

Roles and Responsibilities – Planning Commission

The planning commission primarily acts in an advisory capacity to the elected body. The commission studies issues, oversees the preparation of plans and ordinances, and reviews and advises on development proposals. The planning commission can become an effective force in shaping the future of a community when its work leads to solving practical problems in an informed, impartial manner.

The Iowa Code spells out two specific responsibilities for the planning commission related to the development and maintenance of the zoning ordinance.

Prepare the Zoning Ordinance

While the elected body has the power to adopt the zoning ordinance, the responsibility for overseeing the preparation of the ordinance falls to the planning commission. Iowa Code §§ 414.6 (cities) and 335.8 (counties) specifically require the planning commission “to recommend the boundaries of the various original [zoning] districts, and appropriate regulations and restrictions to be enforced therein. Such commission shall, with due diligence, prepare a preliminary report and hold public hearings thereon before submitting its final report; and the [elected body] shall not hold its public hearings or take action until it has received the final report of such commission.” Usually the planning commission works with a consultant, council of governments, or the city or county’s own staff, who handle the technical details of ordinance drafting.

Review and Recommend Zoning Amendments and Updates

Iowa Code §§ 414.6 (cities) and 335.8 (counties) provide that after the initial adoption of the zoning ordinance “the zoning commission may, from time to time, recommend to the [elected body] amendments, supplements, changes or modifications.” This includes any change proposed by a landowner to the map (for example, requesting a property be rezoned from one district classification to another) or the text of the ordinance. The commission should study the proposed change, hold a public hearing and forward its recommendations to the elected body. Likewise, the responsibilities of the planning commission include keeping the zoning ordinance current by recommending amendments that affect a broader area or the community as a whole when the commission’s study and experience indicates a change is necessary. Such recommendations for updates should be forwarded to the elected body.

Other Zoning-related Responsibilities

The planning commission also applies the policies set out in the comprehensive plan and zoning ordinances by reviewing and providing recommendations on specific project applications. The commission’s responsibilities vary considerably from community to community, and they are spelled out in the zoning ordinance. The commission is commonly called on to review subdivision plats, planned unit developments and major site development plans, and to provide recommendations about them to the elected body. Some ordinances give the planning commission responsibility for providing recommendations to the board of adjustment on special exceptions and, occasionally, variances.

Other Responsibilities

The planning commission plays a vital role in developing land use policy that goes well beyond the duties outlined in the Iowa Code. While the policy-development responsibilities of the planning commission vary considerably from community to community, some of the most common tasks include:

- Assisting in the preparation of the comprehensive plan; functional plans such as for bike trails, transportation or sanitary sewer expansion; and plans for geographic subareas like downtowns, neighborhoods or recently annexed areas.

Planning and Zoning Fact Sheet

- Assisting in the preparation of the subdivision ordinance.
- Assisting in the preparation of a community capital improvement plan (CIP). The CIP is a management and fiscal planning tool communities use for scheduling, financing and constructing needed public improvements. The planning commission's participation in CIP development is crucial, because the CIP should be directly linked to the goals and objectives of the comprehensive plan.
- Undertaking other special studies related to the physical development of the community, as requested by the elected body. These studies could address such varied topics as the need for more affordable housing, responses to new state or federal directives, or the demand for increased parkland.
- Informing and educating citizens about ongoing planning projects and community development issues.