

# Current Public Engagement Tools

Increasing Level of Public Participation



PURPOSE <sup>1</sup>	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
	<i>To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.</i>	<i>To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.</i>	<i>To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.</i>	<i>To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.</i>	<i>To place final decision making in the hands of the public.</i>
<b>CITY TOOLS BY PROCESS</b>					
<b>General Information and Long Range Planning</b>	Master Plan* Zoning Ordinance / Maps* Development Dashboard Presentations Web Portal / Website Resources	Community / Public Meetings Surveys	City Master Plan* Area Specific Plans Focus Groups / Steering Committees Community/ Public Meetings	Area Specific Plans	
<b>Rezoning, Use Approvals, Variances, etc.</b>	Master Plan* Newspaper Publication* Post Card Notice* Public Hearing* Zoning Ordinance / Maps* Notice of Filing Pre-Hearing Conference Pre-Planning Design Team Meeting Web Portal / Website Resources	Public Hearing* Neighborhood Meeting Pre-Hearing Conference Written Correspondence	Neighborhood Meetings	Design Charrettes	
<b>Development Incentives</b>		Public Hearing* Neighborhood Meeting Written Correspondence	Improvement Districts Neighborhood Meetings		
<b>City Construction Projects (e.g. Road Improvements, Park Improvements)</b>	E-Mail Updates Events Post Card Notice / Mailers Social & Traditional Media Street / Project Location Signs Web Portal / Website Resources	Community / Public Meetings Neighborhood Meetings Surveys	Focus Groups		
<b>By-Right Development</b>	Building Permit* Zoning Ordinance / Maps* BuildingEye Pre-Planning Design Team Meeting	Neighborhood Meetings			

\* - Denotes Items Required by Statute or Ordinance

<sup>1</sup> Based on the International Association for Public Participation IAP2's Public Participation Spectrum

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The Planning Department conducts a variety of functions that include some level of public engagement. The type and level of engagement varies substantially based on the nature of the request and type of approval required. For example, by-right development generally has the lowest level of engagement, as these are the uses or scale of development that have collectively been identified as permitted uses for the district in which they are located. There is little discretion in approval behind compliance or non-compliance with the applicable Zoning Ordinance or Building Code standards. For these types of approvals, no specific notice or hearing occurs. However, tools are available to help the public locate information regarding these applications. In certain circumstances, staff may recommend coordination with the neighborhood or other stakeholders even though it is not required.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are processes such as the Master Plan and Area Specific Plan amendments. These requests are often neighborhood-led and include substantial public engagement and interaction over a period of months in developing the plan and multiple rounds of public hearings prior to adoption. These processes contain elements that are the best example of collaborative planning, where the public is critical in identifying both issues and the solutions brought forward within the Plan. The City Commission generally adopts these recommendations unless there is substantial conflict with existing regulation or policy or larger citywide implications.

Some forms of notice are directly influenced by statutory requirements. Michigan Statutes, specifically the Zoning Enabling Acts and Planning Enabling Acts, provide laws which cities must follow in their exercise of Planning and Zoning powers. These acts establish minimum standards which must be followed in terms of duties and function of the Planning Commission, public hearings and notice of such hearings. An example would be the required notice mailed for a Special Land Use, with minimum timeframes prior to hearing and the minimum notice distance included within the statute. The procedures established by the City of Grand Rapids's Zoning Ordinance meet or exceed these statutory requirements. (Reference: Michigan Planning Enabling Act 33 of 2008; Michigan Zoning Enabling Act 110 of 2006)

**Area Specific Plan Process** – Area Specific Plans were identified in the 2002 Master Plan as a tool to manage land use change and take a more detailed approach to ensure that appropriate consideration is given to character, design, and detailed issues. Area Specific Planning provides the opportunity to more closely examine a particular geographic area of the city and tailor appropriate recommendations that best suit the needs of area residents, businesses, and property owners. An Area Specific Plan can be initiated by the Planning Commission, property owners, developers, community-based organizations and/or the Planning Department. The planning process generally takes place over several months (or longer) and includes a variety of active public participation and stakeholder involvement methods. The Area Specific Plan adoption process includes preliminary public hearings, a review and comment period, and final adoption hearings. The Area Specific Plan, when adopted, becomes an amendment to the City Master Plan. The Area Specific Plan process is guided by the Michigan Planning Enabling Act. (*Reference: City of Grand Rapids 2002 Master Plan; Michigan Planning Enabling Act 33 of 2008*)

**Building Permit** – The Building Permit process is comprised of two components, the Land Use Development Services (LUDS) Plan Review and the Building Permit Application. A LUDS permit is required prior to any site work (e.g., excavating, grading, paving, landscaping). A LUDS permit may

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include up to four components: Soil Erosion & Sedimentation Control, Stormwater Drainage, Development Compliance, and Temporary Occupancy of the Public Right-of-Way. A Building Permit is required prior to any building-related construction activity, such as footings, foundation, or framing. The City of Grand Rapids has an online Building Permit system. In addition to permit application, the system allows citizens to search the permit database by site address, permit number, or other qualifiers. This allows interested parties to obtain information regarding permits independently, with City Staff available to answer further inquiries. *(Reference: <http://grcity.us/design-and-development-services/Development-Center/Pages/default.aspx>)*

**Building Eye** – Building Eye provides citizens an interactive mapping tool to illustrate both Planning and Building projects within the City. The map is searchable by address or through zoom tools. Each data entry includes address, application information, application date and status. *(Reference: <http://grcity.us/design-and-development-services/Development-Center/Pages/default.aspx>)*

**City Master Plan** – The 2002 Master Plan is a policy document that establishes the vision of the City and serves as a guide for the City’s future. This is an infrequent process, as it is intended to create a long-range guiding policy. Development of the City’s Master Plan included a broad and comprehensive public engagement process. It is not directly regulatory but serves as the foundation of regulatory documents such as the Zoning Ordinance. The term “Master Plan” includes any unit or part of the plan and any amendments to the plan such as individual Area Specific Plans. The based City Master Plan was adopted in 2002, but Area Specific Plans have provided updates as recently as 2017. The City Master Plan process is guided by the Michigan Planning Enabling Act. *(Reference: City of Grand Rapids 2002 Master Plan; Michigan Planning Enabling Act 33 of 2008)*

**Community / Public Meetings** –Community / Public Meetings are generally topic-driven events versus development project-driven. Community Meetings may occasionally be a stand-alone event, but are generally used as part of a comprehensive planning and engagement process, for example as a part of the Area Specific Plan process. The target may also vary, from location specific events (such as neighborhood or regional) to topics of citywide interest. These meetings can range from sessions that are more informative to full participatory events depending on the structure and activities involved. For example, meetings may include visioning exercises, break-out discussions, preference surveys, and other ways in which participants can both learn and provide feedback and direction.

**Design Charrettes** – Design Charrettes are a voluntary component of the development process. A design charrette is an intense public involvement and design process intended to take community vision and input and create a preliminary development plan or series of guidelines from that vision. They can be an extremely useful tool for public engagement, particularly for large-scale projects or other high-impact developments. They are included as a recommended tool of the Area Specific Plan process under the 2002 City Master Plan. A good source of general information regarding Charrettes is the National Charrette Institute ([www.charretteinstitute.org](http://www.charretteinstitute.org)). An example of a charrette incorporated into the local planning process is the one held May 11, 2013 as a part of the Michigan Street Corridor Plan. *(<https://www.google.com/url?q=http://grcity.us/design-and-development-services/Economic-Development/Documents>)*

**Development Dashboard** – The City’s Development Dashboard provides an overall summary, by year, of construction projects that have been issued including number of housing units and value of construction

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cost. This information can be further refined by neighborhood. (*Reference: <http://grcity.us/design-and-development-services/Development-Center/Pages/default.aspx>*)

**E-Mail Updates** – E-mail updates are used to inform people and organizations that have subscribed to specific topic-driven mailing lists, for example road construction updates.

**Events** – City staff may participate in certain community events where they can share useful information with the general public. For example, Development Center staff may staff a booth at a local home show to answer questions about the type of work requiring a permit and process involved.

**Focus Groups / Steering Committees** – Focus Groups and Steering Committees are collective meetings of stakeholders generally utilized as a part of the Area Specific Plan Process, although they can be formed for other specific planning tasks. Participants may include residents, business owners, property owners, workers, institutions, elected officials, city officials, neighborhood and business associations, non-profit organizations, and other groups or individuals who are interested in the area or topic of consideration. These participants should remain engaged throughout the planning process to ensure ownership of what is proposed in the plan recommendations, to assist with implementation, and ultimately, to realize the goals of the planning effort.

**Improvement Districts** – The City of Grand Rapids Economic Development Department supports a variety of programs to retain and foster employment opportunities by improving our business environment and encouraging sustainable business development. Specifically, their Corridor Improvement Districts and Business Improvement Districts provide opportunity for public participation from formation of the district through participation on the governing boards. Although governed by their own rules and statutes, they follow many of the same steps of public engagement as any concurrent planning processes such as an Area Specific Plan. (*Reference: <http://grcity.us/design-and-development-services/Economic-Development/Pages/Default.aspx>*)

**Neighborhood Meeting** – The purpose of a neighborhood meeting is for an applicant or developer to educate occupants and owners of nearby properties about the proposed development application, receive comments, and address concerns about the development proposal; and resolve conflicts and outstanding issues, where possible. The meeting is intended to result in a project that is responsive to neighborhood concerns and to expedite and lessen the expense of the review process by avoiding needless delays, appeals, remands or denials. A neighborhood meeting is strongly recommended for any project that may have an impact on neighboring properties such as a Special Land Use, Variance or Zone Change request and where a public hearing is required. They are not utilized for by-right development, except under special circumstances. A formal neighborhood meeting is not expected for small, individual requests (e.g. a variance for a porch), however neighbor-to-neighbor discussion is encouraged. Notices are not required to follow the notification area and timeframe as other Post Card Notices (see below), however the same standard is encouraged. City staff may or may not attend the meeting. The applicant prepares summary minutes of the meeting and submits them to the City as a part of the application materials. If substantial changes are made because of the Neighborhood Meeting or if changes occur after the meeting, a second follow-up meeting is advised. (*Reference Zoning Code Section 5.12.04*)

**Newspaper Publication** – Development applications subject to public hearing are advertised by a public notice in a newspaper of general circulation serving the City. The notice must be made at least 15 days prior to the date of the public hearing. The notice must include a description of the request, the location

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of the request by street address (if available, or other means if not), and state when and where the request shall be considered. It must also indicate when and where written comments can be addressed regarding the request. *(Reference: Michigan Zoning Enabling Act 110 of 2006; Zoning Code Section 5.12.06)*

**Notice of Filing** – The Notice of Filing notification system is a component of BuildingEye, the mapping tool for building and planning projects. In order to receive notices, the user must create an account and elect to receive notifications. The system provides blanket information within the target area, which may result a large number of notices for relatively insignificant applications. *(Reference: <http://grcity.us/design-and-development-services/Development-Center/Pages/default.aspx>)*

**Post Card Notice** – Notices regarding development applications subject to public hearing are mailed property owners within 300 feet of property prior to the date of the public hearing. Staff uses a 350-foot radius in every day application, exceeding the minimum standard. The notice must be mailed at least 15 days prior to the date of the public hearing. The notice must include a description of the request, the location of the request by street address (if available, or other means if not), and state when and where the request shall be considered. It must also indicate when and where written comments can be addressed regarding the request. Notification applies only to the initial hearing regarding the proposed development, unless expressly requested by the reviewing Board or Planning Director. *(Reference: Michigan Zoning Enabling Act 110 of 2006; Zoning Code Section 5.12.06)*

**Pre-Hearing Conference** – A pre-hearing conference with the Planning Commission is available for persons or companies who have proposed or pending applications that will require public hearing and that may have a complex or potentially controversial aspects of the project. The meeting allows the applicant to receive early feedback by Planning Commission members. The meeting is a non-binding and informal review of the proposal, is intended to provide information to the applicant on the procedures and policies of the City, and does not give the applicant any development approvals or other rights. These meetings are open to the public, although public testimony is not generally taken on the specific item at this meeting. *(Reference Section 5.12.05)*

**Pre-Planning Design Team Meeting** – An applicant may request a pre-planning meeting with the Design Team (comprised of City Staff from the various review departments). The Design Team is intended to provide site-related staff feedback for conceptual or design-stage development proposals. The meeting is optional, scheduled at the request of the developer or design professional. Design Team agendas are made available, although the meetings are not open to the general public. This is often the time when staff will recommend engagement with the community on any concerns.

**Presentations** – City staff receives regular requests to present topics to various groups. Examples include monthly Lunch and Learn Meetings hosted by the Development Center, presentations on the development process to neighborhood groups, speaking to students at local colleges and universities, and similar sessions. All are intended to inform the public and help them identify the necessary resources to meet their needs.

**Public Hearing** – Public Hearings are the formal process under which a recommendation or final decision is made regarding the development application, incentive, or other proposal. Public hearings can take place in front of the Board of Zoning Appeals, Planning Commission, or City Commission, with the decision-making capacity of each determined by state Enabling Legislation as well as adopted

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procedures and standards under the Zoning Ordinance. Public testimony can be provided at the public hearing for the body to consider in their decision-making. Notice of the public hearing is provided to property owners within 350 feet (see Post Card Notice, above) and is advertised in the newspaper (see Newspaper Publication, above).

**Social & Traditional Media** – The City of Grand Rapids maintains social media pages such as Facebook and Twitter to communicate general information and topics of interest related to the City. Traditional media contact generally occurs through the City’s Public Information Officer. Both formats are generally communicative only and not utilized as tools for collecting public input. They can however be used to promote upcoming engagement events.

**Street / Project Location Signs** – These signs are most commonly used for road construction projects to warn of upcoming work. The City does not currently require posting of properties that are the subject of development application and public hearing, although this tool is sometimes used in other jurisdictions.

**Surveys** – Surveys are occasionally used to gather topic-specific input, generally as part of a larger planning project. An example would be use of a visual preference survey related to design elements of a park or streetscape plan.

**Web Portal / Website Resources** - The City’s website is currently under re-design, with the intent to make much of the useful information contained on the site today easier to locate and utilize. Additional content is also under regular development. The Web Portal is a specific tool on the Planning Department’s page that provides access to all public hearing agendas and backup materials for Board of Zoning Appeals, Historic Preservation, and Planning Commission. *(Reference: <http://grcity.us/design-and-development-services/Planning-Department/Pages/default.aspx>)*

**Written Correspondence** – Written correspondence, including e-mails, are encouraged related to projects. These can be generally directed to the department ([planning@grcity.us](mailto:planning@grcity.us)) or may be addressed to the specific staff person when known. This contact information is identified on post card notices sent for the public hearing. Any written correspondence received by a specified date prior to the public hearing is included as a part of the public record for consideration.

**Zoning Ordinance / Maps** – The Zoning Ordinance and Maps set the specific regulations and govern the use and development of properties within the City. The Zoning Map includes both base zone districts as well as applicable overlay districts. The Zoning Code provides standards specific to each of these districts, such as allowable uses, building heights, setbacks, etc. Different uses may be allowed, allowed with a specific approval such as a Special Land Use, or may not be permitted. In addition to the district standards, there are general standards that also apply such as use regulations, parking requirements, landscape standards, and others. The Zoning Ordinance also establishes the function and procedures for the Planning Commission and Board of Zoning appeals. The Zoning Ordinance, Zoning Maps, and guidance on using these documents can be found on the Planning Department website. *(Reference: <http://grcity.us/design-and-development-services/Planning-Department/Pages/Zoning-Ordinance-Text-and-Maps.aspx>)*