



Community League Planning Committees

Credits: EFCL adapted the booklet from the Community Guide to the Planning Process prepared by the Federation of Calgary Communities and The City of Calgary

A. General

Community League planning committees may take on a number of planning-related roles and tasks related to community building, change and improvement. The primary role of a planning committee is to review and respond to planning applications affecting the community and address general planning and development issues as they arise. However, there are other equally important (and in some ways more proactive) opportunities for planning committees to affect change in their communities.

Community Leagues that receive few planning applications may feel it is unnecessary to set up a fully functioning planning committee. It may be better for the association executive to act as the planning committee in these situations, but at minimum a “Planning Director” should be designated to manage issues that arise.

If your community faces numerous proposals for development, you should consider establishing a planning committee.

The purpose of a Community League Planning Committee is to:

- Be a positive and pro-active force in the direction, development, and evolution of the community’s physical environment
- Be mindful of the community’s role in the overall development of Edmonton, including relationships with neighbouring communities and role of the Municipal Development Plan and the Transportation Plan
- Promote community interest and facilitate community dialogue on local planning and development issues

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- Represent the community's perspective on local planning and development issues to The City of Edmonton
- Advance the goals of the area residents by supporting high quality development and community planning in the community.

Other Issues

Your mandate may also include traffic issues, long range planning exercises (initiated by The City or the community), providing planning information to the community in your newsletter, promoting good development, public improvements to streets and parks, and other initiatives related to the environment, heritage, etc. It is important that your committee not take on too much. Some issues may be best dealt with by subcommittees or other community league committees.

B. Committee Membership

The membership of the community league planning committee is very important. Ideally:

- The Community League planning committee membership should reflect the range of community diversity and interests and should be selected through a process that is open and welcoming to all members of the community league.
- It is important to have enough committee members to provide a variety of perspectives on development proposals, and a pool of people you can draw upon if some are unavailable. Many successful committees have 6 to 12 people, but meetings should not be too large. The committee should have a minimum of three people. The task of reviewing applications should not be left up to one person.
- Try to select people from different areas of the neighbourhood and include people who represent a cross section of community members. You should have a mix of different ages and backgrounds, residents of different housing types, and a mix of long-time residents and newcomers to the community. It may

be useful to include a local merchant to represent the business community. A well-balanced committee will have a sense of continuity and will also be looking to the future.

- Both continuity and turnover are important. Always have some people who have been around for a few years but bring in new blood on a regular basis. Keep in mind that there is high turnover in City departments. The knowledge and “institutional memory” of your committee can be an asset to file managers.
- Your committee should have access to a volunteer who understands the planning process from a technical or professional perspective (e.g. an architect or designer, an urban planner, a builder, a developer or a real estate agent). The person may be a regular member of your committee, or someone who can consult on occasion.
- Record keeping is important for the purposes of continuity. Some projects take a long time to conclude or go dormant and resurface in other forms. It is good to have an avid archivist who will help you keep good records and materials.
- Availability is important. Busy committees benefit from having a Chair or members who are flexible during work hours and can attend meetings or respond quickly to an issue.
- If your community has an Area Redevelopment Plan, try to select someone who sat on the ARP committee. Their experience will be helpful, and they will have a good idea of what type of development is consistent with your ARP. Participants in other relevant planning studies will also be helpful.

Have members who participate in the city’s Planning Academy program or have other related training. All committee members should have some basic understanding of the city planning process.

C. Guidelines For Planning Committee Operations

The following guidelines indicate how some associations handle their planning committees. These are only suggestions, and if your community has found a system that works, pass on your success by letting the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues know about it. Some community leagues have established formal terms of reference and procedures.

In setting up your community league planning committee you need to consider the following elements:

- *Mandate* – The purpose of your committee, your goals, your authority.
- *Membership* – Members should be residents of the community, and members in good standing of the community association. Some community associations require individuals to demonstrate commitment by attending a minimum number of meetings before becoming a full member.
- *Leadership and Management* – The chair of the planning committee should be a member of the board of the community league. It may also be helpful to have a co-chairman and a secretary/record-keeper. Applications come in at all times of the year, including around the holidays, so think about who would replace key people during vacation times or succeed them if they leave the committee. Delegation of tasks (properly supervised) is necessary to build the skills of committee members.
- *Procedures to Process Applications*
 - To receive and review applications in a timely manner
 - To call and conduct your meetings
 - To communication with applicants and adjacent residents, inform them of certain meetings and invite them to attend
 - To convey comments to The City and report to the community
- It is important to have a robust, well-organized process for receiving planning applications and disseminating information to committee members. It is better to have a permanent and frequently checked mailing address for circulations (the community hall, for example), but if the address or other contact information changes make sure you update the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues immediately as well as the city.
- *Authority and Accountability* – The committee should be able to communicate with The City and the Applicant without referring back to the board of the community league except in the case of very substantial or controversial developments. Larger or more controversial issues may go to the board for discussion and final

approval. In cases of very large projects the community league, perhaps in collaboration with the applicant or The City, may hold public meetings. Generally, the more impact a project has, the greater accountability and consultation there needs to be.

Typically, larger and more complex projects have longer timelines that allow more consultation.

- *Rules of the committee* – You need to consider responsibilities of committee members, conduct of meetings, how to make decisions, who speaks on behalf of the committee, committee structure, minutes, reporting to the community association, and issues like ethics and conflict of interest.
- Some communities find simple membership rules (residency, minimum meeting attendance, etc.) sufficient to avoid potential conflict of interest situations (e.g. a developer with financial interests in the community as a committee member), and some have other guidelines. Another issue that can arise is a committee member who is right next door to a proposed development. Neighbour input is always welcomed by The City, but the planning committee has to keep the broader community interest in mind as well.
- *Conduct of meetings* – Some communities have rules for the conduct of meetings when applicants are invited to attend. For example, applicants may present their project and answer questions, but they leave the room when the committee discusses the proposal and comes to a decision. (Having said that, negotiations with applicants are better carried out in the committee meeting rather than one-on-one, so there is no misunderstanding.)
- *Decision-Making* – Consider procedures for decision-making. Planning committees usually operate by consensus and rarely take votes. Consensus doesn't mean that everyone agrees, just that everyone can live with it.
- *Writing the response* – Chairs often write the response letters to planning applications, but sometimes this job is delegated. Letters that are straightforward can go back through the Chair. If the issue is complicated, it can be circulated to the committee for further review and approval. If a new person is delegated to write the letter a more experienced person can be assigned to help them.
- *Meeting schedules* – Planning committees often meet monthly. Committees may meet more or less frequently depending on how busy they are, but to keep on top of things and for group cohesion, most committees find it useful to meet regularly. Some committees deal with simpler applications via email, but face-to-face meetings are best for complex applications and productive dialogue.

- *Responsibility* – It is important that your committee recognize the needs of both Edmonton and the community as a whole, as well as concerns of residents immediately adjacent to a proposed development. For example, a common conflict arises when communities benefit from increased population or amenities, but the adjacent property owners object to higher densities or new uses.
- *Reporting to the community* – Planning outcomes should be communicated to the board, and also to community residents through the community newsletter, website or other means. If timelines permit, the planning committee can solicit input on current applications through the newsletter. If residents know there is a planning committee looking after community interests, they are more likely to contact you when they see a notice posting sign, or if they have something to contribute. Communication is an important part of being legitimate and representative. It is equally important that there is an opportunity for community members to provide comments and suggestions to the Community League planning committee generally, and on specific issues. A responsible planning committee will ensure that comments and input from residents and other community members are heard and considered.
- *Development Principles/Guidelines* – It is helpful for planning committees to have development principles or guidelines. These may be principles in your Area Redevelopment Plans or other guidelines developed with your league. Informal community guidelines do not hold the weight of City plans, but are helpful to committee members (particularly new ones), and will help shape consistent and coherent responses to planning applications. They can also be helpful for development applicants and file managers to better explain your point of view.

D. Principles For Planning Committees

These suggested process-related principles are meant as general guidelines for your committee to keep in mind as they review circulations. They should help you execute your role in the planning process more effectively.

In order to be a valuable participant in the planning process, your community league planning committee should try to follow rules and guidelines which govern their approach to planning. Here are some cornerstones:

Be Informed

- Be familiar with the site where the development is proposed. It is a good idea to have a committee member review the potential development site before it is discussed at the committee meeting.
- Understand the basic steps of the planning process
- Take advantage of planning education courses available through the city's Planning Academy other initiatives. [Subscribe to the EFCL Enews](#). Pay attention to policy and planning developments in the city. Visit The City and the EFCL websites for useful information.
- Familiarize yourself with any policy studies, ASPs, ARPs or other planning documents that relate to your community.
- Have a copy of the land use designation map and know what each designation (zone) means. Just because a lot is sitting vacant now, does not mean it will stay that way.
- Be aware of the difference between good planning arguments, and arguments that are inadmissible (i.e. those that cannot be considered by the planning authorities as being relevant in rendering a decision).
- Have realistic expectations. It is not necessary or possible for neighbours or volunteers to "re-design" projects in detail, or turn around established bylaws or policies in response to an application, except in the most unusual circumstances. Work in good faith with the other people who are doing their jobs in the planning process – the city file manager and the applicant.
- Keep in mind that the file manager is dealing with many applications and also has deadlines to meet. Applicants also appreciate prompt feedback from communities and City planners. The earlier the feedback, the easier it is for applicants to make changes, secure timely approval and start building.
- Being informed can help you focus your comments and thus participate more effectively in the planning process.

Be Representative and Communicative

- Have the delegated authority to represent your community league's perspective. Your board should delegate the authority to the planning committee to respond independently in most circumstances.
- You represent the community as a whole; therefore, your position may differ from individual residents in the community.
- Report to residents on planning issues in the community newsletter. Residents should be aware that there is a planning

committee looking after community interests on planning matters. Encourage residents to get in touch with you if they have an issue (e.g. if they do not understand a development notice).

- You can notify residents who live near a proposed project that there has been an application made to develop land near them. Neighbours can be invited to the meeting at which the development will be discussed.
- You should strive to involve residents in the planning and development matters that affect the community because a representative, fair, and constructive planning committee with well-founded views will often be more effective.
- You have a responsibility to support the involvement of community groups and individuals in planning and development issues and processes.
- If requested, facilitate neighbour participation in the process. You can also note their views in your response to The City, even if they conflict with your own.

Be Proactive

- Consider developing a community charter and/or community plan that helps guide new development in the community. These documents outline the goals and objectives of the community, provide community context, guide the league's actions in dealing with planning applications in the community, and allow developers to understand the community's perspective.
- Undertake more proactive planning pursuits, such as community improvement projects, in addition to the planning application review process. The ability of a planning committee to move from taking positions ("We don't like this") to advancing interests ("We are interested in seeing something that integrates into the community better") also goes a long way in adding legitimacy and strength to the planning committee from the perspective of The City and developers.
- Communicate with the file manager to understand the issues and possible solutions. Endeavour to develop good, communicative relationships with applicants and file managers. This can make the work of your committee easier and more rewarding. Applicants and file managers can benefit from your knowledge of the community and its history.

- Take a team approach to planning. Try to bring your committee members, the neighbours and the applicants together to reach positive solutions that benefit everyone. It is important to articulate the interests of your community in a constructive manner and look for common ground with the developer in order to resolve conflicts. This sometimes is referred to as moving from “positions” (we oppose your project) to “interests” (this is what our community is looking for – how does your project support that?). Success is more likely when all parties move beyond positions to find solutions based on their interests. Look for a win-win solution.
- As Edmonton continues to grow, development in new areas and redevelopment in existing areas presents opportunities to improve communities. By participating in the planning process community leagues can help to manage and direct positive change. You should strive to support development that is compatible and beneficial to its surroundings and contributes positively to the overall character of the neighbourhood.
- To understand what may eventually be built in your community, you may wish to do an inventory of vacant land and its zoning. Publish this information in your community newsletter, so all residents are aware. If you identify land use issues in your community, bring them to the attention of your board. They may authorize further actions such as contacting the land owners, the Councillor, or the City.

Be Consistent

- Consistency refers to the stated position of your committee with respect to a particular type of application. Consistency does not mean that you shouldn't try to negotiate a unique solution to potential problems. Negotiations should be carried out at the committee meeting (rather than one-on-one) so the applicant and committee members have a clear idea of the community's position. Consistency also means not arbitrarily changing positions on a project, but only in response to good reasons. Over long processes plans and situations can change considerably, so it is important to keep good records, continuity, and keep the lines of communication open.
- Draft some development guidelines or principles for your committee that can be used to evaluate specific types of development proposals.

- Appoint one contact person for your committee to communicate with The City or applicants. These guidelines can help to avoid the common situation where one member of the committee tells the City or a developer one thing, and another member seems to contradict them. The committee should try to remain as cohesive as possible.

Be Prompt

- Deadlines are important. If a file manager does not hear from a community within the time allotted to respond to an application, they must assume that there are no concerns over the development.
- The time given to community leagues to respond to circulations is two or three weeks from the mailing date. City planners understand that it is sometimes difficult for volunteers to be able to meet and review applications within the given deadlines. If you cannot comment by the date requested call the file manager as soon as possible to see if more time is available. If you arrange a new deadline, make sure you provide your comments at the time agreed upon.
- Note that you are not required to comment on an application. However, if you provide no comment, this is often interpreted as a sign of support.