



Key Points:

- The municipal plan review is a systematic, but time-consuming process.
- While the primary return for these efforts is a sense of accomplishment or of goodwill for community service.



Daniel Bollman, AIA has more than 25 years of experience in both the public and private sectors, including with large and small architectural firms, municipal government and large residential developers. In 2009, he founded east arbor architecture, a small project-based firm with a focus on historic preservation, traditional detailing and critical regionalism. Bollman frequently speaks and writes about architecture and the built environment, including a regular weekly feature in the Lansing City Pulse. Since moving to East Lansing in 2008, he has served on several of the city's commissions and committees and currently serves as the Chair of the East Lansing Planning Commission.

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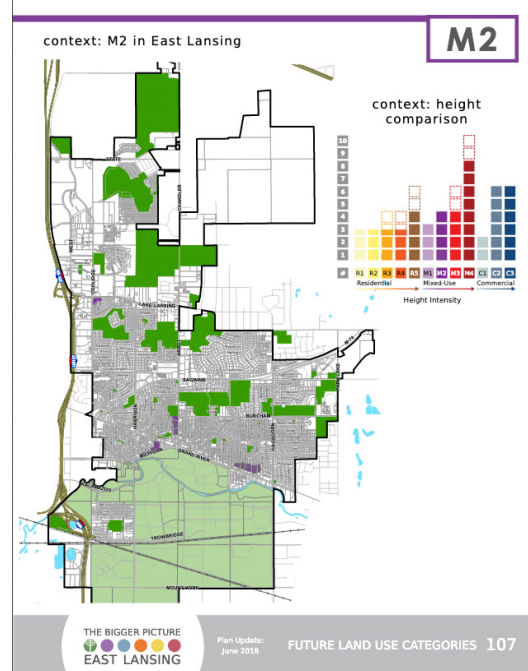
The past year's active construction schedule was a welcome occurrence, as a greater numbers of buildings take physical form over the previous year. These large projects came with significant costs, from financial investment and the expenditure of finite material resources to the long-term use of land and space. Mindful of this with projects of this scope, municipalities frequently employ boards and commissions consisting of citizen-volunteers to obtain expert knowledge in the development process, while gaining public input and early support. Too often the call for these services goes unheeded.

Building professionals - architects, contractors and trades - are particularly well-suited to serve on these boards, especially those that deal with building and development issues. We want to share how such volunteer service has improved our private practice.

The municipal plan review is a systematic, but time-consuming process. Depending on the scope of a construction project, code and ordinance review follows a lengthy effort undertaken by building and trade inspectors, municipal engineers and fire and public safety personnel. Frequently, proposals do not measure up to the letter of an established standard. Rather than rejecting such proposals outright, most municipalities recognize a process of review to allow for variances.

If the deviation is minor or otherwise meets the intent of the regulation, the proposal may ultimately be accepted. The task of determining the suitability of these "short" projects often rests with local experts, who recommend variances or compromises to the decision-making authority. Boards and commissions are formed and appointed by elected leaders to provide advice. While their recommendations are frequently followed, it remains the responsibility of officials to weigh all options and make their final decision based on numerous factors.

As our practice focusses on preservation and adaptive reuse, we find ourselves regularly working with the historic design





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standards. This effort began with service on our city's historic board. Having increased our familiarity and knowledge through service, we now work to represent applicants. Through our volunteer activity, we are specifically aware of those conditions where the seemingly rigid restrictions are less severe than perceived. When a historic property owner wishes to change a historic building, the needs and wants of the owner are often set in opposition to the public purpose of preservation. In fact, if alterations do not adversely impact a resource's character-defining features, most work can be accommodated. Our experience with design problems and construction details has provided the knowledge to find balanced solutions, allowing both parties to prevail.



As commissioners, we frequently listen to proposals that fail to address the commission's specific responsibilities. Naturally, when making presentations to specific boards, one must focus on the charge of the board or commission and on the specific factors the board uses in reaching its decisions. Arguments used to justify the historic district approval carry little weight with the zoning board. In such a case, it is necessary to craft a different set of justifications to support the change, which focus on zoning-related issues, such as lot coverage or average setbacks. Again, our experience as construction professionals is particularly useful. With this knowledge, we have been able to gain variances on behalf of our clients that we might not have been able to otherwise.

Rather than working with existing ordinances, commissioners may occasionally develop new ordinance language. Our city is currently considering adopting a Form-Based zoning code. The draft text is dense and unfamiliar, as its goals differ from those usually found in use-based zoning language. The dictates of the draft language will have a direct impact on the eventual cost of construction. Since our professional colleagues will interpret and implement the final code, we want the final language to be as clear as possible. Most importantly, involvement at the initial stage has provided an opportunity to shape the outcome.

Aside from the unusual zoning terminology, the earliest criticisms on the initial draft emphasized that much of the language is a design code, which attempts to dictate specific building details. This is a legitimate complaint; the draft language affects factors beyond building form. And while I happen to appreciate the desired aesthetic, I am hesitant to have it codified. We are now working to separate the building and street form from matters associated with appearances.



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Ideally, this will permit the owner and architect to offer a larger collaborative vision that is compatible with the street, but does not dictate the appearance of individual buildings.

While the primary return for these efforts is a sense of accomplishment or of goodwill for community service, there are tangible benefits as well. Some of our pro bono work has been recognized on the recipient's list of donors. Committing the time to complete the work on boards and commissions has identified us as dedicated experts. Naturally, the relationships required time to grow, and returns only become visible over several years, as the community and city staff members grow more familiar with our efforts. Today, we are frequently recommended for work by some of the city's influencers, a benefit directly from our civic activity.

There are also occasional drawbacks. One local developer explained that they would rather have us on the Commissions as level-headed advocates, rather than professional representatives. Despite this, we remain committed to continuing our volunteer work, providing our balanced input on behalf of the city.

The opportunities are abundant; larger cities often feature dozens of standing boards and commissions. Often, more positions are available than there are people to serve in them. Since there aren't enough professionals who avail themselves, the positions often rotate among a limited group of experts. As the commitment of time is often significant, a hesitancy to participate is understandable. Fortunately for those looking for limited involvement, some municipalities create ad hoc committees to tackle smaller issues that can often be addressed in a matter of months.

In his book *Drive*, Daniel Pink defines companies that value both "purpose maximization" and "profit maximization." These organizations find value in pursuing goals beyond simple profit, often devoting as much as 20% of their time to larger, philanthropic efforts. We have personally taken this effort to heart and have focused on activities that benefit from our experience and training, while providing an occasional financial return. Please consider "doing well by doing good" for your own community.