

Assessing and Optimizing Planning Board's Role in Denver's

Land Use Planning and Regulation Decision-making

Executive Summary

by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The goal of this project is to improve Denver’s planning and land-use decision-making by optimizing the Denver Planning Board’s role in those processes.

Though it has little actual authority, the Board plays an important advisory role to City Council with regards to land-use planning and zoning. This project provides eight recommendations to make Planning Board more effective by creating effective feedback loops—realistic policy and procedural changes help the City more efficiently, effectively and equitably achieve its stated goals and objectives.

Planning Board is widely accepted to be a technical board whose members have expertise in planning and the built environment, though “citizen planners” with significant involvement in neighborhood organizations and local planning efforts have also served.

The bulk of Planning Board’s work is reviewing rezonings, though it also reviews changes to the zoning code and amendments to the comprehensive plan. The Denver Zoning Code provides very specific criteria to be considered by Planning Board and City Council in considering rezonings and the Board’s strict adherence to these criteria is widely viewed as one of its defining characteristics and key strengths, ensuring the Board and its recommendations remain non-political. This provides an important balance, or even cover, to the political pressures to which City Council is subject.

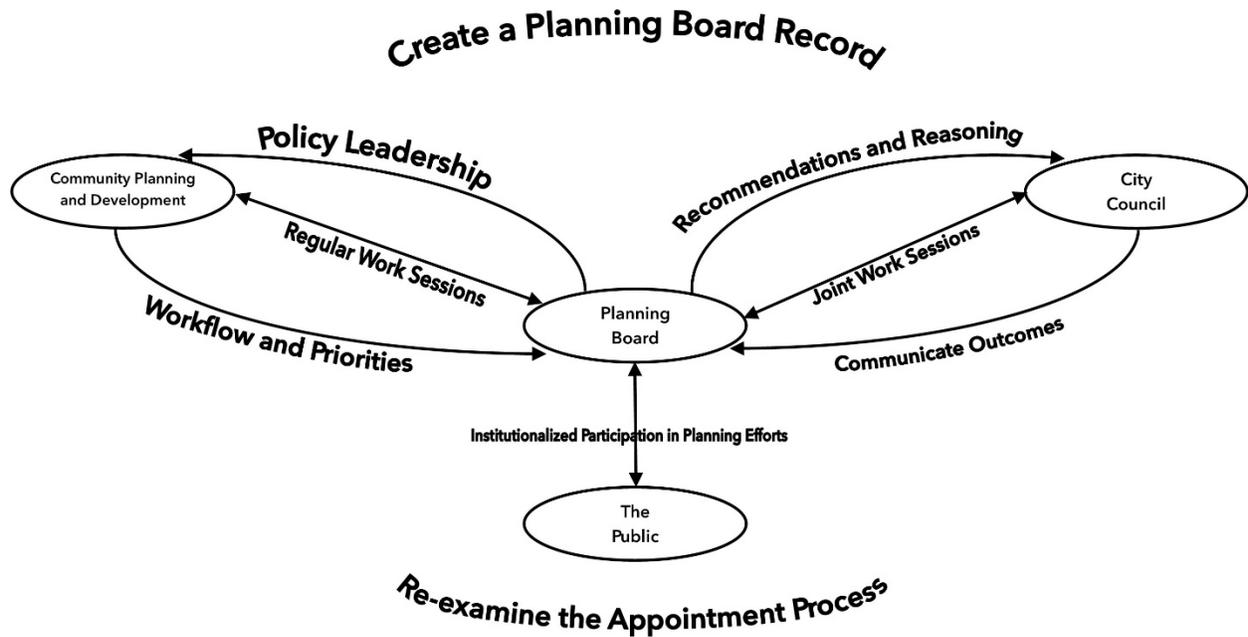
The Board’s deliberations regarding the criteria, particularly with regards to applications that come to Council with a split decision from Planning Board or are otherwise complex or controversial, are seen as of particular value to Council, but there is no clear mechanism for these to be transmitted to City Council

The Board also reviews supplements or changes to Denver’s adopted plans, and while Denver’s planning efforts do include significant public engagement, Planning Board may provide a

different link between planners and the community. Planning Board members may also provide a different perspective from staff, providing greater accountability.

For the full value of Planning Board to be realized, Planning Board needs to be an integral part of a larger feedback system, with effective communication between its main partners and stakeholders—City Council, CPD and the public—prioritized.

Establishing Effective Feedback Loops



Recommendation One: Foster Effective Communication to City Council Concerning Proposals

The majority of proposed rezonings and text amendments are not controversial or subject to substantial debate at Planning Board, but in cases where there is a split decision or substantial discussion at Planning Board, the gist of those discussions needs to be consistently and effectively communicated to City Council.

Planning Board could make specific recommendations to Council concerning a rezoning or text amendment, either by attaching conditions to its recommendation to City Council (an “approval with conditions”) or by making a specific, separate recommendation to City Council, but the

Board should clarify the circumstances in which a recommendation of “approval with conditions” is appropriate and clarify how and when it might make an additional recommendation.

While the official minutes of the Planning Board currently contain only a record of the action by the Board, nothing appears to prevent the Board from issuing an additional elaboration. The Board should produce a brief, written statement to provide to Council in cases where there was either a split-decision or substantive deliberation and the Board feels additional context and/or details of the deliberation would help to better inform Council.

Recommendation Two: Foster Effective Communication *from* City Council Concerning Proposal Outcomes

Staff should regularly report to Planning Board the outcomes of cases where there was substantial difference between the Planning Board decision and the Council decision, or where there were other substantive discussions. Individual Planning Board members could then follow up based on interest and time.

Recommendation Three: Close the Loop with Direct Council/Board Sessions

The Planning Board and City Council should convene regular joint sessions to discuss policy and citywide progress towards achieving plan objectives.

Recommendation Four: Empower Planning Board as a Policy Leader

Planning Board, as an independent body that regularly examines the results of the City’s planning and land-use policies, is positioned to be a policy thought-leader. Planning Board should be empowered as a policy leader, in collaboration with the Executive Director of CPD and her staff. Planning Board should also be able to recommend text amendments and policy efforts.

Recommendation Five: Establish an Effective Planning Board/CPD Feedback Loop

The Planning Board should have greater visibility into the policy and planning priorities of CPD and be a true thought-partner to CPD.

Planning Board and CPD leadership have recently begin to hold joint working session and these should be made part of the Board's annual schedule and should include some regular milestone agenda items, such as an annual review of CPD's workplan. The Planning Board and CPD leadership should explore how others within the executive might participate in these work sessions and what the value of that participation would be. CPD should also consider having a member of their leadership team attend all Planning Board meetings.

Recommendation Six: Elevate and Institutionalize Planning Board's Role in Planning

Planning Board is often described as the "guardian" of Denver's Comprehensive Plan and Blueprint Denver and should be brought into planning processes earlier, and more actively.

Members of the Planning Board do participate in most major planning and policy efforts as members of steering committees, task forces or similar City-convened committees, but it is not always clear if participating Board members are participating as Planning Board members, or as members of the public whose qualifications include their membership on Planning Board. Their role should be clarified, including whether and how they should report back to Planning Board about the deliberations of those committees, seek Planning Board input and relay that input back to the committees.

Recommendation Seven: Create and Institutionalize a Planning Board Record

City staff prepares an annual report of Planning Board's work, focused on the quantifiable. Planning Board should work with staff to produce a reflective Annual Report which includes qualitative and quantitative information. Staff should also seek to make past agendas and meeting materials readily available on the Planning Board website.

Recommendation Eight: Re-examine the Appointment Process

City Council and the Mayor’s office should, together, examine changes to the appointment process, including enumerating the required or preferred professional/technical expertise of members and splitting the Board appointments between the Mayor and City Council.

Consideration should also be given to ways to expand the pool of applicants for Planning Board, including paying Board members for their service, and identifying and mitigating other barriers to service.

These recommendations require varying levels of involvement from five main parties: Planning Board, CPD staff, City Council staff, City Council itself and the Mayor’s office. They also range in complexity from simple procedural changes to those which would require changes to the DRMC by ordinance. The following table summarizes the levels of involvement required and changes required to implement these recommendations.

Recommendation Implementation	Required Involvement of (Primary, Supporting)					Changes Recommended to			
	Planning Board	CPD Staff	City Council Staff	City Council	Mayor's Office	Administrative or Operational Process	PB By-laws	DZC Text Amendment	Ordinance
1) Foster Effective Communication to City Council Concerning Proposals									
Clarify "approval with conditions" recommendation	P	P		?			X	?	
Clarify additional recommendations	P	P		?			X	?	
Additional written statement to Council	P	P	S				X		
2) Foster Effective Communication from City Council Concerning Proposal Outcomes									
Staff report to Planning Board outcomes of cases	P	P				X			
3) Close the Loop with Direct Council/Board Sessions									
Planning Board and City Council convene joint sessions	P	S	S	P		X			
4) Empower Planning Board as a Policy Leader									
Planning Board empowered as a policy leader	P	P		P		X	X	X	X
5) Establish an Effective Planning Board/CPD Feedback Loop									
Greater Planning Board visibility into and partnership on CPD policy and planning priorities	P	P				X	?		
Institutionalize Planning Board/CPD work sessions	P	P				X	?		
Investigate executive participation in work sessions	P	P			P	X			
CPD leadership participation in Planning Board meetings		P				X			
6) Elevate and Institutionalize Planning Board's Role in Planning									
Earlier and more active involvement of Planning Board	P	P				X	?		
Examine role of Planning Board members in planning committees	P	P				X	X		
7) Create and Institutionalize a Planning Board Record									
Annual Report	S	P				X	?		
Make past agendas and meeting materials available on website		P				X			
8) Reexamine the Appointment Process									
Examine changes to the appointment process	S	S	S	P	P	X			X
Expand the pool of applicants for Planning Board	S	P		P	P	X			X