

PLANNING DEPARTMENT

Morgantown Land Use Planning Milestones

- 1944City Council adopted first Zoning Ordinance
- 1959West Virginia Planning Enabling Act Adopted
- 1961City's First Comprehensive Plan Adopted
- 1970Comprehensive Plan Updated
- 1979First City Planner Hired
- 1998Comprehensive Plan Updated
- 2006Zoning Ordinance Modernized and Codified
- 2010Downtown Strategic Plan Update
- 2010Comprehensive Plan Update to be initiated



Introduction

The Vision is to organize a municipal Planning Department that puts customer service first; works through motivated professionals to shape a high quality community for residents, business, and visitors; and, serves as a model for management excellence.

The Mission is to enhance the quality of life and the design of the community, foster innovative planning, and promote sustainable community and economic development. This is accomplished by exercising commitment to public service and fairness, while maintaining respect for individual property rights.

The Purpose is to provide advice and technical expertise for elected officials, appointed citizen planners, City Departments, public agencies, residents, property owners, and developers in pursuit of supporting well-informed and collaborative land use and land development decisions. Efforts are guided by an understanding and commitment to the principle that these decisions have a direct impact on the community's quality of life today and for future generations.

Programs and Services

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

Long-range planning involves the Comprehensive Plan process, which includes citizen reviews and public meetings leading to the adoption and update of the Plan. West Virginia State Code §8A-3-11, as revised in 2004, mandates that local comprehensive plans be reviewed and updated at least every ten (10) years. The next comprehensive plan update will be launched in 2010.

Special Studies include both scheduled and unscheduled requests for research and analysis of particular issues and projects. Additional requests arise internally from City Council and City Boards and Commissions. These studies involve interaction with committees and interest groups and eventually foster policy and/or ordinance formulation, enactment, and implementation. The Downtown Strategic Plan update project is an example of a special study that will conclude in 2010.

Current Planning involves daily interactions with the general public regarding pre-application conferences, inquiries, and complaints. “Current Planning” also includes the routine review for Comprehensive Plan and Planning & Zoning Code compliance of:

- Minor and major subdivision petitions
- Site plan applications
- Variance petitions
- Conditional use petitions
- Zoning text amendment petitions
- Zoning map amendment petitions
- Home Occupation applications
- Administrative appeal petitions
- Building permits applications
- Grading permits applications
- Certificates of Occupancy
- Sign permit applications
- Private Club/Wine/Tavern petitions
- Business licenses

Community Development refers to a wide range of general and specific activities pertaining to community improvement and quality of life matters. Attendance at various meetings of neighborhood groups, community service organizations, and government agencies fall within this category. The Planning Department remains an active participant by attending an average of 5 to 10 community and economic development related activities a month.

Intergovernmental Services refers to technical support and assistance to City Departments and allied county and regional agencies including demographic research and analysis, data collaboration and sharing, GIS analysis and mapping, transportation planning, public facilities planning, and infrastructure improvements. The Planning Department manages the caseload of the City’s Technical Review Team, which is comprised of representatives of the Planning Department, Engineering Department, Code Enforcement Division, Fire Department, and Morgantown Utility Board (MUB). The Team is charged with conducting preliminary plans review with developers of multi-family residential projects and all commercial and industrial projects. This Team continues to foster Departmental coordination of plans review and provides an opportunity for developers to meet with Departments in one forum. Team members have been administratively expanded to include representatives from Mountain Line Transit, Monongalia County Schools, Greater Morgantown MPO, West Virginia University, and Republic Services. The Planning Department also devotes limited services for the coordination of the City’s Wellness Program.

Staffing

The Department is currently staffed with a Director and a Deputy Director. The Department maintains a quality internship program for graduate and undergraduate West Virginia University students studying Geography, Political Science, Public Administration, and Landscape Architecture. The continuation of this internship program is critical to sustain Departmental operations.

Christopher M. Fletcher, AICP joined the Planning Department as the Director in 2005. He is a certified professional planner with public and private sector experience in land use and land development planning, community and economic development, and federal and state block grant administration. Chris currently serves as the President of the West Virginia Planning Association, is a member of the American Planning Association, and a former Councilor with the City of Weirton, West Virginia.



Lisa Mardis joined the Planning Department as Assistant to the Planner in 2000. She currently serves as the Deputy Director. She previously served in several local and state government roles with the City of Westover and the State of Maryland in Garrett County. Lisa is a member of the West Virginia Planning Association and the American Planning Association. She is currently working to fulfill the testing and certification requirements of the American Institute of Certified Planners and pursuing a graduate degree in Public Administration from West Virginia University.



Citizen Planners

The success of local planning policies, programming, and services depends largely on the commitment and integrity of residents appointed to serve on various planning-related committees. Morgantown is fortunate to enjoy a well-informed public that is willing to serve the role of “citizen planner.” The Department provides staff support to the following committees:

Citizen Planner	Original Appointment	Current Term
Planning Commission		
Peter DeMasters, Pres. 6 th Ward Representative	03/21/06	01/01/08 – 12/31/10
Sam Loretta, Vice-Pres. 1 st Ward Representative	06/20/06	01/01/09 – 12/31/11
Tim Stranko 2 nd Ward Representative	03/21/07	01/01/09 – 12/31/11
Barbara Ferrell 3 rd Ward Representative	01/15/08	01/01/08 – 12/31/10
Kathryn Greever 4 th Ward Representative	07/02/07	01/01/07 – 12/31/09*
Michael Shuman 5 th Ward Representative	02/19/03	01/01/07 – 12/31/09*
Carol Pyles 7 th Ward Representative	09/17/08	01/01/07 – 12/31/09*
Jennifer Selin City Councilor	07/02/07	City Council term ending 06/30/09
Dr. Ken Martis Administration Representative	05/01/01	at will of City Manager
Board of Zoning Appeals		
Bernie Bossio, Chair	01/04/05	01/01/09 – 12/31/11
James Shaffer, Vice-Chair	02/07/06	01/01/07 – 12/31/09
Leanne Cardoso	08/21/07	01/01/07 – 12/31/09*
George Papandreas	02/06/08	01/01/09 – 12/31/11
Tom Shamberger	02/06/08	01/01/08 – 12/31/10
Downtown Design Review Committee		
Tom Anderson	Jennifer Selin	
Bob Carubia	Steve McBride	
Michael Mills	Sam Loretta	
Constance Merandi	Terri Cutright, Ex-Officio	

**filling unexpired terms*

2009 Activities

The distribution of activities across Department programs and services for the reporting year was:

- Current Planning 60%
- Intergovernmental Services 15%
- Community Development 10%
- Special Studies 10%
- Long-range Planning 5%

The following table illustrates the Planning Department's caseload for reporting years 2007, 2008, and 2009.

	Number of Applications			2009 Actions			
	2007	2008	2009	Pending	Approved	Denied	W/drawn
Variances	41	44	32	0	26	0	6
Conditional Uses	13	19	10	0	7	0	3
Site Plans	21	28	20	0	17	1	2
Minor Subdivisions	35	23	24	0	22	1	1
Major Subdivisions	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Map Amendments	7	7	3	0	2	0	1
Text Amendments	10	5	8	0	6	0	2
Administrative Appeals	2	1	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	131	127	97	0	80	2	15

The following statistics represent activity in addition to the above table:

- Approximately 860 building permit reviews from November 2008 though October 2009, (estimated 45% of the 1,925 building permits issued during this period)
- Forty (40) sign permits for the reporting year
- Nine (9) Class 1 Home Occupations were approved during the reporting year
- No conditional use, Class 2 Home Occupations were granted during the reporting year
- Approximately 2,500 general planning and zoning inquiries for the reporting year
- Approximately 330 pre-application conferences for the reporting year
- Approximately 60 Department man-hours were devoted to the SC Bodner PUD
- Approximately 75 man-hours were devoted to the "Beech View Place" PUD, which is scheduled for consideration by the Planning Commission and City Council in early 2010
- Approximately 150 man-hours were devoted to the research and development of the proposed text amendments to the definition of "Family" and residential occupancy standards
- Approximately 10 Department man-hours hours were devoted to the City's Wellness Program for the reporting year

Observations

The following observations relate to the Department's 2009 activities:

- **Sunnyside Neighborhood** – There were no Developments of Significant Impact approved during the reporting period within Sunnyside. There have been exploratory discussions on a number of potential developments with varying scales, some of which are expected to materialize in 2010. However the volatility seen in the national banking industry, more conservative lending standards (higher LTV, absorption rates, etc.), and student housing market saturation outside the City have been intuitively indentified as contributing factors to an apparent cooling during the reporting period in new rental multi-family construction within the City.
- **Planned Unit Developments (PUD)** – Status of the four (4) approved PUDs includes:
 - Square at Falling Run – Outline approved in 2003; Phase I to construct “The Augusta” was completed and tenants occupied the buildings in September 2007; at least 124 permanent parking spaces must be provided by May 21, 2011 (36 months from initial occupancy); There have been no preliminary discussions between the developer and the Department regarding the design and construction of the PUD’s Phase II, which provides for the development of a 500 space parking garage facility. Said facility is due by April 1, 2011, as set forth in the April 17, 2008 Ground Lease.
 - SC Bodner – Outline Plan approved in 2006; amendment approved in 2008; “Mountaineer Place” is currently under construction with an anticipated delivery date of Fall 2010.
 - Grand Central Apartments – Outline Plan approved in 2007; amendment approved in December 2008; amendment approval included, among others, a condition that the Development Plan be reviewed and approved by the Planning Commission within 18 months following City Council approval of the Outline Plan (June 2, 2010).
 - Westminster House – Outline Plan approved in December 2008; amendment approved November 2009 to extend the deadline for submitting the Development Plan from June 3, 2010 to December 3, 2010 and to permit the development of temporary parking lots ending on or before December 31, 2010.
- The number of **Variance Applications** dropped slightly but remains higher than annual caseloads prior to the major zoning ordinance revision enacted in January 2006. The reason for the decline in 2009 is attributed to Staff grouping similar requests for individual projects under one petition as well as Staff successfully negotiating with developers to incorporate plan and design modifications that meet Planning & Zoning Code provisions.
- The number of **Text Amendments** increased slightly as Staff continues to identify minor revisions that correct unintended consequences with the major zoning ordinance revision enacted in January 2006. Additional text amendments are anticipated in 2010 to incorporate recommendations anticipated in the Downtown Strategic Plan Update as well as a significant shift in defining “Family” and regulating residential occupancy citywide.
- **Minor Subdivisions Applications** remained the same in 2008 and 2009.
- The issuance of only 40 **Sign Permits** in 2009 continues to demonstrate a lack of resources devoted to the enforcement and administration of sign regulations.

Successes

- **Public Outreach** – The Department continues to identify ways of improving public access to and increasing transparency of City planning activities and proposed development projects.

With the assistance of Jeff Mikorski, Assistant City Manager, the Department launched a new monthly neighbor notification system that includes: revamped letters that include more project information; online mapping of project locations; online links to notification letters; and, online links to Staff Reports. A webpage was developed as a one-stop online resource of all petitions, excluding minor subdivisions, that are considered by the Planning Commission and the Board of Zoning Appeals. A mass email is sent once a month to a number of constituencies that includes the webpage link so that citizens and interested parties remain informed in a timely, free, and easily accessible manner.

The Department has received many positive comments in support of the new system and a few communities across West Virginia have asked for information on how to launch a similar program.

- **Citizen Planner Training** – The Department continued its efforts to provide detailed orientation for new Planning Commissioners. As provided in 2008, the Department will facilitate workshop-style training sessions for members of the Morgantown Planning Commission and Morgantown Board of Zoning Appeals.
- **Geographic Information System (GIS)** – The Department continues to integrate GIS into its day-to-day operations, which has resulted in increased efficiencies and improved services. The following analysis and mapping projects were completed:
 - Zoning Map – The “Official Zoning Map” of the City of Morgantown is maintained digitally using ArcView. Digital zoning classification spatial data was updated as the result of various zoning map amendments enacted by City Council from 2006 through 2009. Staff is studying the feasibility of improving online zoning map access.
 - Downtown Strategic Plan Study Area – The following study area data sets were created by Department Staff: existing land use (horizontal and vertical); inventory of private parking; 2006 property tax assessment; and, property ownership.
 - Fire Department – Company and apparatus response zones were revised, digitized, and mapping delivered in advance of the North Side Fire Station opening.
 - Community Development – GIS mapping and staff support was provided for various Community Development Block Grant initiatives.
 - Neighborhoods – In support of the Neighborhood Association Coordinating Council's work, previously digitized neighborhood boundaries were revised and new mapping provided for the Jerome Park Neighborhood Association that was formed in 2009.
 - Monongalia County Schools – The Department provided GIS technical assistance relating to Woodburn Elementary School and the BOE's Comprehensive Educational Facilities Plan.
 - Monongalia County OEM – The Department provided limited GIS technical assistance in the preparation of the Monongalia County Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan.
 - Public Assistance – Several mapping projects were completed to assist various public agencies and private entities. The services were provided gratis.

Challenges

- The issue of “adequate enforcement” of the City’s Planning & Zoning Code and the monitoring of conditions included in approvals remain a concern. The scale and scope of the Department’s caseload relative to new construction has greatly diminished its ability to maintain an active and effective enforcement program. Enforcement challenges include illegal signs, field inspections of new development during construction, and monitoring compliance with conditional use and variance approvals.

The Department must rely on college-aged volunteers when investigating certain types of conditional use approvals. Although at times successfully, soliciting volunteer assistance can be challenging in terms of identifying suitable candidates and ensuring timely investigations.

- The lack of an integrated, managed, and maintained comprehensive Geographic Information System (GIS) within the City and the County remains a significant barrier to increasing and enhancing existing planning services. Primary barriers to the development and implementation of a comprehensive GIS include:
 - Cadastral Data – The County Assessor’s Office has not transitioned from paper tax mapping to digital GIS-based tax mapping.
 - Addressing Data – The County Office of Emergency Management has been hampered by funding and capacity challenges to complete the city-style addressing project countywide.
 - Interdepartmental Coordination – The lack of a GIS implementation strategy to connect databases and software across City Departments is a barrier to increasing operational efficiencies and enhancing services.
- The revision of the City’s Subdivision Regulations remains a high priority. However, the Department’s caseload has presented challenges to completing the task internally.

Future Initiatives

- In 2009, the Department worked to solicit the support of the County and neighboring municipalities to undertake a joint Comprehensive Plan to promote policy continuity and reduce costs. The lack of interest requires the City to move forward with the project. The competitive RFP process is expected to begin in the first quarter of 2010.
- The Planning Department will seek funding in FY 2011 to outsource the task of revising the City’s Subdivision Regulations.
- To build on the success of the 2008 “Citizen Planner Training” workshops, the Department will develop a basics training workshop that will be provided annually and be made available to members of planning commissions and boards of zoning appeals for Morgantown, Westover, Star City, and Monongalia County.
- The Department will conduct a comparative analysis of all fees associated with planning services and seek adjustments where necessary.
- The Planning Department will continue to adapt standard operating procedures and initiate activities that serve to streamline review processes, increase operational efficiencies, expand services, and improve customer service.