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STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE Major/Minor Plan Review Requests and Neighborhood Engagement

No person or entity shall be entitled to rely on or otherwise claim any right or benefit by reason of this Standard Operating Procedure should the Planning Staff fail to strictly adhere to its suggestions, recommendations and/or requirements in carrying out their function.

Best practices indicate that community engagement and input is a critical part of a robust and transparent review process for development applications. The responsibility for engagement should be shared between the applicant, planning staff, and the community, and include clear expectations with identified opportunities for education, awareness, and input. A successful approach toward development review must incorporate concrete, measurable, windows of opportunity for input by the community, while allowing for the overall process to be streamlined and timely for the applicant. The process should create a high level of certainty for the community and the applicant, specifically related to investments, timeframe, and outcomes. Giving meaningful notice of plan review requests must come early in the application process, and it must effectively convey the information needed to participate. This document shall outline a process for clear and defined involvement of community members in the development review process.

Definitions

Plan Review Request – an application by a developer, property owner, or tenant for a modification to the design, use, or occupancy of a parcel or parcels. Staff review these requests for conformance with the zoning regulations. Decision on a particular request may be made “administratively” by the Planning Director or their designee (the “zoning administrator”) or via “public hearing” by a board or commission.

- **Minor** – a minor application is one which is approved at the staff level. This includes administrative site plan reviews, which may be large in scope and scale, but are lawful in accordance with the regulations.
- **Major** - a major application is one that will require a public hearing with a board or commission. The boards/commissions which may be involved are the Planning & Zoning Commission, Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Commission, or Zoning Board of Appeals.

Pre-Application Meeting – a meeting, held by Planning Division staff, with applicant(s) and/or property owner(s) to discuss the details of an application (“plan review request”). Section 1.3.1.B of the Hartford Zoning Regulations states that pre-application meetings provide early opportunity for staff and applicants to discuss the procedures, standards, and regulations required to be met for development approval. This sections also clearly defines the types of requests which shall be required to have the pre-application meeting as part of the intake process.

In an effort to increase communications Planning Division staff shall:

1. **Post application materials on meetinginfo.org.** Meeting materials will be posted under the next commission meeting date, where they will be introduced as “New Business”.
2. **Update mailed notices to neighbors** to include the MeetingInfo web address where documents are available.
3. **Improve sign posting.** Use plain language, specify the type development being proposed, and include a QR code which will direct applicants to meetinginfo.org for more information.
4. **Utilize Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter** to spread information about new applications in addition to meeting the statutory requirements for legal noticing in print.
5. **Continue to direct developers to meet with the NRZ** regardless of whether an application is considered major or minor.
6. **Continue to provide virtual options for attendance at public hearings** even if/when COVID related orders are lift. Virtual public hearings have provided opportunity for more residents to participate and voice their concerns, making the hearing more credible and accessible.
7. **Write staff reports that include commentary from the NRZ.** If none is received, staff reports shall indicate the date that notification of the project was sent to the NRZ. If the staff report recites community concerns, staff shall indicate if a land use regulation can be applied to address the matter.
8. **Attend NRZ monthly meetings.** Staff will come prepared to present a summary of active major and minor applications and zoning permit requests in the area for the previous month. Staff shall answer basic questions as time allows. NRZ chairs shall reserve space on their agendas for this monthly report out.

Working with Community Members for Commentary on Major Applications

The recommendations below shall apply to major plan review requests. They shall not apply to requests brought before the Historic Preservation Commission. Revisions to permits and minor requests, including administrative site plan reviews, and use and occupancy permits, shall not be subject to this process.

There are two stages in the application process. The following outlines the steps within each stage:

1. **Pre-Application Stage.** This occurs prior to the applicant contacting the Planning Department or any submissions being made. Generally, this is not the appropriate stage for detailed community input as the application has not been vetted by Planning Department staff as to its feasibility (i.e. use is allowed, etc.), approval process, applicable standards, and conceptual design. At this stage, staff cannot know whether the request is considered major or minor.
 - Nothing stated above shall preclude the applicant from contacting the community voluntarily.

- Planning staff shall provide the applicant with contact information for NRZ representatives.

The important outcome of this stage is for the applicant to engage the Planning Division staff for pre-application meeting. This will ensure that any information that is then conveyed to the residents and community in the post acceptance stage is correct and accurate.

2. **Acceptance and Referral Stage.** This step occurs after an application has been filed.

- Staff shall upload all relevant application documents to meetinginfo.org for inspection by the general public.
- A letter will be sent by Planning Division staff to the chair and/or Development Review Committee representative for the corresponding NRZ stating the following:
 - o An application has been received;
 - o The nature of the application including applicable Sections of the regulations and commission(s) that will review it;
 - o Application documents are available for public review/inspection online and the web address;
 - o The applicant/owner has been instructed to contact/ meet with the NRZ and either party may initiate contact;
 - o Contact information for the applicant/owner;
 - o The application will be introduced as “new business” at the next commission meeting (application deadlines shall apply);
 - o A public hearing will open for the application on X date;
 - o The NRZ shall have 30 days to review the application and provide their comments;
 - o Barring any other concerns by staff, the public hearing will proceed whether comments have been received by the NRZ or not;
 - o Contact information and specific due date for returning comments

This letter shall serve to indicate that the Planning Division has received a formal request and shall become a part of the formal record of the application. A similar notification letter shall be distributed via mail and/or electronically to adjacent property owners, persons of record, registered civic associations, and municipalities (abutters).

- During this stage, the NRZ and applicant may schedule to meet with one another so that the proposal is clearly explained and any issues can be examined further.
- A staff planner may be available to participate in a community meeting to answer questions about the review process/timeline and to record resident concerns and feedback. If the NRZ, would like the staff to participate, the NRZ shall inform the staff of the meeting in advance in writing.

- The NRZ shall return a letter indicating comments, concerns, and/or support for the project within the period prior to the opening of the public hearing.

Comments about the application are accepted via e-mail to oneplan@hartford.gov (use “COMMENTS” in the subject line) or letter (sent to City of Hartford Department of Development Services – Planning Division, 260 Constitution Plaza 1st Floor Hartford, CT 06103)

Minor Applications

The Zoning Administrator may determine appropriateness of a sign posting on a parcel for a minor application. If posting a sign is appropriate, and the property owner agrees to it, the subject property is may maintain the sign on site for the duration of the review.

- Signs shall provide details on the proposed project, links to the application documents, and contact information for the owner/applicant.

Hartford Zoning Academy

Outside of the plan review process, year-round community education is often the first step in obtaining meaningful input on future development applications. Planning staff shall work to develop a “Zoning Academy” curriculum, a seminar series designed to inform residents, civic groups, property owners, and other stakeholders about form-based code, the Hartford regulations, and plan review processes. This series can be paired with and/or offered concurrently with the NRZ educational cohort being developed by Hartford Next.

The Hartford Zoning Academy shall be offered/taught quarterly or semi-annually by Planning Division staff. Estimated kickoff date – *Fall 2021*