

PLANNING DEPARTMENT

Morgantown Planning Milestones

- 1944 - City Council adopted first Zoning Ordinance
- 1959 - WV Planning Enabling Act Adopted
- 1961 - City's First Comprehensive Plan Adopted
- 1970 - Updated Comprehensive Plan
- 1979 - Hired First City Planner
- 1999 - Updated Comprehensive Plan
- 2001 – Embark on Comprehensive Amendment of Zoning Ordinance

The primary goal of the Planning Department is to promote orderly development to ensure that the health, safety, welfare, and convenience of Morgantown's citizens will be preserved and enhanced.

To that end, the Planning Department provides staff support to several citizen boards and commissions including the following:

- Planning Commission
- Board of Zoning Appeals
- Downtown Design Review Committee

Additionally, the Planning Department provides support services to other City Departments and outside agencies to accomplish community development objectives.

CURRENT PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

The work program activities of the Planning Department are categorized as long-range, special studies, community development, and current-planning.

Long-range planning

Long-range planning involves the Comprehensive Plan process, which includes citizen reviews and public meetings leading to the adoption of the Plan. Major updates of the City's Comprehensive Plan generally occur every ten years, with minor updates every five years. The latest update to the City Plan occurred in January of last year. A minor update is planned for 2004.

Special Studies

Special studies include both scheduled and unscheduled requests for staff research and analysis of particular topics/projects. Periodic requests come from the Housing Authority, Main Street Morgantown, Landmarks Commission, and Vision 2000 to name a few. Additional requests arise internally from City Council and boards and commissions. These studies can involve interaction with committees and interest groups and eventually foster policy/ordinance formulation and implementation.

Community Development

Community development refers to a wide range of general and specific activities pertaining to community improvement and quality of life matters. Attending meetings of various interest groups and community service organizations, and interactions with other governmental units fall into this category. An exciting program on traditional town planning and urban design continues to be offered to various community groups throughout the year. It remains very well received.

Current Planning

Current planning or land use control essentially involves the day-to-day interactions with the general public regarding complaints and inquiries, and office operations including the review of signs, grading and building permits, and business licenses for zoning compliance.

The office also administers applications for variances, conditional uses, rezonings, property subdivisions, and site development reviews. Certain applications have a review process governed by State law and City ordinance, which includes public notification/legal advertisement, and letters to property owners within 200 feet. The Planning Department prepares agendas, recommendations, staff reports, records meeting attendance, minutes, and follow-up communications.

The current planning work program activity comprises the majority of staff time (70% or more).

OFFICE RESOURCES

The office is currently staffed with a Director and an Assistant Planner, who doubles as the departmental secretary. The office has developed a strong relationship with the WVU Department of Geography and the Department of Landscape Architecture, in terms of offering unpaid student internships. Staff has also occasionally benefitted from the use of adult volunteers from the community.

Office equipment includes three newer desktop computers, two HP inkjet printers, and a fax machine. Arc View GIS mapping software was purchased this year. Training will begin in Spring of 2003.

PAST YEAR'S ACTIVITIES

Zoning map amendments adopted this year were limited to 1 case as follows:

Masonic Lodge and adjacent parking lot, Willey Street, B-1 to B-4.

The Board of Zoning Appeals reviewed 14 variance requests (up from 8 in 2001); 12 conditional use requests (about the same as in 2001); 17 subdivisions; 2 zoning text amendments, including the very important *planned unit development ordinance*; and 23 major site plan reviews, an increase of 10 from last year.

Of significance is the continued success in keeping the number of variances low.

In terms of the revisions to the zoning ordinance, a consultant team (HNTB) was retained and continues to work on the drafts. Unforeseen personnel changes at HNTB means that the City is with its third project manager for the rewrite. This led to delays in producing a meaningful first draft. That first draft was produced with and presented to the citizenry through a series of public input meetings and exercises. The open process followed won an award from the WV State Chapter of the American Planning Association as the outstanding public participation program for 2002.

The first draft of the ordinance has now been thoroughly reviewed by Building Inspections, Planning, Engineering, and Legal. A second draft incorporating all their comments will be produced in the next few weeks and another round of public input meetings will be held after the first of the year. It is anticipated that the revised ordinance will be brought to City Council for consideration by midyear 2003.

Morgantown also hosted the 2002 Annual Conference of the WV Chapter of the American Planning Association. It is the first time the City was selected to host the meeting. The Department was instrumental in convincing the executive committee of the WVPA to hold the conference in Downtown Morgantown. The Department staff worked long and hard to organize and plan the event to insure a quality program. Many thanks go to Mayor Justice for providing opening remarks and to all the board and committee members who helped with the conference planning. The evaluation forms told the story: This was the best annual conference in recent memory.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

A Technical Review Process continues to foster departmental coordination on development review items and provides an opportunity for developers to meet with various departments (Planning, Engineering, Fire, Building Inspections) in one forum.

MAIN CHALLENGES

There remains one significant challenge that continues to tax staff resources: being able to devote adequate time to zoning ordinance enforcement. This will be especially important when the revised zoning ordinance comes to fruition. During the public input exercises, “adequate enforcement” consistently came up in citizen comments as a missing ingredient in departmental efforts to regulate development. The Department agrees with Engineering and Building Inspections that a “plans expeditor / zoning enforcement officer” position would greatly assist by reducing permit processing times; allowing for consistent enforcement of the zoning ordinance; and having one person responsible for tracking the progress of a permit at any point in its processing.

FORECAST OF ACTIVITIES, 2002

Regular monthly cases for the Planning Commission/Traffic Commission/BZA.

Continue the process begun in December of 2001, of completely overhauling the zoning ordinance text to make it more logically ordered and user-friendly and to incorporate smart growth principles. It is anticipated that this will consume a great deal of staff time for the first 6 months of 2003.

Work with the University to establish sensible zoning district classifications on University-owned lands (agriculture farms). Work on this cannot proceed until the new zoning ordinance is finished.

Become self-sufficient in computer mapping and networking capabilities.

Streamline the development process to eliminate wasteful duplication of effort and needless obstructive barriers to quality development.

Continue to give educational seminars to community groups on smart growth principles.

Begin review of current subdivision regulations after the zoning ordinance is completed.

SUMMARY

The past year has been productive in terms of realizing and beginning long range planning goals.