

City of East Lansing Boards & Commissions Handbook



EAST LANSING

A half-century after the Grand River plank road was built in 1850, street cars and interurban railroads linked the state capital to the Michigan Agricultural College. The end of the streetcar line formed a wye (turn-around triangle) at the intersection of Ann, Albert and M. A. C. streets. In 1907 a committee, led by Agricultural College postmaster Charles Collingwood, proposed a charter for "College Park" to the state legislature. On May 8, 1907, following extensive debate, legislators chartered "East Lansing." The city's first paved road, Michigan Avenue, was completed by 1916, and the police and fire departments were established in 1921 and 1924. East Lansing experienced its greatest growth between 1950 and 1960 when its land area tripled and its population increased by 50 percent.

MICHIGAN REGISTERED HISTORIC SITE



“Never doubt that a small, group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

- *Margaret Mead*

Welcome and thank you for volunteering to participate in the local government policy process in service to the City of East Lansing. As an appointed member of one of the City’s volunteer Boards, Commissions and Authorities, you have accepted the challenge of helping to shape important decisions on behalf of your community.

“I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.”

- *George Bernard Shaw*



East Lansing City Council

Councilmember Lisa Babcock, Councilmember George Brookover, Mayor Ron Bacon, Mayor Pro Tem Jessie Gregg, Councilmember Dana Watson

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Note: For the purpose of simplicity, boards and commissions will simply referred to as “commissions.” Board and commission members will be referred to as “commissioners.”

Roles of Commissions

Commissions function in two distinct capacities in the public policy process in East Lansing: Advisory and Administrative. Some will serve in both capacities.

The Advisory Role

Each Advisory Commission makes recommendations to the City Council based on the scope of its particular service area. Typically, Advisory Commissions have a work agenda in place for a calendar year during which it undertakes projects, deliberates on issues and hosts special events.

The City Council is responsible for making the final decisions on most issues or topics, but it will look to commissions for advice, background information and analysis. As the elected body, the City Council has discretion to accept advice in full, in part or not at all.

The Administrative Role

Certain commissions have an additional administrative role. This means that they are permitted or required by charter, statute or ordinance to conduct formal reviews and issue administrative decisions.

It is vital that rules established by law are followed by commissioners and that every administrative decision is supported by facts placed on the record. An administrative decision should not be based on the number of people who show up to speak for or against, rather, it should be based on applicable law and presented facts or testimony.

In fact, courts will overturn decisions that lack a factual basis and decision makers may even be liable if determinations are not based on what is permissible under the law. In some cases, a decision may be appealed to the City Council; in others, an appeal will be made to Circuit Court.

The Relationship of Commissions with City Council

The City's five Councilmembers divide the task of serving as liaisons to the various commissions. The role of Councilmembers varies between commissions. Generally speaking, liaisons do not become actively involved in the general conduct of the work of a commission. Nonetheless, recommendations for appointments of new commissioners are made in collaboration with the City Council liaison. The appointments must then be approved by the entire City Council during a meeting.

Each commission advises the City Council on specific issues or on policy matters regarding its assigned responsibilities and duties. Typically, the commission chairperson and city staff member will keep the Council liaison informed of important activities of the commission. It is incumbent upon the Council liaison to keep the other Councilmembers updated.

In some cases an individual commissioner who cares deeply about a particular issue may wish to appeal directly to the Council in order to shape the outcome of Council's decision. However, this is discouraged because it detracts from the purpose of the commission which is to arrive at a decision, recommendation or set of recommendations based on consensus.

The outcome of commission deliberations should be based on the vote of the body rather than the preferences of a single member. The responsibility of a commission is not to control the outcome of decisions that will ultimately be undertaken by Council, but to provide the best possible advice based on public input, analysis and review of the issue(s).

As a guide to decision-making, commissions are provided with the City Council's Strategic Priorities. The Strategic Priorities are identified bi-annually and reflect the Council's overall priorities and vision for the community.

Each commission has its own set of tasks to accomplish based on mission. Some activities are prescribed by local ordinance and/or State of Michigan statute. Others

are established by interests and expertise of commission members. Each commission should prepare, in collaboration with staff support and the council liaison, a work program comprised of items to take up over the course of a calendar year.

“I can assure you, public service is a stimulating, proud and lively enterprise. It is not just a way of life, it is a way to live fully.”

- Lee H. Hamilton

The Relationship with City Staff

Commissions are assigned a staff representative with expertise in the area falling under its purview. The staff member attends all meetings but is not a voting member of the group. In some case, they are active participants during the discussion phase and, in other cases, they are not. Staff for some commissions, such as the Planning Commission is expected to make a formal recommendation on the course of action, based on the law, policy and professional expertise. In all cases, the role of staff is to support the work of commissioners by providing information and background, keeping minutes and agendas, helping to plan and organize commission activities and in general, acting as facilitator. Staff is expected to have an in-depth understanding of the community and its history.

Once a commission has taken action, it is the role of staff to make a formal presentation to Council and to prepare any associated materials needed. Staff is required to provide a complete overview of the commission’s proceedings and to ensure that all relevant points are included in the final packet of information City Council will use for deliberation and decision-making. When commissioners differ on an issue, the role of staff

is to remain neutral. Staff will look to the chairperson to speak for the commission as a whole.

While staff is actively involved in the commission's work, they also have other duties and assignments. It is solely the Department Director who determines staff work agendas and directs staff activities.

Sometimes commissioners will want to direct the work of staff or take it on personally, however, neither course of action is appropriate. If commissioners have concerns about staff activities and work, they should be discussed directly by the individuals involved. Often, this type of discussion provides insight to commissioners about the types of constraints under which staff operate.

Role of the City Attorney

Occasionally, the City Attorney will work with a commission on a specific issue or will attend meetings to advise and counsel the commission.

The staff representative, with the Department Director's approval, will make arrangements for the City Attorney's involvement with the commission. The city staff representative or the City Council liaison must facilitate all interactions with the City Attorney.

The City Attorney is the City Council's legal representative and renders legal opinions on their behalf only in matters involving the City.

The City and its commissions use no other legal counsel in decision-making and the City Attorney's opinions are binding as he or she would defend the City in the case of a legal challenge.

Working Successfully Together

City Council often chooses to appoint individuals to a commission whose views, backgrounds, opinions and values vary widely from one another. The purpose of diverse representation on city commissions is to insure that the

entire community has a voice in decision-making. Sometimes these differences cause conflict during the process of deliberation and finalizing recommendations. Nonetheless, in order to be an effective commissioner, each individual must:

- Work within a team framework of compromise and exchange;
- Separate people from the issues when conflict arises;
- Focus on mutual interests and shared goals;
- Look for compromises and work to understand diverse perspectives;
- Examine one’s own approach to dealing with conflict and be open about concerns where there is room for compromise;
- Strive to problem-solve based on collaboration rather than simply making a decision.

Most issues will be resolved and decisions made through the voting and deliberation processes. It is important to recognize that as a commissioner, you have done your job by thoroughly examining the pros and cons of each situation. Once an issue is decided, it is equally important to accept the wishes of the majority and move on to the next issue.

Board and Commission Responsibilities

Members of commissions have the following responsibilities:

- To attend all regularly scheduled meetings – 2-243 Removal. *Unless otherwise provided by this Code or by law, members of boards and commissions established by this article shall serve at the will of the council. Nonattendance at three regularly scheduled consecutive board or commission meetings or failure to attend more than one third of the regularly scheduled meetings during any rolling 12 month period, is hereby determined to constitute neglect of duty, shall be deemed non-feasance in office, and, unless a removal hearing is otherwise required by law, shall automatically create a vacancy without further action.*

Except in a circumstance of an automatic vacancy under this provision, any commission or board member removed by city council during their term may request a hearing before city council and receive an explanation of the reason for their removal. A member may request the city council to grant a leave of absence, not to exceed 120 days from a board or commission. Such leave may be granted upon the request of the commission and upon a majority vote of the city council.

Other responsibilities:

- To use parliamentary procedure to conduct and participate in meetings;
- To hold public hearings when called for in the commission's enabling legislation, or when otherwise prudent to provide the opportunity for public comment;
- To make recommendations to City Council as required by law or upon request;
- To refrain from any act that constitutes a conflict of interest;
- To follow the operating rules the board or commission has established;
- To review all relevant materials and come to the meetings prepared discuss the issues;
- To work cooperatively with other commissions when there are areas of common interest or overlap in responsibilities;
- To abide by the provisions of the Open Meetings Act.

Media Relations

Local government is a major source of news for the local print, radio and television media. Each outlet assigns a specific reporter to cover the City. The City works closely with the media to insure accurate and thorough coverage of its issues.

Generally, reporters will seek information directly from the City Manager, City Councilmembers, the Communications Department or individual department directors.

If approached by a reporter, consider these guidelines:

- You have the right as a private citizen to speak with the media but first ask yourself if you are the best person to answer questions about the commission's work. Is it more appropriate for the reporter to speak with a City official?
- If you speak with a reporter, stick to the facts. Anything you say may end up in print or on TV. If you do not want to see it in print or over the airwaves, don't say it;
- If you decide to provide your opinion, make it clear that you are speaking for yourself, not the balance of your commission, the City Council or Administration;
- Sometimes reporters get it wrong. Remember that any time you discuss an issue, you run the risk of being misquoted or misrepresented;
- Commissioners are discouraged from engaging in direct media contact. Media relations should be discussed by the commission with consensus about publicizing a project, issue or decision.

“The citizen can bring our political and governmental institutions back to life, make them responsive and accountable, and keep them honest. No one else can.”

- John Gardner

Role of the Chairperson

The chairperson is the key to the effectiveness of the group decision-making process. The chairperson provides direction and sets the tone for the meeting with the other commissioners and with the public. The chairperson must strike a balance between moving the meeting along and allowing for an inclusive and democratic process. To be effective, the chairperson needs the support and trust of the other members. In the chairperson's absence, the vice-chairperson will assume the duty of presiding over the meeting.

Sixteen techniques of an effective chairperson; he or she:

- Uses parliamentary procedure at all times;
- Expects courteous behavior from all commissioners and models such behavior;
- Treats the public with courtesy and diplomacy;
- Listens attentively to all speakers;
- Solicits opinions, ideas and perspectives from all members and avoids letting a few dominate the discussion;
- Protects new ideas from rejection prior to fair evaluation;
- Keeps the discussion focused on the topic at hand and redirects the group when it digresses;
- Delays decision-making until all of the ideas have been articulated and given consideration;
- Attempts to gain consensus;
- Balances discussion and meeting time constraints;
- Assures formal decorum is observed at all times;
- Keeps the audience apprised of process and procedure being used by the group;
- Always restates the motion prior to calling for a vote;
- Applies time limits to all speakers consistently.

Commissions elect their chairperson and vice-chairperson annually. A commission may also appoint sub-committees and members to chair them as needed.

Successful Meetings

Board and commission meetings are open to the public. As the presiding member, the chairperson is responsible for calling the meeting to order on time and adjourning at a reasonable hour.

If meetings are canceled or rescheduled, notification must be posted 24 hours in advance.

People who come to participate in a public hearing or come to express their views on an issue may be doing so for the first time.

The experience can be intimidating and emotional. Sometimes their behavior is nervous, forgetful or even aggressive, however, most people will relax when they perceive that they are treated well and that their concerns are given thoughtful consideration.

Meeting Courtesy:

- An agenda should always be available for members of the audience;
- Commissioners should treat the members of the public with dignity and respect;
- Commissioners should refrain from displaying negative gestures or sounds with they disagree with a member of the public or another commissioner;
- Side conversations should be avoided;
- The chairperson should inform the audience of the time limits for speakers and should adhere to those limits;
- The chairperson should explain the purpose of the meeting and the appropriate time to ask questions;
- The chairperson should explain technical terms or jargon that might otherwise make it difficult for the audience to follow the deliberations;
- The chairperson should thank participants for their attendance.

The Challenging Meeting

If it is anticipated that a particular meeting may be difficult because of controversy surrounding an issue, the chairperson is encouraged to discuss the situation with the staff representative and another commissioner whose input he or she respects. Consideration should be given to making the meeting as productive as possible while respecting differences and individual needs.

Running a smooth meeting:

- Plan the agenda carefully and strategically;
- Make sure the room is comfortable and that adequate seating and audio capability are provided;

- Plan for the location of the media to avoid unnecessary disruptions;
- Try to anticipate difficult questions, problems and information in advance so that clear, concise responses can be given.

During the meeting:

- Begin with a staff review of the issue so everyone is operating with the same set of facts;
- Review procedural expectations including speaker time limits;
- Remind the speakers that they must address the commission, not the audience;
- Explain the rules surrounding public comment and if questions from the audience will be accepted;
- Remind the audience that there should be no demonstration for or against a speaker;
- Make sure that all who wish to speak have an opportunity to do so;
- Model polite listening behavior;
- Apply speaker time limits impartially.

Parliamentary Procedure

All commissions are required to use parliamentary procedures to conduct their meetings and periodically, the City offers an intensive workshop in parliamentary procedures that is made available to all commissioners and city staff who wish to participate.

Commissioners and staff are also encouraged to familiarize themselves with Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised. This is of particular importance for chairpersons in their capacity as presiding officer tasked with conducting fair and efficient meetings.

General Liability

The City’s “errors and omission” insurance policy covers all commission members as they engage in the policy process. Commissions and City Council members are covered in their actions as long as they are based on standards or accepted review procedures in the ordinance they follow.

However, if a commission or a commissioner makes an administrative decision that is “arbitrary and capricious” and is not based on standards of review, they may not be covered under this policy.

Rules and Procedures for Boards and Commissions

All City of East Lansing residents are eligible to serve on one commission at time. The application is available at www.cityofeastlansing.com or by calling (517) 319-6863.

Most appointments to commissions are made in December and January though vacancies can be filled at any time of the year, should they occur. Appointment to a commission requires a majority vote of the City Council. Most commissioners are appointed to three-year terms and may also be eligible for a second three-year term.

If a commissioner finds it difficult to meet the expectations of their assignment he or she can resign at any time. A resignation does not, however, prohibit an individual from being appointed again at a future date. Commissioners must also notify the staff liaison if they are unable to attend a meeting. This is critically important when staff is determining if there will be a quorum of the members required to conduct business.

A quorum is determined as follows: a majority of the members of each commission appointed and serving shall constitute a quorum for the transaction of business. Any member who has been granted a leave of absence, whose resignation has been accepted by City Council, who has been removed by the appointing authority or automatically

removed for nonattendance, shall not be deemed to be serving for purposes of determining a quorum.

A commissioner fulfilling the remaining time on an unexpired term is still eligible for two full terms on the same commission.

City Council holds a reception each fall for commission members during which a representative of each commission provides and updated activity report to the City Council at a televised meeting.

East Lansing Boards and Commissions

As of February 2022, the following commissions have been established to work on behalf of the City. Most meet monthly and all are created by legislation approved by City Council as part of the City Code.

Arts Commission

Art Selection Panel

Board of Review

Brownfield Redevelopment Authority

Building Authority

Building Board of Appeals

Commission on the Environment

Downtown Development Authority

Downtown Management Board

East Lansing Independent Police Oversight Commission

East Lansing-Meridian Water & Sewer Authority

Commission on the Environment

Historic District Commission

Housing Commission

Human Rights Commission

Income Tax Board of Review

Library Board of Trustees

Michigan Avenue Corridor Improvement Authority

Officers Compensation Commission

Parks & Recreation Advisory Commission

Planning Commission

Seniors' Commission

Transportation Commission

University Student Commission

Zoning Board of Appeals

Boards and Commissions General Provisions

Introduced:	06-19-01
Public Hearing:	03-19-02
Adopted:	03-19-02
Effective:	03-31-02

CITY OF EAST LANSING

Ordinance No. 977

An ordinance to amend Chapter 4 – Boards and Commissions of Title I – Administration – and to add Chapter III – Civil Rights to the Title IX – Police Regulations – of the Code of the City of East Lansing.

The City of East Lansing Ordains:

Chapter 2 of Title I of the Code of the City of East Lansing is hereby amended and replaced by a new Chapter 4 to read as follows:

Boards and Commissions General Provisions

2-241 **Appointment.** Members of City Boards and Commissions shall be residents of the City of East Lansing, unless specifically provided otherwise in this Chapter. Members shall be representative of the population of the City and shall include members of the community directly affected by the subject matter dealt with by the Board or Commission. No member shall hold any other municipal office, except as provided by this Code or law. All members shall be appointed by the Mayor subject to the approval of the Council. Unless otherwise provided in this chapter, each Commission member may be appointed to no more than two (2) consecutive three (3) year terms. Provided, however, that the appointment to an unexpired term shall not count against the two (2) term limit. Provided further that Council may waive this limitation for good cause upon request of a Councilmember.

2-242 **Vacancies.** Unless specifically provided otherwise in this Chapter, any vacancy occurring in the membership of any Board or Commission may be filled by the appointing authority for the remainder of the unexpired term.

2-243 Removal. Unless otherwise provided by this Code or by law, members of boards and commissions established by this article shall serve at the will of the council. Nonattendance at three regularly scheduled consecutive board or commission meetings or failure to attend more than one third of the regularly scheduled meetings during any rolling 12-month period, is hereby determined to constitute neglect of duty, shall be deemed non-feasance in office, and, unless a removal hearing is otherwise required by law, shall automatically create a vacancy without further action. Except in a circumstance of an automatic vacancy under this provision, any commission or board member removed by city council during their term may request a hearing before city council and receive an explanation of the reason for their removal. A member may request the city council to grant a leave of absence, not to exceed 120 days from a board or commission. Such leave may be granted upon the request of the commission and upon a majority vote of the city council.

2-244 Meetings. At the last regularly scheduled meeting of a calendar year, each Board or Commission shall adopt a schedule of meetings for the coming year, which shall be publicized through local media or a City publication. Each Board or Commission shall schedule no less than ten (10) regular meetings each calendar year. Special meetings of a Board or Commission may be called upon 24 hours notice by the chairperson or vice chairperson of the Board or Commission.

2-245 Open Meetings. All Board and Commission meetings shall be open to the public, and all business shall be conducted in public session. At each regularly scheduled meeting, there shall be an opportunity for the public to speak. All meetings shall be held in a facility accessible to persons with disability and the City shall provide reasonable auxiliary aids and services to individuals with disabilities upon request received by the City staff resource to the Commission at least seven (7) days prior to the meeting.

2-246 Parliamentary Procedure. All Board and Commission meetings shall be conducted in accordance with Robert's Rules of Order unless otherwise stated in this Chapter.

Each member of a Board or Commission present at a meeting shall vote on each motion made unless excused by the unanimous consent of the other members present.

2-247 Quorum. A majority of the members of each Board and Commission appointed and serving shall constitute a quorum for the transaction of business. Any member who has been granted a leave of absence, or whose resignation has been accepted by City Council, or has been removed by the appointing authority or automatically removed for nonattendance shall not be deemed to be serving for the purposes of determining a quorum.

2-248 Chair and Vice Chair. Except as otherwise provided in division 2 of this article, each Board and Commission, shall, at the first meeting in January, elect a chair and vice chair. In the event a Board or Commission shall, for any reason, fail to elect a chair or vice chair as required by this section, the City Council shall at the Council's first meeting in February appoint a chair and vice chair from the members of the Board or Commission.

2-249 Compensation. Unless specifically provided for by law, no member of a Board or Commission shall be compensated for their service. Members of Boards and Commissions shall be entitled to reimbursement for their actual and necessary expenses incurred in the performance of their duties if the expenses are recommended for approval by the Board's or Commission's staff resource and the City Manager.

2-250 Rules. Each Board or Commission may adopt administrative rules which pertain to the actual conduct of its business. Such rules shall not be effective without the approval of the City Council and once approved, must be made available to each person conducting business before the Board or commission.

2-251 Staff Resource. Each Board or Commission shall be staffed by no less than one (1) employee of the City as designated by the City Manager who shall be secretary to the Board or Commission and who shall have responsibility to: record the meetings, prepare and distribute minutes,

prepare and distribute materials to be considered in the business of the Board or Commission, publish notices of meetings and accommodate persons attending meetings, make recommendations as to the items of business of the Board or Commission, and to act as a resource to its members.

2-252 Annual Report. Each Board or Commission shall report to the City Council on the business conducted by the Board or Commission during the previous year. Such report may be made in writing or be presented at a meeting scheduled by the City Council

2-253 Boards and Commissions Created. See page 16 for a complete list of Boards and Commissions.

Thank You for Your Service!

In concluding, we sincerely hope you enjoy your experience serving on one of the City's boards, commissions or authorities. Most participants report satisfaction with the process and with the opportunity to interact with residents with a shared commitment to the policy process and to serving the East Lansing community. Your dedication is greatly appreciated!

“Everybody can be great... because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

- Martin Luther King, Jr.



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www.cityofeastlansing.com