced by distribution of relevant materials to planning commissioners
- Be conducted in an adequate meeting space
- Follow parliamentary procedure (Robert's Rules of Order)
- Maintain quorum to conduct business
- Provide findings to support decisions
- Start on time



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

The Chair's Procedural Duties

An effective chair understands the issues, understands fellow members, can maintain order, and bring the commission to a decision.

The Chair's Responsibilities:

- Preside over meetings
- Sign official documents
- Work with staff to set agenda
- Act as liaison between commission and council
- Appoint commissioners to subcommittees
- Resolve parliamentary issues



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Practical Advice for Commissioners

- Read packet before meeting
- Seek staff assistance before meeting
- Know comprehensive plan and zoning/platting codes
- Be familiar with sites and projects
- Share information
- Focus on facts, not opinions
- Summarize what you have heard
- Participate in discussion
- Be practical
- Be a problem-solver, not a problem-maker
- Be probing, but not argumentative
- Respect your associates
- Treat everyone equally
- Attend meetings
- Come on time to meetings



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

How Does the Planning Commission Make Decisions?

- Using common sense
- Thinking about what is in the best interest of the larger community
- Considering the rules
- Using persuasion or arguments based on testimony
- Interpreting the comprehensive plan in accordance with legal requirements

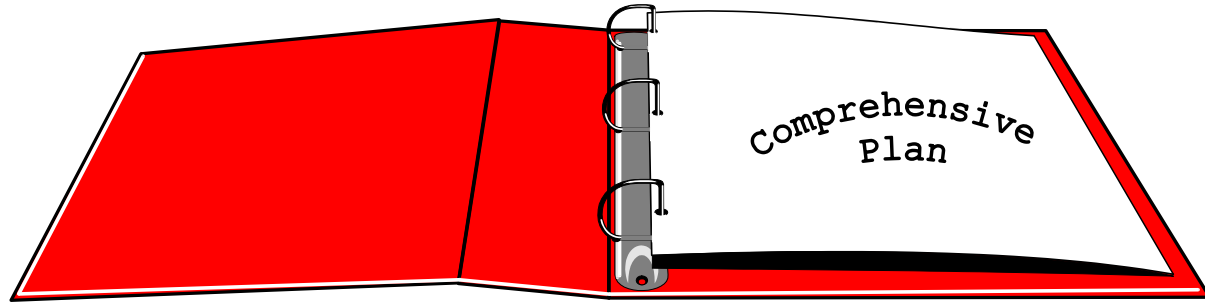


Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

What is a Comprehensive Plan?



- A blueprint for guiding community development.
- A flexible document, not a uniform template.
- A visionary document attempting to anticipate future events and needs.
- A statement of policies, goals, and standards.



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

What is a Comprehensive Plan? (continued)

- Provides a policy framework for decision-making regarding land use, transportation, housing, public facilities, and economic development.
- Includes information on the many facets of a community including demographics, physical conditions, land use, environment, transportation, legal matters, and fiscal conditions.

Reflects the vision and direction of residents!



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Comprehensive Plans Include:

- General statement of goals and objectives
- Background Report - regional needs, local resources, population trends, existing facilities
- Land Use Plan
- Community Facilities Plan
- Other Plans - parks/recreation, flood mitigation, coastal management, transportation, open space, housing, annexation



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Comprehensive Plans Include: (continued)

- A housing development plan.
- Recommendations for implementation – principles, policies, standards
- Plans from other agencies and communities
- Strategies for improving the local economy



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

A High-Quality Comprehensive Plan Includes:

- A systematic and comprehensive collection and analysis of data
- Clear and comprehensive goals
- Specific action-oriented policies for implementation
- Local official support
- Local community support
- Current data and policies



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Why Have a Comprehensive Plan?

- Fulfills legal obligation
- Meets grant eligibility requirements
- Guides community and economic development
- Guides decision-making
- Establishes basis for regulation
- Coordinates policy
- Provides “blueprint” for growth
- Represents future vision



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025

Concluding Thoughts

- Planning is a collective effort between citizens, elected officials, and the planning commission.
- When an effective and collaborative planning process flourishes in a community, the vision of the citizens, planning commissioners, and elected officials can be achieved.



Planning Commission Roles and Responsibilities

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

8/14/2025