

MEMORANDUM

Date: October 14, 2019
To: City of Madison Plan Commission
From: Ledell Zellers, Plan Commission Chair
Re: Big Picture Responsibilities of the Plan Commission

Dear Plan Commissioners,

This is a memo about “Big Picture” responsibilities of the Plan Commission and an approach for addressing them beginning in 2020.

Background

One of the responsibilities of Plan Commissioners is to contribute to achieving the vision of the city as it relates to land use. This is in addition to our more routine agenda items related to specific development proposals, public building location, street extensions, routine zoning map amendments, etc.

Documents that contain information about the city vision include the Comprehensive Plan, our zoning code and other city plans. The Plan Commission was intimately involved in the creation of the Comprehensive Plan, the Downtown Plan, and the Zoning Code. That said, the Plan Commission continues to have “big picture” responsibilities beyond the development of these guiding documents and can and should do its part to help achieve the city’s vision.

Another way the Plan Commission (PC) can contribute to doing the best work for the city is to identify stumbling blocks in accomplishing the work of the Commission and to implement improvements to minimize these challenges. The “Plan Commission Handbook” (<https://www.uwsp.edu/cnr-ap/clue/Pages/publications-resources/PlanCommissions.aspx>) effectively calls out a part of this:

“Permit conditions that are routinely imposed for similar projects should be adopted by ordinance as minimum standards for approval. Incorporating standards in the ordinance allows permit applicants to anticipate and plan for design, location, and construction requirements.”

Challenges

We do have challenges in working towards these goals and objectives. An excerpt from the document “Just What is the Job of a Planning Commissioner” (attached...I urge that you read the complete document) helps zero in on this challenge:

“...one of the biggest challenges facing commissions is keeping their eye on the “big picture”... There are indeed, so many items on the agenda that board members sometimes wonder what happened to the Big Picture. The Big Picture is, indeed, a vital part of a planning board’s responsibilities. ... The question is often posed, however: how do we deal with the Big Picture when there are so many little pictures we’re lucky to get home in time for the 11 p.m. news? One thing is certain: the board has to make it happen.”

I have talked with many of you about how we can go about working on these “Big Picture” responsibilities. I have talked with city planning staff and touched base with the mayor about how the Plan Commission can take on this challenge. I appreciate the input I have received.

Way Forward

Vice Chair Cantrell and I met with Heather Stouder, Kevin Firchow, Nan Fey, and Deputy Mayor Christie Baumel about the best path forward. As a result of this meeting we propose the following:

- 1) Hold quarterly meetings focused on “Big Picture” topics. Tentative dates: 2/20, 6/18, September and December dates TBD.
- 2) Focus on the following topics:
 - a) Needed Zoning Ordinance Changes related to Comprehensive Plan Elements with particular emphasis on:
 - i) Land Use & Transportation (Primary focus on Transit-Oriented Development (TOD), Transportation Demand Management (TDM))
 - ii) Neighborhoods & Housing (Primary focus on increasing housing generally, on housing affordability and on “Missing Middle” housing types)
 - iii) Green & Resilient (Primary focus on stormwater management and urban tree canopy)
 - b) Stumbling blocks for accomplishing work of the PC such as:
 - i) Items routinely added as conditions which could be more readily handled if they were specified in zoning text or in ordinances (e.g. dog waste stations for certain size apartment buildings)
 - ii) Items which have been identified as important but which are not currently called out in ordinances and so result in an inability to accomplish desired outcomes or result in additional time to approve proposed developments which could be avoided with a clearly articulated ordinance (e.g. bird resistant glass for a certain area of glass surface)
 - iii) Issues in current zoning text language that make the ordinance difficult to understand, does not accomplish intent, etc.
 - c) Other miscellaneous sticky issues such as:
 - i) Other important Comprehensive Plan elements which are under PC purview which are not covered under items listed in 2) a) above. For example under Culture and Character: Strategy 2, Action d. “Update the zoning code and height maps to better link the code with the City’s historic preservation plan and ordinance.”
 - ii) Plan retirement protocol.
 - iii) Selected Plans which are in progress which have challenging issues

Collaboration and Communication

Because many issues the PC will cover have overlap with the interests and duties of other committees/commissions, we will notify those committees of topics which will be covered by the PC that may be of interest to them. Heather Stouder will also work with appropriate staff people to extract from plans things which should be covered in association with some of our special meetings. For example the Urban Forestry Task Force Report has recommendations which would fall under our Green & Resilient topic. Heather will also reach out and be in regular communication with, for example, our Engineering Department about flood prevention goals, with our Director of Transportation about TOD and TDM, etc. and will invite staff, as appropriate, to the special PC meetings.

Structure of Special Meetings

We anticipate the special meetings will be 3 hours from 5:00-8:00 pm, structured (in general) as follows:

- a) 30 minutes for something like a plan that is complex
- b) 2 hours on a major topic
- c) 30 minutes on a zoning code fix

Please let Heather or me know if you have questions about or recommendations related to this initiative.

Thank you for all the work you do as Plan Commissioners. Your work is important to the success of our city.