

Procedure Manuals

Procedure manuals, as used in this paper are tools created by communities to help staff, commission members, property owners and the general public understand the procedures used in implementing the local zoning ordinance (or other ordinances for that matter).

Zoning ordinances can be complicated documents. It can be difficult to understand for members of the public who wish to rezone their property, or to understand what their neighbor's variance request means to them. It can be difficult for members of Planning Commissions, ZBA's and City/Village Councils or Township/County Boards to understand as well. Procedure manuals can help to clarify the ordinance requirements, promote consistency in decision making and promote documentation of proper procedures.

Every community is different, their needs and capabilities are also different. Procedural manuals should be crafted to meet their unique requirements.

What Is the Purpose of Procedural Manuals?

Procedure manuals can be helpful in clarifying the zoning ordinance.

- Flow charts or tables can clarify the relationship of one approval and another (Do you need to get variance approval before you submit your site plan or after?)
- Illustrations, photos and examples can be used to clarify the meaning of requirements.
- Flow charts or tables can clarify time frames and steps in the approval process.
- Checklists and sample drawings can clarify the information required for applications.
- Checklists and drawings can clarify standards for approval.

Consistency is a necessary ingredient in any ordinance enforcement. Consistency both in the information people get when they have questions, and in the decision that are made on zoning requests or enforcement matters. This can be a challenge when staff and commission members change, ordinance language changes, and community values and goals change. Checklists and example can help to ensure that requirements are not missed and standards are applied uniformly.

Procedure manuals can help to document compliance with informational and procedural requirements and compliance with standards through the use of checklists, illustrations and flowcharts.

What Types of Zoning Approvals Do Procedural Manuals Cover?

The content and scope of a community's procedural manual is dependent on the audience.

- Is it primarily an instruction manual for the zoning administrator? If so, it may concentrate on administrative procedures and policies such as addressing Freedom of Information requests or the steps in enforcement of ordinance violations.
- Is it primarily intended as a primer for the Planning Commission or ZBA members? In this case there maybe emphasis on meeting procedures, standards for approval and steps in the approval process.

- Is it primarily intended for property owners interested in getting a zoning approval or challenging their neighbor's request for approval? Development of a simplified flow chart, checklists or brochures maybe helpful.
- Is it primarily intended for developers, realtors, engineers or similar professionals? Information that clarifies the process and how to get in contact with other people or organizations involved in the review process may be a helpful area of emphasis.

Procedural manuals can cover whatever range of approvals or procedures appropriate for the community. They might include the full range of zoning approvals such as zoning permits, site plans, rezoning requests, special land use requests, variances and appeals or a subset that the community deals with the most. They might include specific types of improvements such as signs, fences or parking lots that come up frequently or approvals related to other ordinances such as building permits, land divisions or lot splits.

What Types of Zoning Issues Do Procedural Manuals Cover?

The items covered for each approval will vary based on the purpose of the manual as discussed previously, but can include:

- An easy to understand explanation of when the approval is required.
- A checklist of information required.
- A sample application form.
- A sample of any required plat or site plan drawings.
- A flow chart or matrix.
- A checklist of approval standards.
- Sample notices
- Key information

What Are Some of the Design Issues Related to Procedural Manuals?

As stressed before, the first decision in outlining the content of a Procedural Manual is to consider who will use it. If it will be used by many different types of people (staff, citizens, developers, etc.) make sure to address each group's specific needs. Other design issues to consider include:

- Color coding - Color coding can make it easier to find particular sections, but may increase problems if you want to make copies.
- Paper size – Some sample drawings or large flow charts may require 8½ x 14 or 11x17 paper size. Keeping these to a minimum can also simplify making copies.
- Binding – Because many elements of a procedural manual are likely to change over time, placing it in a 3-ring binder provides flexibility for changes down the line.
- Incorporating an Introduction – An introduction to the manual explaining how to use it can be useful. It is also a good place to include a disclaimer that the manual is **not** the zoning ordinance and if an inconsistency arises, the zoning ordinance regulations always supersede the manual.

This last point raises a question. Why not just incorporate all this into the zoning ordinance? Communities have been working on making zoning ordinances easier to understand for many years. Ordinances have incorporated illustrations and tables for a long time. Many ordinances include a preface, “How to use this ordinance” that includes explanations of the interrelationships between site plans, rezoning, special land uses and variances and recently flow charts. Making a zoning ordinance easier to read and understand is very important, but some communities choose to limit these items either because they or their attorney don’t feel they are appropriate in an ordinance or they are concerned about conflicts if the text of the ordinance says one thing and the illustration show another. Also, there are elements that some communities incorporate into their procedural manuals that would be out of place in a zoning ordinance such as application forms or sample notices. Procedural manuals should be seen as a supplement to a clear, understandable zoning ordinance, not a substitute for one.

The final comment on procedural manuals is that many communities have the ingredients for such a document, they are simply pages on the community’s website. For those communities less digitally inclined, keep in mind the potential future incorporation of the elements of your procedural manual on to your municipal website.