

Why Was the Planning Commission Dissolved?



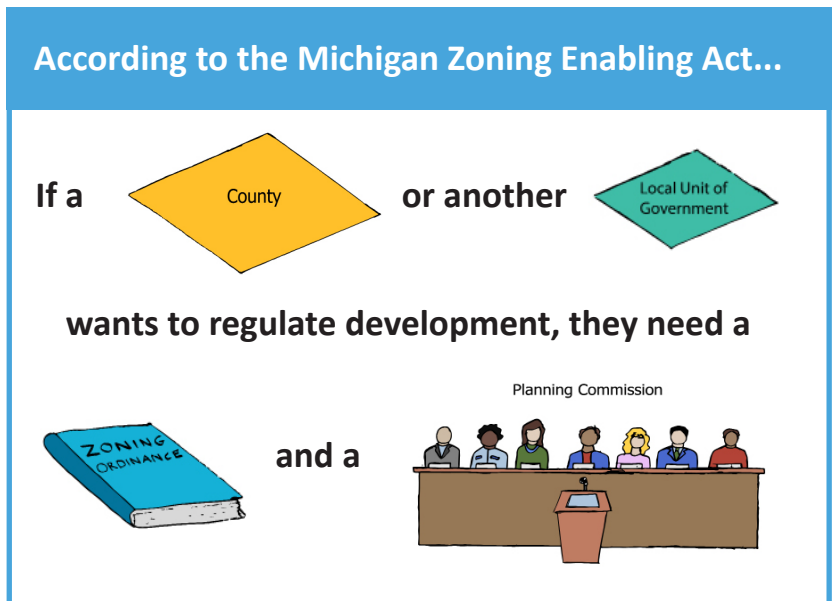
An Explanation and Glimpse into Future Planning Efforts in Ottawa County

On October 27, 2020, the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners dissolved the county planning commission. This document will outline why this decision was made and how the county's regional planning functions will continue to be performed without the commission.

How Do Planning Commissions Operate in Michigan?

Like many states, Michigan grants regulation of land use to local units of government. These municipalities – townships, villages, cities, and counties – are empowered to develop zoning ordinances, or laws to regulate development within their municipal boundaries. Just as courts must exist to uphold the Constitution, planning commissions must exist to uphold the municipality's zoning ordinance. In all cases across the state, if a municipality adopts a zoning ordinance, it must also create a planning commission to oversee it.

Some counties in remote parts of the state administer a countywide zoning ordinance, as townships within them lack the resources to adopt a separate zoning ordinance and appoint a planning commission. In this case, the county must have a planning commission to oversee the zoning ordinance and regulate development across the county. In more urban regions of the state, each local unit of government typically adopts their own zoning ordinance and appoints a planning commission to oversee it. This local zoning ordinance supersedes any countywide zoning ordinance, and when all local units of government within a county have adopted separate zoning ordinances, the county zoning ordinance is no longer applicable, rendering the county planning commission a merely advisory body.



With all municipalities in Ottawa County administering separate zoning ordinances and appointing separate planning commissions, the Ottawa County Planning Commission served no formal purpose other than promoting regional planning efforts, a function that will continue to be performed by the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners and the Planning and Performance Improvement Department.

How Does Dissolving the Planning Commission Impact Countywide Planning Efforts?

The short answer is that countywide planning efforts will be unchanged, as the commission's former duties and initiatives will continue to be accomplished by the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners and the Planning and Performance Improvement Department. Without a zoning ordinance, the planning commission had no enforcement tool to guide development within the county. Because of this, the commission could only provide recommendations to local units of government. These advisory duties can still be performed by county planning staff without convening the planning commission, saving county staff time and resources.

Perhaps the most salient argument in dissolving the planning commission is the rapid development of Ottawa County and the increasing challenges associated with growth. Issues such as groundwater depletion, housing affordability, broadband accessibility, farmland preservation, and transportation connectivity threaten the region's quality of life and often require complex solutions not easily determined from a commission that meets only a few times per year. Specialized committees with experts in the field can better recommend solutions than a broad, largely inflexible commission. This is not only part of the county's pursuit of increasing efficiency in government services but a shift towards a more proactive approach in addressing these regional land use challenges.

The current duties of the planning commission include providing recommendations to municipalities regarding zoning changes, updates to their master plans, and applications for farmland preservation. In the absence of the planning commission these duties have been transferred to the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners and the Planning and Performance Improvement Department.

Future Planning Efforts

Although the Ottawa County Planning Commission has been dissolved, the regional planning initiatives of the county will continue to be performed by the board of commissioners and professional planning staff. Some of these initiatives are discussed below:

Housing Commission – Reinstated on April 9, 2019, the Ottawa County Housing Commission seeks to gain status as a public housing agency (PHA) to secure housing vouchers for Ottawa County communities. With increasing housing costs countywide, this body will be a crucial partner for local municipalities and other housing organizations within the region.

Farmland Preservation Board - Continuing Ottawa County's commitment towards promoting its vibrant agricultural industry, this body will work with the agricultural community and staff to develop programs and resources for producers and the preservation of prime agricultural land within the county.

Groundwater Initiatives- With Ottawa County's groundwater challenges threatening the region's health and quality of life, monitoring systems and water conservation programs will be implemented to help alleviate shortages and protect our valuable water resources.

Broadband Accessibility - In an age where internet connectivity is becoming increasingly vital in everyday life, ensuring residents across the county have access is important in fostering economic development and improving the region's quality of life. Improving broadband internet access has long been a goal in Ottawa County and planning staff will continue working with public and private partners to close the technological divide within the region.

Brownfield Redevelopment Authority - Growing Ottawa County's tax base strengthens local communities. Dedicating resources towards the Brownfield Redevelopment Authority facilitates the remediation and rehabilitation of underutilized parcels across the county, creating new businesses and jobs.

Future Land Use Vision - With the current Ottawa County Development Plan created in 1992 and last updated in 2008, a full-scale revision is needed to reflect the three decades of change since its adoption.

Summary

Although the Ottawa County Planning Commission has been dissolved, the regional planning initiatives of the county will continue to be performed by the board of commissioners and professional planning staff. In the absence of the planning commission, county planning staff will remain accountable to the board of commissioners while partnering with specialized committees more adept at addressing the complex challenges facing Ottawa County.