

KEY TERMS USED IN PLANNING

Those involved in planning, as in other specialties, develop their own language as a communications shortcut. But for those who are new to planning, some of the terms are strange. In this section are some of the key terms used in planning and zoning along with a brief definition. We hope these will provide you with a shortcut to the language of planning. *You should observe, however, that these definitions may be different than those in your local ordinances.*

accessory building, structure, or use—a building, structure, or land use that is supplemental to the main structure, attached or free standing. Examples include garages, sheds, swing sets, and satellite dishes.

capital improvements plan (CIP)—priority listing of new or reconditioned facilities—buildings, roadways, bridges, treatment plants, water supply, sewerage, or storm water pipes, solid waste disposal site, etc.—needed by the community over a six-year period with proposed methods of financing.

commons—those land areas or facilities to which persons have access and use by right because of ownership or contract; usually refers to areas or facilities in a housing project owned jointly under condominium law or accessible to renters in the project.

community facilities district—those areas designated or zoned for publicly provided functions such as schools, libraries, government centers, etc.

condominium—a form of property ownership in which living units or other forms of units in a structure are owned individually but the associated land is owned in common or jointly with owners of other structures on the site.

deceleration lane—an additional lane in the public right of way used to slow down and leave the main roadway without interfering with through traffic.

density—usually refers to the number of dwelling units or useable area per acre allowed on a parcel of land.

easement—usually refers to rights granted to utility companies to use corridors on private property for specified purposes; may also refer to rights to cross lands to gain access to other property.

egress—used to refer to traffic outlets from private property to public roadways or exits from buildings or other facilities.

excepted parcel—land excluded from a development project that may border it on up to three sides.

family—in zoning the term includes common usage of two or more persons related by blood, marriage, or adoption. The term may be extended to include “functional family” or a group of individuals who occupy a single family residential unit for an indefinite time.

farm—land operated as a single unit for the purpose of growing agricultural products. Zoning ordinances typically set a minimum land area (e.g., 5 acres or more) for a parcel to come under this

zone classification. Ordinances may also define permitted functions—greenhouses, orchards, hatcheries—and exclude others—riding/boarding stables, raising fur bearing animals, gravel and sand pits.

floodplain—that land area that is subject to seasonal or other periodic overflow of water where filling or building is prohibited to preserve the area for storm water storage.

front yard—the minimum allowable distance between the front lot line and the front part of a building (also see “setback”).

future land use plan—the portion of the comprehensive master plan showing the planned use of land at some point during the planning period.

grade—the degree of rise or inclination (slope, fall, etc) compared with level.

governing body—the official group vested with the power to adopt an ordinance such as city and village councils, township and charter township boards, and boards of county commissioners (also called legislative body).

home occupation—those types of work or jobs conducted in a residence, may or may not be allowed in a residential zone by the zoning ordinance.

infrastructure—general reference is to the network of physical systems such as streets, water supply, sewerage, and storm drains that are essential in urban areas.

ingress—used to refer to traffic outlets from public roadways to private property or entrances to buildings or other facilities.

land splits—actions that divide a parcel into additional smaller parcels. When acreage is involved the reference is usually to part of the larger parcel for a building site; in subdivisions it refers to the division of a lot with parts attached to adjacent lots.

legislative body—see governing body.

living unit—a structure or part of a structure designed for occupancy by one or more persons in space consisting of a kitchen, bath, and sleeping/living facilities for only the occupants. The unit may take numerous forms such as detached house, row house, apartment, mobile home, etc.

loading area—the onsite area of a commercial, industrial, or non-single family development reserved for the loading and unloading of vehicles (especially trucks).

lot—a parcel of land with its own distinct description. It may be part of a subdivision or described by metes and bounds.

lot coverage—the proportion of a lot that a structure may cover, sometimes regulated by the floor area ratio to lot size formula (FAR).

lot lines—the boundaries of a land parcel.

lot of record—a lot, usually part of an approved subdivision, but in any case one that has been recorded by the county register of deeds.

lot size—the area of a building site or lot; usually applied to a subdivided lot and expressed in terms of square feet.

manufactured housing—a residential structure that is assembled in a factory and moved to the site in contrast to a structure that is constructed on the site.

nonconforming use—a structure or use that is not permitted in the zoning district in which it is located, but which is permitted to continue with restrictions because the structure or use predates the designation of the zone.

nuisance—anything that interferes with the use or enjoyment of property, or endangers personal health or safety. Zoning is generally intended to separate uses that constitute a nuisance to adjoining properties, but zoning law cannot be invoked to abate all nuisances.

open space—land area that has not been developed. Usually refers to land in the countryside but may be used to include parks, undeveloped areas in PUDs, or other large projects.

Open Space and Farmland Preservation Act—Public Act 116 of 1974 (MCLA 554.701 ff.) that permits certain property owners to contract with state government to retain land in agriculture or open space in exchange for tax advantages and immunity to special assessments not of benefit to the property under current use conditions.

other permitted use—a land use permitted in a zoning district only under special conditions. The term does not

refer to principal uses permitted in the ordinance.

performance standard—a regulation that admits or denies a particular use in a zoning district on the basis of the proposed use's capability to meet noise, air pollution, vibration, heat, visual impact, or other standards.

planned unit development (PUD)—a self-contained development, usually with a mixture of housing types in which subdivision and zoning regulations apply to the entire project rather than to separate lots. A PUD may also include mixed uses and can apply to commercial or office developments.

planning acts—those statutes enacted by the legislature authorizing local units to create planning commissions. They refer to either a) The Municipal Planning Act—(MCLA 125.31-45), b) Township Planning Act (MCLA 125.321-333), or c) County Planning Act (MCLA 125.101-107)

plat—the map of a subdivision showing lot lines, street and right-of-way boundaries, topography and other features.

principal use—the main or central purpose (use) to which a parcel is put. In zoning it is distinguished from accessory or incidental use.

right of way—most commonly the dedication of land on which a road or railroad is located and on which passage is permitted.

rear yard—the minimum open space that an owner must maintain from the rear

of the structure to the back boundary of the lot.

required parking—refers to the minimum number of square feet or spaces required by the zoning ordinance to be reserved for parking of automobiles.

road system—The network of roads and streets that permits circulation within communities and connections between them. A typical classification of roads is as follows:

- **local road/street**—roadway constructed to provide access to adjacent properties only.
- **collector road/street**—a roadway serving the function of channeling traffic from local roads to major arterial streets.
- **major arterial road/street**—a roadway carrying large volumes of through traffic across urban areas. Usually does not have separate grade crossings or controlled access from abutting property.
- **freeway/expressway**—a multi-lane roadway designed to carry large volumes of traffic; has limited access from abutting property, separated grade crossings, and directional lanes separated by median space or barriers.
- **private road**—a roadway that has not been dedicated or received by a public agency as part of an official road system. Maintenance of a private road is usually the responsibility of the owners.

setback—the minimum distance that a building must be back from a lot line or right of way.

sign—the use of any words, numerals, figures, devices, designs, or trademarks that are used to show an individual firm, profession, or business and are visible to the general public. Additional definitions may include accessory signs—signs accessory to a business—and nonaccessory signs. “Signs” usually does not include billboards which are covered under different rules.

side yard—the minimum open space that a structure must maintain from the side boundaries of a lot.

site built—a structure constructed at the site but may include some pre-assembled parts.

special use—use of a parcel approved by the designated municipal body (planning commission or legislative body) in a manner that conforms to specific standards for that use in the zoning district in which the parcel is located.

structure—any constructed facility, whether it is temporary, as in “tent” or permanent, as in “house” or office building.

subdividing—an official process of dividing a large parcel of land into lots, blocks, streets, and public areas. The process ends with the registration of the subdivision map with the county register of deeds.

subdivision—the result of the process of subdividing land for sale, lease, or development.

utility—service to a structure provided through cable, wire, or pipe. The usual reference is to electricity, water supply, sewerage, gas, telephone, and cable TV.

usable floor area—an area defined as less than the gross floor area of structure for purposes of certain zoning regulations; e.g., the ratio of parking spaces to the sales area of a structure.

use—refers to the purpose to which a land parcel is being or is proposed to be put; in zoning, reference is usually in terms of one of the zoning classifications.

use exception—see special use.

variance—official permission by the ZBA to build or use a structure or lot in a manner that does not conform to the provisions of the zoning ordinance.

yards—the open areas of a lot. In planning and zoning the usual reference is to front, rear (back), or side yards.

zoning board of appeals, ZBA—the body required to consider appeals from administrative zoning decisions and other zoning actions. The ZBA is authorized to make adjustments in how zoning standards are applied.

zoning classification—the name given to types of zones such as single family residential, rural residential, agricultural, regional shopping, neighborhood shopping, office, industrial, etc.