

CITIZEN ADVOCACY AROUND ZONING ISSUES

Have you wanted to express your opinion on something happening in your neighborhood but didn't really know how to go about it? Grand Rapids' new Zoning Ordinance provides opportunities for you to impact development projects and zoning changes proposed for your neighborhood. Here are some examples:

Neighborhood Meeting. Developers of significant projects are encouraged to organize a meeting with residents and other affected parties to inform them about the project, answer concerns, and discuss any potential problems. The intent of the neighborhood meeting is to provide a forum so that the developer and affected parties can understand each others' perspective and try to resolve any possible conflict. Neighbors should always attend these meetings. Usually the neighborhood and/or business association will assist the developer in organizing the meeting. Neighbors should use this meeting to make sure the development will be an asset to the area and to negotiate with the developer for improvements.

Public Hearing. A public hearing may be held by the Planning Commission, the City Commission, or the Board of Zoning Appeals when a project will have a significant impact on an area, require a special land use, or deviate from the Zoning Ordinance requirements. Affected citizens should make their voices heard at the hearing through written or oral testimony. Neighbors who have organized to present a unified position are much more effective in affecting desired changes to a project than a few individual voices. Your neighborhood association should help in organizing this effort and provide tips on how best to present your case. Testimony must focus on specific criteria regarding the zoning issue and not just emotional reactions.

Report Violations. Good enforcement of the Zoning Ordinance is dependent upon citizen vigilance in reporting possible violations. This is done by calling Housing Inspection at 456-3053. You do not have to leave your name when filing a complaint if you do not want that as part of the public record. However, you should call back in a couple of weeks and ask for the inspector handling the complaint. Many times you can provide crucial information regarding the situation that will help the inspector. The inspector does not have to include your name in the file at this point.

Access Information/Review File. As a citizen, you can obtain all kinds of information regarding zoning cases. First, you can receive every Planning Commission agenda and every Board of Zoning Appeal agenda via e-mail by contacting the Planning Department at 456-3159 or e-mailing them at planning@grcity.us. Second, all of the information a developer has presented to the City on a project as well as all of the materials submitted by an owner seeking a zoning variance can be inspected at the Planning Department at 1120 Monroe N.W., second floor. The history of a specific house can be viewed at Housing Inspection, also at 1120 Monroe N.W. Minutes from the Planning Commission and Board of Zoning Appeal meetings can be accessed at the Planning Department's web site: www.grcity.us/planning.

In summary, there are several kinds of meetings where citizens can impact zoning decisions affecting their neighborhoods, but YOU must attend. There are many ways to obtain lots of information about zoning issues, but YOU must access them. The important point to remember is that YOU must take the initiative if the Zoning Ordinance is to be utilized to protect and preserve the quality and character of YOUR neighborhood.