

Planning Commission 101

FOUNDATIONS OF LOCAL PLANNING

Prepared by Southeast Tennessee Development

PC Training 2025



What is planning?

► According to the American Planning Association:

The goal of planning is **to maximize the health, safety, and economic well-being for all residents**. This involves thinking about how we can move around our community, the businesses and attractions in our community, where we want to live, and opportunities for recreation. **Most of all, planning helps create communities of lasting value.**

While architects often focus on a single building, a planner's job is to work with residents and elected officials to guide the layout of an entire community or region. **Planners take a broad viewpoint and look at how the pieces of a community – buildings, roads, and parks – fit together like pieces of a puzzle.** Planners then make recommendations on how the community should proceed. One of the greatest challenges for planners is to imagine what can and should happen to a community: how it should grow and change, and what it should offer residents 10, 15, or even 20 years into the future.

<https://www.planning.org/aboutplanning/>



American Planning Association

Making Great Communities Happen

What is a planning commission?

▶ Commission Size

- ▶ **Municipal:** 5-10 members
- ▶ **Regional:** 5-15 members
Both are set by the legislative body.

▶ Municipal Membership

- ▶ Mayor or Mayor's Designee
- ▶ One Governing Body Member (Alderman/Councilmember)
- ▶ Remaining Members Appointed by the Mayor

▶ Regional Membership

- ▶ Members Appointed by the County Mayor
- ▶ Membership confirmation by legislative body is recommended, if not required.
- ▶ Majority of Members Must Hold **No (Public) Salaried Public Office** (TCA 13-3-101(c))



Organization of Planning Commission

- ▶ **Officers:** Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary (1-Year Terms/No Limits)
- ▶ Adopt by-laws to determine meeting rules, schedule, order of business, attendance requirements, and election process for officers.
- ▶ Planning commission by-laws may be adopted and amended by the PC without review or approval of the legislative body

Role of SETD Planning Staff

- ▶ Planners provide **professional guidance** and assistance to the planning commission and local officials.
- ▶ **Complete technical reviews of site plans and subdivision plats**, and present these to the planning commission.
- ▶ Available to assist with **planning documents and regulations, mapping, annexations, special projects and studies**, PC meeting logistics, and more.
- ▶ **Update regulations** to remain in compliance with applicable state/federal laws and court decisions.
- ▶ **We are not enforcement officers, building inspectors, or zoning administrators.**
- ▶ SETD planners serve in an advisory capacity only. We do not have a vote on the planning commission. **The board may accept or reject our recommendations.** Commissioners should make decisions they feel are in the best interest of their community.

Role of the Planning Commission

- ▶ Develop and adopt **subdivision regulations**.
- ▶ Develop and recommend **zoning and planning policies** to the legislative body.
- ▶ **Review projects** to determine if they meet zoning and other requirements.
- ▶ Review and approve **site plans**.
- ▶ Review and approve **subdivision plats**.

Role of the Legislative Body

- ▶ Consider and act on items that come from the PC in a timely manner.
- ▶ **Conduct public hearings** on zoning ordinance as well as any amendments.
- ▶ Carefully review recommendations and proposals that come from the planning commission.
- ▶ The mayor or alderman who serves on the PC may give a report or update on planning commission business at the city commission meetings.
- ▶ Set the standards for public and private roads.

Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA)

- ▶ TCA 13-7-205 through 208
- ▶ Established by the Zoning Ordinance
- ▶ The PC and BZA are separate boards
- ▶ Different powers and roles
 - ▶ BZA membership is set by the zoning ordinance: members may be the same as the PC, or completely different.
 - ▶ Separate meetings, minutes, officers, agendas
 - ▶ BZA meetings typically require special public notice, as they are held only when there is business to address. They are often scheduled to coincide with Planning Commission meeting dates.

Powers of the BZA

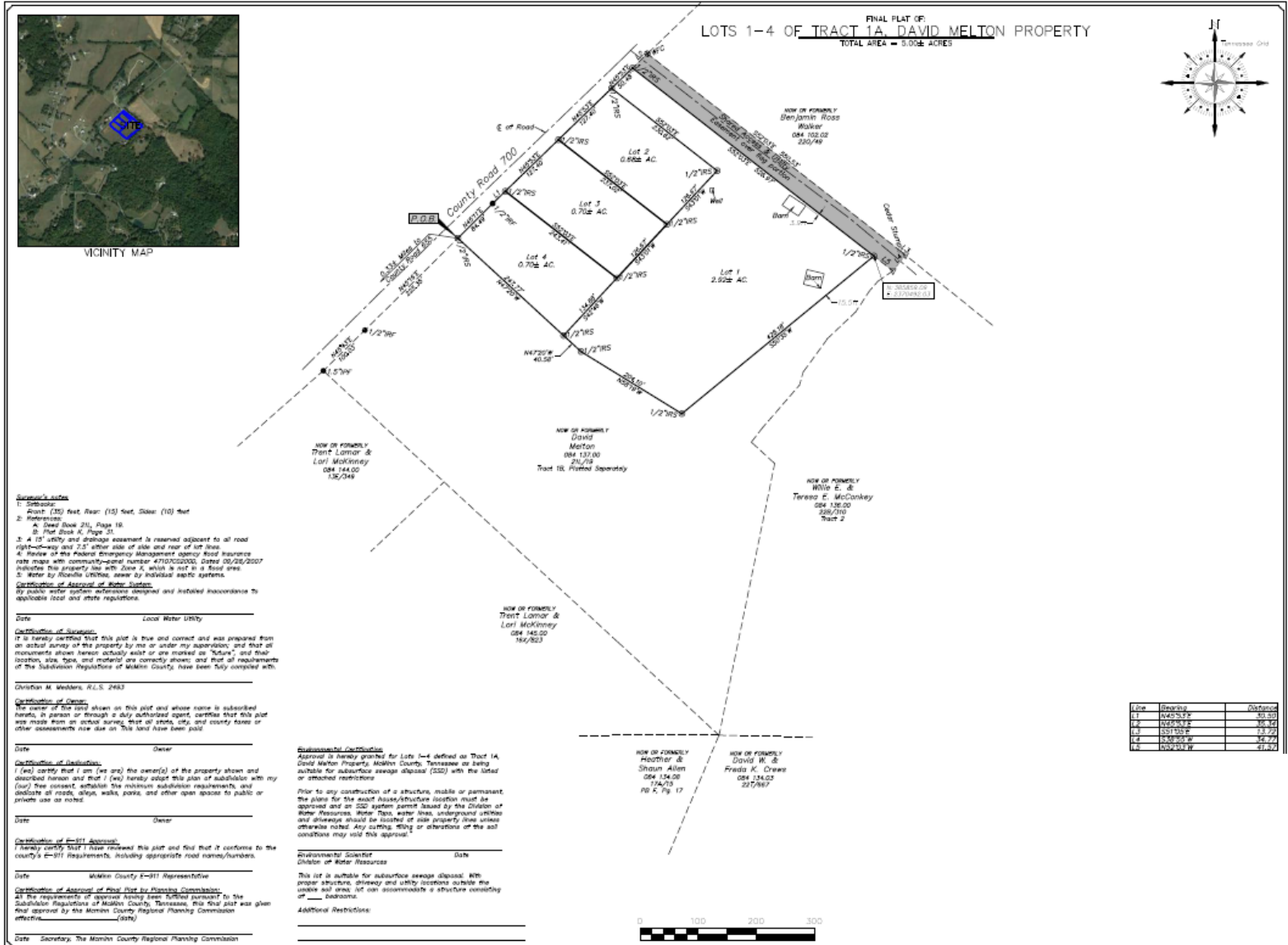
- ▶ **Hear and decide administrative appeals**
 - ▶ The BZA takes appeals from decisions or actions of administrative officials (e.g., a zoning administrator or building official) that the appellant believes are in error.
- ▶ **Grant variances from the zoning regulations**
 - ▶ When strict application of the zoning ordinance would cause “exceptional and undue hardship” to a property owner (due to unique conditions of the land), the BZA may authorize a variance that relaxes certain zoning requirements, so long as the relief won’t impair the intent of the zoning plan.
- ▶ **Interpret the zoning ordinance and maps, and grant special exceptions**
 - ▶ The BZA may interpret ambiguous provisions of the zoning ordinance (or zoning map), hear requests for special exceptions (if the local ordinance provides for them), and settle questions such as boundary-line or district-line disputes.

Typical Steps for Developers

- ▶ Identify the current zoning for their property.
- ▶ Confirm that their proposed development is permitted under the zoning ordinance.
- ▶ Subdivide their property to create lots
- ▶ Prepare and submit a site plan, if required - this may require working with an engineer.
- ▶ Once the site plan is approved by the PC, apply for a building permit.
- ▶ Construct their development in accordance with the approved site plan.
- ▶ Once complete, obtain a certificate of occupancy.



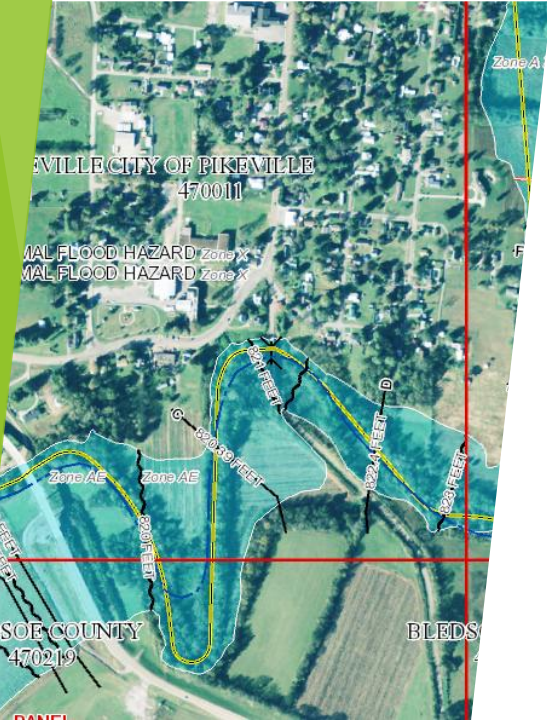
Sample Subdivision Plat





National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP)

- ▶ The NFIP identifies areas of known flood risk in a community.
 - ▶ 1.0% Annual Risk (“100-year”)
 - ▶ 0.2% Annual Risk (“500-year”)
 - ▶ General floodplain, no floodway
 - ▶ Floodways, where water is moving (higher risk)
- ▶ FEMA publishes flood maps, which are then adopted through a vote by the city commission.
- ▶ City also adopts a flood damage prevention ordinance.
- ▶ Site plans and subdivision plats will indicate if a property is inside or outside of the flood zone. If inside, the planning commission must ensure the development follows the city’s floodplain requirements.



Shifting Gears: Planning Exercise

- ▶ Each table will be their own Planning Commission
- ▶ Designate who will be the Chairman/Spokesperson
- ▶ Review the scenario for your table
- ▶ Discuss what the review process would look like in your community
- ▶ We'll give ~15 minutes to discuss with your group.
- ▶ Be prepared to discuss the scenario with the larger group and explain your reasoning.

Planning Commissioner

▶ Scenario 1

- ▶ A rural gas station wants to expand to accommodate a fast-food tenant, raising concerns about traffic, lighting, and site circulation. The commission is asked to review potential impacts and regulatory considerations.

▶ Scenario 2

- ▶ A 15-acre parcel is proposed to be split into three lots using a narrow shared drive on a State Highway. The commission must determine whether this qualifies as a subdivision under Tennessee law and evaluate access and safety issues.

▶ Scenario 3

- ▶ A lakefront homeowner is operating a short-term rental in a community with no specific regulations for this use. The commission must interpret existing zoning and consider neighborhood concerns and future policy needs.

▶ Scenario 4

- ▶ A developer proposes 150 homes on 115 acres of farmland near an overburdened school and limited infrastructure. The commission must assess feasibility, density, utilities, and roadway impacts during early concept review.

Questions?

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