



# Introduction

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## • Sponsored by The North Carolina Chapter - American Planning Association

These materials are the result of an effort by volunteer members of the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association (NCAPA) to establish a formal training program for planning commissioners and planning board members, as well as other citizen planners (elected officials, Board of Adjustment members, etc.) across the state. This resource is designed to provide concise information on the problems and issues citizen planners encounter in their communities.

This program is an outline. There are volumes of more specific and detailed information available on each subject touched on here. To seek out further information on any subject, consult the bibliography / source materials section at the back of each module, or ask your trainer or professional staff for help.

## • Format of these materials

After survey research and discussion with planning board members and professional staff around the state, the Citizen Education Committee designed this resource to be:

- Modular, so that communities could "mix and match" different modules to meet their individual training needs.
- Concise, and organized in short paragraphs, many headings and bullet lists.
- Organized with a "core" curriculum (the first five modules) and "electives" (the remaining modules in the program).
- Available with support materials for trainers.

Each module is edited to an extended outline form, is approximately 25 pages in length and includes several sample situations for discussion. A **trainer's resource** is available that includes information on training techniques and specific learning goals for each module.

## • Supplementary materials

The use of the binder to keep other materials (a local set of by-laws, newspaper articles, an adopted work program, an annual report) is encouraged. This resource should be the basic reference for planning board members. Use it the way it works best for you, and let us know if we can do it better.

We count on you to help us know what works and what doesn't. Please contact NCAPA through your professional staff to give us feedback on this resource material. Regular updates are anticipated, and your input is important to help us improve the materials.

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## A glossary of common planning terms:

NOTE: SOME OF THESE TERMS MAY BE SPECIFICALLY DEFINED IN YOUR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS. YOU MAY WISH TO LOOK OVER YOUR LOCAL ORDINANCES, SINCE THE USE OF THESE TERMS IN LOCAL REGULATIONS MAY VARY IN SUBTLE WAYS FROM THE DEFINITIONS NOTED HERE.

**Administrative Function** - A technical review procedure wherein a development plan is measured against a clearly defined set of technical standards, and a factual determination, generally by a professional staff, is made whether or not the plan meets the standards.

**Berm** - a raised or elongated mound of earth intended screen or buffer an area from its surroundings or direct the flow of water.

**Buffer** - a term often applied to landscaped areas separating incompatible land uses. Can also mean an area of a "transitional" land use that lies between two incompatible land uses.

**Cartway** - The traveled portion of a street or road, often the same as the paved area of the street or road.

**Cluster Development** - a type of residential development that allows reduced minimum lot size in exchange for the preservation of open space in commonly-owned tracts, maintaining the same density that would otherwise be allowed by the zoning district if the property were completely subdivided into lots without common open space. It is normally used to maximize development potential and protect sensitive drainage areas or open space.

**Comprehensive Planning** - a process of evaluation of available resources and future needs, establishment of goals and visions, organization of tools to achieve the goals and connection of the goals with actions to be taken in the future by a community. The term "comprehensive" implies a global view, taking into account an issue from a variety of perspectives.

**Conditional Use** - A land use that is allowed by the zoning regulations as long as a set of defined conditions are met. For example, an accessory apartment may be allowed in a zoning district that allows only single-family detached homes, as long as the apartment is no more than 25% of the size of the main unit, is attached to the main unit, and the main unit is occupied by the owner of the home. As used in most areas is synonymous with special use.

**Condominium** - A form of property ownership whereby separate parts of a single building may be owned individually by separate owners, and the underlying property is owned in common by all the separate owners together. Condominiums may be residential, office, retail or industrial.

**Cross section** - A section formed by a plane cutting through an object, usually at right angles to an axis. Cross-sections are often used to illustrate the character or design of a street and right-of-way and can show the relationship of the street to the sidewalk and to the house.

**Cul-de-sac** - A local street, one end of which is closed to through traffic, and which includes a circular turn-around. Although they are popular locations for homes, they reduce travel options and tend to concentrate traffic on collector and arterial streets.

**Curvilinear** - A design form for streets involving curves and switchbacks, intended to allow the integration of development with the topographic features of the land and to enhance the aesthetic interest of the development.

**Density** - The number of residential dwelling units allowed on a tract of land, usually measured in units per acre.

**Detention basin** - A storage facility designed for the temporary storage of stream flow or surface runoff and for the release of the stored water at controlled rates.

**Down-Zoning** - A term (often incorrectly applied) that refers to a situation where a zoning district that allows a broader range of uses is replaced by a more restrictive zoning district. This term is more applicable to “pyramidal” zoning ordinances, where the next zone in the list allows all uses in the previous zone on the list, plus a few more, and so on down the line.

**Duplex** - Two single-family dwellings that are joined by a common wall. A duplex may be located on single lot, or may exist as a duplex townhouse, where each unit is situated on its own lot.

**Easement** - a legal term often applied to subdivisions that grants a certain property right or rights to some entity other than the property owner. For example, a sanitary sewer easement allows the community to build and maintain sewer lines underground within the easement area, but the community does not own all the property rights to that piece of land.

**Enabling Legislation** - the act of a legislature to grant powers to local communities, such as the power to zone land or the power to regulate the use of signs on public property.

**Exaction** - A requirement that a developer provide or pay for public facilities at the developer’s own expense, related to the cost or impact of the development to the community.

**Extraterritorial Jurisdiction (ETJ)** - This is the ability of a community to apply its development regulations in the urbanizing area immediately outside its current City Limits. This is applicable in areas where it is anticipated that future urban services will be extended and the area will be eventually annexed by the city or town. This allows orderly growth under one, rather than two different sets of development regulations.

**Final Plat, Engineering Plat or Recorded Map** - a final map legally establishing property boundary and easement information, prepared by a registered surveyor, and prepared from information on an approved preliminary subdivision plan.

**Flag lot** - A lot with a developable area connected to a street or road by a narrow strip of land that includes a driveway.

- Floor Area Ratio** - a measurement of development intensity, representing the total amount of building square feet divided into the square footage of the property.
- Frontage** - The side of a lot abutting a street or road right-of-way usually regarded as the front of the property. The amount of frontage tends to influence what is perceived to be the residential density of the area.
- Grid** - A pattern of parallel or crisscrossing streets intersecting at right angles.
- Impervious surface** - Material that reduces or prevents the absorption of stormwater into the ground.
- Legislative Function** - The actions of an elected body to make decisions on questions regarding planning and development. Legislative decisions involve considerable discretion on the part of the determining body, usually a town council, county commission or board of supervisors.
- Metes and bounds** - A means of describing property boundaries that relies on bearings and distances.
- Non-conforming Situations (Lots, Structures, Uses)** - An existing land use that does not conform to the zoning requirements. This may occur when a property is legally developed, and then a community extends its extraterritorial jurisdiction or corporate limits and thus its zoning regulations to take in the property, or when a property is legally developed and the zoning ordinance itself is amended to make an aspect of the existing use no longer acceptable. This is distinguished from an illegal use, which refers to a land use that is established in violation of the zoning regulations after the regulations have already been applied.
- Patio Home** - A single-family detached dwelling on a very small lot, often developed in such a way that the open area of the lot is larger to one side of the house, providing more usable open space for the property owner.
- Plat** - A map of land included in a common development or sales plan that shows the location and boundaries of streets, individual lots or parcels, and other site information.
- Preliminary Plat, or Preliminary Subdivision** - A map of a proposed subdivision of land submitted for approval by the local unit of government, typically showing proposed lot lines, proposed and existing streets, utility layouts, topography, etc. to allow the reviewers to determine compliance with local subdivision regulations. Approval of the preliminary plat is necessary before a final plat for recording is authorized.
- Quasi-Judicial Function** - A formal, legal procedure with a very clearly defined process, intended to pass judgment much as a court of law. Decisions must be based on findings of fact presented only at a duly-advertised evidentiary hearing.
- Reverse frontage lot** - A through lot that is not accessible from one of the non-intersecting streets on which it fronts.
- Right-Of-Way** - A right (enjoyed either by the public or by private parties) to use a defined linear area for travel purposes. Technically a right-of-way is an

easement interest in the land, and most North Carolina streets involve easement interests only. However, the term is sometimes used to refer to roadways for which the public has acquired full title to the land. The extent of the right-of-way typically includes area used for the cartway, curbs and gutters, sidewalks, road shoulders and swales, street trees, and various utility lines.

**Setback** - The required minimum distance between a structure and a particular property line (front, side or rear). Front setbacks are often measured from the right-of-way line rather than the edge of the road pavement or the centerline of the adjacent street.

**Site Plan** - The technical definition of a site plan may vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but in its generic form, a site plan is a two-dimensional plan drawn to scale, meant to represent information on the future development of streets, parking areas, underground utilities, building "footprints", sidewalks, landscaping, etc.

**Special Use** - A land use that is allowed by the zoning regulations only after specific findings are made, generally in a quasi-judicial format. For example, a telecommunication tower may be allowed in a residential zoning district if the tower is set back from the property line by twice its height, and will not interfere with local TV or amateur radio reception. The quasi-judicial board hears evidence on these required findings and makes a judgment on that specific case in that specific location.

**Subdivision** - The technical definition of subdivision may vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but in its generic form, a subdivision is any division of a property into more than one property, for sale or other development. The state statute definition of a subdivision is used by all jurisdictions except those where a local act of the legislature has re-defined it, and contains a few exceptions. For example, a division of land where all resultant lots are greater than 10 acres is not a "subdivision" under state law.

**Swale** - An elongated earthen depression intended to direct the flow of water.

**Takings** - A legal concept that concerns the right of property owners to receive just compensation when land development regulations deprive the owner of all use of the property. This is distinguished from the public's right to regulate the land uses on private property to protect the property and interests of adjacent neighbors and the public at large. There is considerable debate as to where the line falls between legitimate public regulation of private land use, which is clearly right and legal according to the courts, and a "taking" of land without just compensation.

**Through lot** - A lot that fronts on two streets that do not intersect.

**Townhouse or Townhome**- A one-family dwelling typically with two or three stories, situated in a row of at least three units, such that each unit has its own direct access to the outside, no units are located over another, and each unit is separated from the next by a common fire wall. Individual townhomes are situated on their own separate lots.

**Traffic calming** - A set of techniques which serve to reduce the speed of traffic , such as lane narrowing, sharp offsets, sidewalk bulge-outs, speed bumps, and road surface variations.

**Urban service boundary** - The boundary that defines the geographic limit of public facilities and services provided by an urban government , not necessarily coinciding with the unit's corporate boundary.

**Variance** - a waiver of a specifically defined rule, generally based on specified criteria, such as a topographic hardship. This is generally, but not always, a quasi-judicial function. For example, a Board of Adjustment may grant a variance whereby a house is allowed to be built in violation of the usual minimum setbacks on a lot.

**Zero lot line** - The configuration of a building on a lot such that one or more of the building's sides is located on and along the lot line.

**Zoning Districts** - Geographically defined areas where a set of specific rules for land use and activities are enforced. Each zoning district may be applied in one or more places within a community, and each may have its own distinct rules.