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Planning commissioner training is most often done at the local level. The most popular format is face-to-face as it allows commissioners to share experiences. Online training offers convenience and flexibility.

Commissioners Online

PLANNING TOOLS

ONLINE EDUCATION HAS BLOSSOMED. WHETHER YOU WANT TO PURSUE a college education or learn to bake a cake, the Internet provides a wealth of choices. Once regarded as the repository for everyone's homemade videos (which it still is), the Internet and online education have gained new respectability. The launch of university-sponsored online "universities" such as Coursera and edX have sparked discussion and drawn many new users to these sophisticated courses.

Conceivably the Internet is an excellent venue for disseminating training for planning commissioners, zoning board of review members, and other appointed officials. Convenient, accessible, and potentially low cost, the Internet could be the answer to widespread training for officials. But is it?

A search for planning commissioner training online suggests that this platform for education has been used to a limited degree. The most robust of the training programs—designed for planners but appropriate for officials as well—is found at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy's site. Its "Comprehensive Planning: Introduction and Planning Principles" contains 17 units and displays a video of the lecturer along with his or her PowerPoint slides. The State of Washington Department of Commerce has created video lectures, also organized in a module format. The videos cover topics such as "Comprehensive Planning Basics" and "Updating Your Plan." The videos are designed to accompany the manual, *A Short Course on Local Planning Guidebook*, which is available as a PDF.

Many states and cities as well as university extension services post training materials for boards and commissions. Almost all of these are in a static text (PDF or HTML) for-

mat. An example is the *Plan Commission Handbook*, posted in 2012 by the Center for Land Use Education, University of Wisconsin Extension. In Pennsylvania, officials can read "The Planning Commission in Pennsylvania" from the Government Center for Local Government Services, and in Tennessee, they can access the "Tennessee Planning Commission Training Handbook: A Closer Look at Zoning." The state of New York publishes a fact sheet called "Promoting the Training of Municipal Planning and Zoning Officials" that provides tips and references for live training and published materials.

A privately run website, PlannersWeb, is designed specifically for planning commissioners and officials. Although the extensive information is static on the site, the site does sponsor webinars, such as a recent one on Citizen Planning Academies.

Live, face-to-face training remains the most popular and documented form of education for planning commissioners. Frequently, the training materials are posted online. Commissioners and trainers still consider this to be highly effective training as it can be tailored to specific localities and made flexible to the needs of those community officials.

Webinars provide another form of training. The Michigan State Extension Service conducts a “Master Citizen Planner Series,” which runs from February through December. Recordings of these programs are available online. These webinars help reinforce the core training program that is offered face-to-face and that provides the foundation for the Master Citizen Planner certificate program.

An online search looked at the big, free, university-based programs called Coursera and edX to see if they offered anything specific to planning commissioners. The answer was no. Coursera offered one course by a planning professor titled “Technicity” that focused on the use of technology in cities and planning. The other was titled “Re-Enchanting the City—Designing Human Habitat.” These are courses that might attract the very adventurous planning commissioner.

The edX site offers more courses on cities and especially theoretical concepts around cities. Courses, for example, included “Future Cities” and “Exploring Humans’ Space: An Introduction to Geographicity.” Both sites offer courses in the mold of undergraduate and some graduate classes.

What about YouTube? Surely a site that supplies generous access to the seemingly inexhaustible array of human interests would have space to accommodate planning commissioner programs. It does—mostly in the form of recordings of planning commissioner meetings. A rather blurry 2012 video of training in California, called “Planning Commission CEQA Training,” focused on that state’s environmental planning programs. A 2009 video has lectures from the Virginia “Community Planning Academy Training for Planning Officials.” A curious video is titled “LA City Planning Commissioners Need Bet-

ter Training” and dates from 2011. More helpful is a video posting of an American Planning Association division and chapter webinar titled “Ethical Rules and Considerations for Planners, Planning Commissioners, and Lawyers.”

Pay-for-view online training can be found on the Planetizen site. The courses are geared primarily to practicing planners, although commissioners may find topics such as food systems and disaster planning of interest as well. A search of other commercial online providers such as Udemy did not turn up any educational offerings on planning topics.

Upon reflection, it’s apparent that most of the online learning is geared to large audiences. For example, the university-developed sites focus on science, the arts, and professional careers, and the tens of thousands of people seeking college degrees. The one pay-for-view site that covers planning, Planetizen, is geared toward those most able and willing to pay for the education—practicing planners. Much of the educational materials available for commissioners, in either an active learning format or as PDF handbooks, have been created by state agencies, city planning departments, or universities. Further, it is the universities with extension services or a strong community-service orientation that provide the bulk of the education.

Planning is complex and ever changing. An effective planning commissioner needs to keep abreast of evolving planning practice and also master the skills of meeting facilitation and ethical decision making. These are not negligible skills and demands—planning commissioners and officials need ongoing training just as a planner or dentist or lawyer does. As the tools for recording and creating online education become more accessible to more people, we should encourage the dedicated trainers who write and teach to make more of their courses available online in order to reach a larger audience.

—Carolyn Torma

Torma is APA’s director of education and citizen engagement and the editor of The Commissioner.

ON A RELATED TOPIC

Resources

APA Streaming Education

planning.org/education/elearning

The American Planning Association provides online training in the form of live webinars, conference webcasts, and recordings of these programs. Among the 17 products are:

- ▶ Design Review for Officials
- ▶ Creating Successful Meetings
- ▶ Great Plans, Great Communities
- ▶ Informed Decisions
- ▶ Managing Complex Relationships
- ▶ Open Government and Engaging the Public
- ▶ Staying Out of Court by Avoiding Pitfalls

Online Resources

- ▶ Coursera: coursera.org.
- ▶ edX: edx.org.
- ▶ Lincoln Institute of Land Policy: <http://tinyurl.com/osrq9js>.
- ▶ Michigan State University Extension: <http://tinyurl.com/p2mjm7>.
- ▶ Municipal Resources Services Center of Washington: <http://tinyurl.com/oae87t5>.
- ▶ New York training resource information: <http://tinyurl.com/ng8tsj6>.
- ▶ Pennsylvania training: <http://tinyurl.com/qasev1v>.
- ▶ PlannersWeb: plannersweb.com.
- ▶ Planetizen: planetizen.com.
- ▶ “Tennessee Planning Commissioner Training Handbook”: <http://tinyurl.com/6ukugx4>.
- ▶ University of Wisconsin, Center for Land Use Education, *Plan Commission Handbook*: <http://tinyurl.com/nz5stm4>.
- ▶ Washington’s Short Course on Local Planning: <http://tinyurl.com/q9anww6>.

Tree Preservation Ordinances and Green Infrastructure

BEST PRACTICES

URBAN FORESTS COMPRISE THE LARGEST COMPONENT OF THE GREEN infrastructure network. Approximately 3.8 billion trees make up American urban forests. Protecting and enhancing this valuable resource is critical, as growing research demonstrates.

Social benefits

Research on the impacts of trees on public health, safety, social behavior, and community interaction indicates that there are direct positive social influences from exposure to trees. For example, a 2001 study compared the social behavior of low-income residents living in different parts of Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes public housing. It concluded that residents with views of trees and greenery from their homes had more social interaction with neighbors.

Trees have also been recognized as positively influencing the academic performance of high school students. University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment research suggests that exposure to natural environments restores mental energy and enhances concentration.

University of Vermont environmental researchers examined crime rates and tree canopy coverage. Although disparities were found primarily because of the diversity in scale from urban to suburban communities, the researchers found that "a 10% increase in tree canopy was associated with a roughly 12% decrease in crime." Poorly groomed vegetation did, however, provide concealment for criminal activity.

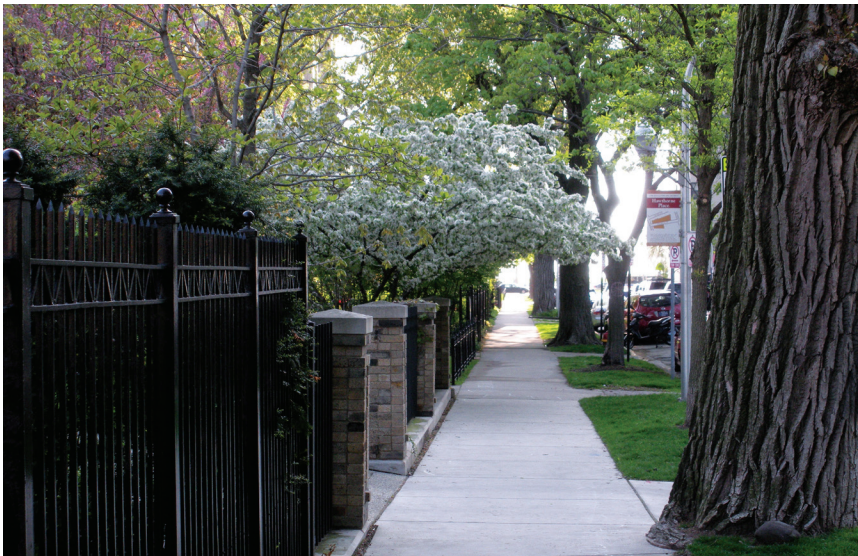
Environmental benefits

Federal agencies, state agencies, universities, and local utility and watershed organizations have documented the environmental benefits of urban forestry. These include:

STREAM BANK STABILIZATION: Roots bind soil, which prevents sedimentation.

CARBON SEQUESTRATION: Trees absorb atmospheric carbon, reducing greenhouse gases.

REDUCED AIR POLLUTION: Trees remove many atmospheric pollutants.



Not only do trees cool cities, they help clean stormwater and provide visual character, as on this street in Chicago.

URBAN HEAT ISLAND MITIGATION AND REDUCED ENERGY CONSUMPTION: Trees absorb sunlight, provide shade, reduce sunlight on heat radiating surfaces, and block cold wind.

STORMWATER INTERCEPTION AND FILTRATION: Trees reduce runoff by intercepting rainwater on leaves, and they also filter runoff pollutants.

Economic benefits

Economic benefits include both direct benefits (e.g., return on investment through real estate values and taxes) and indirect cost savings (health benefits and energy savings). A 1992 comprehensive study for the *Journal of Arboriculture*, "Assessing the Benefits and Costs of the Urban Forest," documented these benefits:

- ▶ increased property values
- ▶ increased tax revenue
- ▶ reduced building energy costs
- ▶ reduced stormwater impacts
- ▶ improved health and lower health care costs

Urban forestry in development codes

Many municipalities have adopted regulations to ensure the preservation and replenishment of their tree canopy. Here are some common elements.

The *Statement of Purpose and Intent* should be clear, concise, and based on the goals of an urban forestry master plan, green infrastructure plan, or urban forest element of the comprehensive plan. These objectives should enumerate the social, environmental, and financial benefits of tree preservation.

Tree ordinances come in *two different categories*: those that are applicable only to trees on public property (i.e., street trees) and those that apply to development on private property. Most municipalities do not attempt to preserve or replace all trees to avoid placing a significant financial burden on home owners or the city. In general, individual residential lots, developed lots, or properties under a certain size threshold are exempt from the regulations.

Typical tree ordinances establish a *Minimum Tree Cover or Density Requirement* that provides a number or percentage of trees of a given size that must be protected or planted. Some communities apply a minimum percent tree canopy requirement that emphasizes the preservation of stands or clusters of mature trees, rather than individual trees. An existing tree canopy is considered more beneficial. By valuing the tree canopy, communities have a better chance of promoting preservation over planting of trees that mature slowly.

Many communities *Protect Special Trees* with exceptional value, including historic or landmark trees and specimen trees. Specimen trees apply to certain species of trees that provide particular local value. Communities typically prohibit their removal unless the tree is considered a nuisance or hazard. To discourage removal or destruction, some communities require extensive compensation for a lost tree.

Communities typically avoid trying to preserve all trees everywhere; they must determine *Preservation and Planting Requirements*. That is, does a tree provide benefits greater than its maintenance cost or is the tree a public safety risk? Communities must also consider the cost/benefit ratio when requiring replacement trees to compensate for removal. Most tree ordinances include a list of tree species that are acceptable replacement trees. Selected species must remain healthy. Planting requirements also need to consider proper planting and maintenance to ensure tree survival.

Tree Maintenance Requirements mandate maintenance for one to three years, and require replacement of trees that die within that time frame. Some communities partner with nonprofit or volunteer tree organizations to ensure ongoing tree maintenance due to the limits of what can be imposed on developers or owners.

Good ordinances incorporate flexibility to address physically constrained sites that cannot accommodate the required tree coverage. In such cases, a *Fee-in-Lieu Replacement Option* is an effective approach that allows developers to compensate for lost trees by paying into a tree fund, which is used for urban forest management functions, such as education. This option places a monetary value on removed trees and the deficit of trees that are not replaced. Most ordinances apply a cost-per-caliper-inch or cost-per-tree fee.

Enforcement is critical to success. When developing tree preservation codes, municipalities should determine how much capacity they have for enforcement. Regulations need to be clearly tied to community objectives and enforced by the proper professionals—like arborists—who have proper authority and an in-depth knowledge of trees.

The tree preservation ordinance is only one of several municipal

codes that impact urban forestry and provide benefits. Others include:

STORMWATER MANAGEMENT ORDINANCES.

Trees have an important function in stormwater management, including intercepting rainwater. These functions are incorporated into ordinances by requiring tree preservation and replacement standards as part of the stormwater management infrastructure, and factoring the presence of trees in pre- and postdevelopment calculations for stormwater flow.

ZONING ORDINANCES. Tree preservation regulations are often included in zoning and development codes as a chapter or section. However, trees also appear in other sections, including landscaping standards and riparian buffer requirements. Development standards such as setbacks, minimum lot sizes, and parking regulations should be

conceived with tree coverage in mind to ensure that the required amount of trees can be accommodated.

EROSION AND SEDIMENTATION CONTROL

ORDINANCES. Trees can be incorporated into engineered standards for managing the impacts of development on stream banks and steep slopes; trees stabilize stream banks and slopes. The landscape conservation plan helps ensure the health and survival of trees.

SUBDIVISION ORDINANCES. Right-of-way requirements and street- and sidewalk-design standards are found in subdivision regulations. These standards ensure adequate planting widths and depths, provide the structure to avoid sidewalk obstructions (e.g., grates), prevent interference with underground and overhead utilities, and consider the types and sizes of trees that can thrive.

The case for an integrated code

The urban forest should be addressed through an integrated green infrastructure code and management structure that optimizes benefits. This process starts with an inventory of all the community's regulations that address green infrastructure. It should include the various departments and personnel responsible for regulation, permitting, and enforcement. Existing regulations should be evaluated for inconsistencies, conflicts, overlap, and opportunities for coordination. The evaluation assesses the various review and permitting procedures and how they can be integrated. It looks for missed opportunities to apply green infrastructure best management practices. The final step is to recommend a structure to integrate existing regulations, review processes, and new approaches into an ordinance that maximizes the triple bottom line of social, environmental, and economic benefits.

—By Nancy Templeton, AICP, and David Rouse, AICP

Templeton is a senior planner with Glackin Thomas Panzak, Inc. in Philadelphia. Rouse is APA's managing director of research and advisory services. This article is excerpted from the September 2012 issue of Zoning Practice.

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Meeting the Vacant Property Challenge

LAW

THE LINGERING FORECLOSURE CRISIS RESULTED IN A PROLIFERATION of vacant properties, both in perpetual hard-luck cities and in boomtowns. Without a comprehensive strategy for stabilizing and revitalizing vacant properties, many communities continue to struggle with blight.

The National Vacant Properties Campaign defines vacant properties as unoccupied residential, commercial, and industrial buildings and lots that meet one or both conditions: the site is a public nuisance, or the owners have failed to meet the financial requirements of ownership.

Beyond the health and public safety risks, vacant properties put a huge strain on municipal budgets. According to a 2005 Homeownership Preservation Foundation study, local governments in the Chicago area spend between \$5,000 and \$34,000 to secure and maintain a single vacant property. And vacant properties drag down the values of nearby properties. The NVPC estimates that homes in close proximity to vacant structures may lose more than \$7,500 in value.

A successful strategy for stabilizing and revitalizing vacant properties

Communities need to develop comprehensive stabilization and reclamation plans to stem the tide and restore productive use. The NVPC cites these components for successful reclamation planning: a vacant properties monitoring system, a comprehensive approach to code enforcement, and a mechanism to facilitate property acquisition and reuse. Policy advocates agree that the most promising tools are better property information systems, improved code enforcement tools, and new acquisition authorities such as land banks.

Property information systems

An effective real property information system can concentrate on two distinct sets of data: (1) information about current vacant properties and (2) information about properties with a high risk. These lists of vacant and problematic properties help identify responsible parties, track complaints and code violations, and connect potential buyers to redevelopment opportunities. Systems that also include information about distressed—but not yet vacant—properties are an early warning system. These systems target code enforcement and reinvestment resources strategically.

Enforcement tools and strategies

Traditional code enforcement has long relied on two related regulatory tools: (1) property maintenance codes and (2) nuisance property ordinances. In recent years, overwhelmed officials have turned to vacant property registration ordinances to identify and hold owners accountable for maintenance and security of properties.

Property maintenance requirements address both potential future structural problems (e.g., cracked foundations and leaky roofs) as well as aesthetic concerns (e.g., chipped paint or cracked windows). Some codes also establish standards for landscaping and other design features.

Traditional nuisance law authorizes corrective actions to bring properties into compliance. Effective administration of nuisance ordinances relies on clear standards that define a nuisance and guidance on when a local government can act.

Limitations of traditional codes

Property maintenance and nuisance abatement requirements assume the existence of a physical owner or an easily identifiable institutional owner such as a bank. Yet one of the key contributing factors to ongoing foreclosures was the creation of exotic mortgage derivatives that divided interest among a wide range of investors and institutions that have no incentive to maintain properties.

While many local governments are authorized to obtain administrative abatement orders to bring vacant properties into compliance, the upfront costs can be a disincentive. Many communities are simply overwhelmed by the numbers.

Vacant property registration

Beyond traditional code enforcement, many communities have adopted vacant property registration ordinances.

They require owners to notify the local government when a property becomes vacant. Most ordinances also require owners to pay a registration fee to defray the costs of pro-



viding municipal services. Additional provisions may include property maintenance standards, proof of insurance, and a plan to return vacant properties to productive use.

There are two basic types of VPR ordinances: those that regulate all vacant and abandoned properties regardless of ownership structure and those that target properties in foreclosure. VPR ordinances include a list of definitions and a statement of applicability, and clarify which types of properties must comply. The ordinances are triggered based on the length of time a property is vacant or when it enters the foreclosure process.

At that point, owners must register the property within a certain number of days and pay a fee to cover inspection and service costs. Some communities waive the fee without waiving other requirements to assist community development corporations, land banks, or other entities to facilitate reuse.

A number of VPR ordinances compel owners to submit a plan detailing how they

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will bring properties into code compliance and return them to productive use. Some plans document the steps the owner will take to bring the property up to code and state a target date when the property will either be demolished or ready for reuse. Enforcement provisions ensure that owners take the registration requirement seriously. Failure to register often results in a monthly late fee; some ordinances stipulate that the local government can place a lien on delinquent properties or pursue criminal prosecution.

Acquiring and recycling properties

Long-term revitalization depends on policies that expedite the acquisition and reuse of abandoned and tax-delinquent properties. Governments acquire vacant properties through tax foreclosure, eminent domain, and gift property programs.

Managing these processes and programs is complex. Communities have partnered with community development corporations or created new redevelopment authorities to focus on recycling vacant properties.

Land banks

Land banks are local governmental or non-profit entities that acquire, maintain, and facilitate vacant property redevelopment. Funding typically comes either from local governments or from revenue generated through operations.

The Neighborhood Stabilization Program (authorized by the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008) and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 allow land banks to acquire foreclosed and abandoned properties in addition to those with tax liens.

Conclusion

Real property information systems, aggressive code enforcement, and mechanisms to facilitate the acquisition and reuse of vacant properties are all important strategies to tackle this community challenge.

—David Morley, AICP

Morley is a senior research associate at APA. This article was adapted from the June 2010 issue of *Zoning Practice*.



Sagamore Farms in northwest Baltimore County, Maryland.

HISTORY

THE PLAN FOR THE VALLEYS. In the early 1960s, it became apparent that the mostly rural area of rolling hills and valleys just north of the Baltimore Beltway was being encroached upon by the city's urban growth. Residents and business owners alike started considering how future development of the area should take shape. Property owners hired David Wallace and his partner Ian McHarg to create a plan that would allow for new development while preserving rural character.

The resulting plan, which won an APA National Planning Landmark Award in 2010, was revolutionary for its use of urban growth boundaries, transfer of development rights, and environmental conservation. While Baltimore County did adopt and implement the plan at the behest of property owners, the transfer of development rights concept, as well as some other components, was absent. The *Plan for the Valleys* and revisions that have followed have undeniably influenced the pattern of development in Baltimore County and introduced new planning approaches.

—Ben Leitschuh
Leitschuh is APA's education associate.

RESOURCE FINDER

Learn more about the plans, planners, and places that made history.

APA RESOURCES

Planning Landmark Awards
planning.org/awards/landmarks.htm

Planning Pioneers Awards
planning.org/awards/pioneers.htm

100 Essential Books of Planning
planning.org/library/greatbooks

OTHER RESOURCES

The City Reader, 5th Edition (The Routledge Urban Reader Series)
routledge.com/books/details/9780415556651

American City Planning Since 1890
Mel Scott

WEB RESOURCES

Planning History Timeline: a Selected Chronology of Events (with a focus on the U.S.)
Scott Campbell, University of Michigan
www-personal.umich.edu/~sdcamp/up540/timeline12.html

"What is a City?"
Lewis Mumford
Architectural Record (1937)
<http://tinyurl.com/oy3vvw7>

—Ben Leitschuh