

VERSION : FINAL
FEBRUARY 5, 2025



PLANNING COMMISSION ANNUAL REPORT 2024

PRESENTED BY: ANDREA Z. POLVERENTO
PLANNING DIRECTOR

PLANNING COMMISSION ANNUAL REPORT

INTRODUCTION

Planning Commission bylaw 6.0 and Sec. 125.3819(2) of the Michigan Planning Enabling Act (P.A. 33 of 2008, as amended) require the Planning Commission to prepare, file, and present an annual written report to the Board of Trustees.

This document is intended to comply with the above-stated criteria and to provide both an overview of 2024 accomplishments and the 2025 goals and objectives of the Planning Commission.

DEPARTMENTAL OPERATIONS

The Planning Commissioners represent many facets of our community and are a qualified, diverse group of individuals with expertise in a variety of professions. The various perspectives and knowledge brought by these members creates a well-rounded Commission that maintains fair and thoughtful deliberations.

2022 Planning Commission roster:

Richard Adams. Appointed 2016. *Chair of the Planning Commission & Representative to the ZBA.*

Beth Ball. Appointed 2007.

David Bartkowiak. Appointed 2024.

Joseph Davis. Appointed 2013.

Charles Openlander. Appointed 2007.

Ronald Overton. Appointed 1993. *Trustee, Watertown Charter Township Board of Trustees.*

Andrew Powers. Appointed 2018. *Secretary of the Planning Commission.*

Richard Turcotte. Appointed 2021. *Vice-Chair of the Planning Commission.*

John Wiesner. Appointed 2013.

Ulrika Zay. Appointed 2021. *Vice-Chair of the Planning Commission.* Resigned, November 2024.

Planning Department staff:

Andrea Z. Polverento serves as Planning Director. She has served in this role for nearly 18 years. In 2024, Polverento was recognized as a 20-Year Member of the Michigan Association of Planning.

Lisa Winans was hired as the part-time Planning and Zoning Assistant in July 2019. She splits her time between several township departments.

Melanie Wright was hired as the full-time Planning and Zoning Assistant in August 2019. She splits her time between the Planning and Zoning Department and the Treasurer's Department, also serving as Deputy Treasurer.

Additionally, Planning Director Polverento would also like to acknowledge Donna Minton, Administrative Assistant, for her ongoing support to the Planning and Zoning Department.

Polverento would like to recognize Ball, Minton, Winans and Wright for their 2024 service as Election Inspectors.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Staff and Commissioners

Maintain and expand working relationships with the Board of Trustees and other departments within the township.

The Commission and staff have worked directly with the Board of Trustees to address zoning ordinance amendments, special land use permits, and zoning enforcement. Meeting agendas, minutes, and reports are shared between the Commission and Township Board. The Planning Director attends most Board meetings to facilitate communication. Staff works closely with the Deputy Clerk on necessary public hearing notices, and posting of minutes and agendas on the township's website.

Encourage commissioners and staff to attend continuing education seminars as well as explore the possibility of in-house training.

Polverento attended the Michigan Association of Planning's housing workshop, and participated in many webinars and virtual trainings provided by the Michigan Public Service Commission, MSU Extension, EGLE, legal information, and others.

Keep operating expenses in line with the approved budget.

Staff and commissioners reviewed the proposed budget for 2025 in accordance with bylaw 6.1.

Continue to maintain a manual for new commissioners in order to promote quality community planning through updated education and information.

Staff compile relevant articles and educational materials for these manuals throughout the year. A new member of the Zoning Board of Appeals was appointed in July 2024, and a new member of the Planning Commission was appointed in December 2024. Up-to-date manuals were provided to each new member, along with an invitation to take part in future training opportunities.

Continue to develop and maintain a departmental website to provide a venue to both developers and residents.

This continues to be essential in directing residents, builders, developers and others to relevant applications, information, and news from the township. It was critical for the master plan update in providing an alternate opportunity for public input. Staff was able to direct residents, developers, contractors, and others to the department's web page for permitting applications, as well as other information and resources in 2024. A page highlighting the groundwater studies completed in 2022 and 2023, as well as resources for maintaining private wells and septic systems was added in 2024.

Engagement, Efficiency, and Enforcement

Ensure that civil infraction penalties are implemented for zoning ordinance violations.

In 2024, staff in the Planning and Zoning office addressed several zoning violations. Most violations were related to either junk or junk motor vehicles. A facility on Grand River Ave. was cited for zoning violations, but significant progress was made and the ticket was dismissed. A civil infraction ticket was also issued for a junk vehicle on Hummingbird Lane, but the property was brought into compliance and the ticket was dismissed.

Staff has been receiving complaints of an abandoned house on Cutler Road since the owner's death in 2022, but a lack of clear ownership prevented any substantive action. Staff is now working with a company to remediate this property and bring it into compliance.

Three other violations were resolved this year, one each on Bancroft Road, Grove Road, and Wacousta Road. A notice regarding a keeping of animals violation has been sent to a property on Lowell Road, and one additional violation on Grand River will be a priority in 2025. Staff is investigating a complaint on Herbison Road for consideration of a violation notice in early 2025.

Staff worked closely with the Mid-Michigan District Health Department and township building department regarding issues at a commercial property on Grand River.

Several additional violations were reported in 2024, but either could not be verified, or did not meet the violation parameters.

Encourage public involvement in planning and zoning efforts.

Staff and Commissioners have made a concerted effort to actively inform and involve citizen participation in the planning process.

The final draft and adoption of the township's master plan was completed in accordance with all public notification procedures.

The Commission continues to post all meeting agendas and approved meeting minutes online.

Continue to analyze existing trends and conditions within planning and zoning programs to manage growth and community character.

This analysis was completed as part of the master plan update with the assistance of consulting firm Giffels Webster.

Continue and improve efficiency in procedures for residents and developers seeking development permits.

Staff is developing a checklist for utility-scale energy projects to ensure all procedures are followed by all parties involved.

Minimize land-use conflicts and promote public health, safety, and general welfare.

Staff and the Building Inspector monitor approved projects to verify proper permits before construction begins on a given site. Staff works with local agencies to verify permit compliance requirements.

Plans and Ordinances

Conduct an annual review of the fee schedule as a part of the annual budget process, to ensure that operating costs are being covered in accordance with the annual budget.

Staff periodically reviews the fee schedule and makes recommendations for adjustments when deemed appropriate. In 2024, staff recommended an update to the Zoning Board of Appeals application fee, which was adopted by the Board of Trustees in December 2024.

Review and update, if appropriate, the Planning Commission Bylaws.

In 2024, the Planning Commission revised several of their bylaws:

- Bylaw 1.1 was amended to describe the method for removing an officer of the Planning Commission;
- Bylaw 1.5 was amended to require that the Planning Commission Secretary provide notice of special or emergency Executive Committee meetings in accordance with the OMA; and that notice of Zoning Board of Appeals meetings and the staff report be submitted to Planning Commission members;
- Bylaw 1.6 was amended to provide a statement that the Representative to the Zoning Board of Appeals shall not serve on the Ordinance Review Committee;
- Bylaw 2.0 was amended for a minor textual issue;
- Bylaw 2.1 was amended to include elections as a reason to select an alternate meeting date;
- Bylaw 3.5 was amended to include a statement that the Representative to the Zoning Board of Appeals may be replaced on the Executive Committee with an at-large member; and that interviews and evaluations are conducted for review and approval of the Planning Commission;

- Bylaw 3.6 was added to establish specifications for meetings of the Site Plan Review Committee.

These amendments were adopted by the Planning Commission at their regular meetings on April 3, and May 1, 2024.

Review and update the Capital Improvements Plan.

The Planning Commission conducted a full update of the Capital Improvements Plan in 2019 and several new capital projects were added to the plan. The Planning Commission will continue its annual review of this plan, and new projects may be added at any time, if necessary. The Planning Commission added a capital project and updated the status of several other completed and in-progress capital projects in 2024. The amendments were approved by the Planning Commission at their regular meeting on September 4, 2024.

Continue ongoing evaluation of the Zoning Ordinance in order to facilitate necessary amendments: to clarify language of the Ordinance; add new zoning techniques; add new uses to zoning districts; continually review existing standards; and implement possible changes in procedure.

While no zoning amendments were addressed in 2024, actions by the state legislature, and state and federal judicial decisions have required staff and the Planning Commission to keep a close eye on these activities and how they affect the Zoning Ordinance. Specifically, state actions related to renewable energy were of concern throughout 2024. Any necessary amendments to the Zoning Ordinance will be a priority for the Planning Commission in early 2025.

Continue the Master Plan update process and submit document to the Board of Trustees.

The Planning Commission has been engaged in a full update of the master plan with the assistance of consulting firm Giffels Webster since 2021. This review concluded in 2024. The 63-day review process was conducted between September 18, 2023, and November 20, 2023. A public hearing was held on January 10, 2024, with adoption by the Planning Commission on March 6, 2024, and adoption by the Board of Trustees on March 18, 2024. This document will be reviewed periodically to ensure goals and objectives are being met.

Long Range

Staff and Commissioners will be trained to understand increasingly technical information within the fields of planning, zoning, and environmental issues.

The Commission and staff continue to look at ways to implement trending issues and emerging topics within the zoning ordinance. Staff conducted several informational presentations at the Planning Commission and Board of Trustees meetings in 2024, related to renewable energy facilities.

As staff and Commissioners attempt to deal with increased development pressure, they must become more knowledgeable about projects and their potential effects on the community. They must actively pursue greater public awareness and involvement in the planning process.

The public notice procedure is strictly followed. Every effort is made to ensure that the township website is also updated to keep the citizens informed. Staff provides relevant articles for the township newsletter. This year, an article regarding the master plan update was published in the township newsletter, along with reminders on well testing and maintenance, and using the MISS DIG system.

Staff and Commissioners are prepared to consider alternatives to problematic land use issues.

2024 Department cases

Case Number & Name	Date	Action
24-01 ZBA Simmons Variance Request	Feb 2024	Approval Rescinded by ZBA in March 2024
24-02 SPR – Peckham Farm Building Additions	Mar 2024	Approved by PC in March 2024
24-03 SPR/SLU – House of Promise Facility Expansion	Apr 2024	Approved by PC & BOT in April 2024
24-04 SPR – Myers Plumbing & Heating Cold Storage Building	May 2024	Approved by PC in May 2024
24-05 SPR – Northern Pump & Well Cold Storage Building	Jun 2024	Approved by PC in June 2024
24-06 OAL – Wacousta Co-op Preschool Block Party Outdoor Assembly License	May 2024	Approved by BOT in May 2024 for June 1, 2024 Event
24-07 OAL – Royal Scot Micro Wrestling Outdoor Assembly License	Jun 2024	Approved by BOT in June 2024 for June 26, 2024 Event
24-08 SPR – BRP/Manitou Storage Yard Expansion	Aug 2024	Approved by PC in August 2024
24-09 PPLT – Lakeside Preserve Preliminary Plat 2-Year Extension	Aug 2024	Approved by PC & BOT in August 2024

NOTABLE 2024 PROJECTS

Renewable Energy Legislation Review

In November 2023, Governor Whitmer signed PA 233 of 2023, which, under certain conditions, preempts local zoning authority for utility-scale renewable energy production facilities. In Watertown Township, this particularly affects solar energy systems expected to generate over 50 megawatts, and battery energy storage facilities of 100 megawatts or greater. The legislation allows electric utilities and independent power producers to apply for a certificate from the Michigan Public Service Commission (MPSC) to operate a commercial-scale wind or solar facility. The MPSC is required to issue this certificate subject to a few requirements, including holding a public meeting in the township, and at least 60 days before the public meeting, the applicant must offer to meet with the chief elected official of the township in writing.

Local units of government are permitted to adopt “compatible ordinances,” and if one is in place, the developer/applicant is required to obtain local approval as provided in the ordinance. However, the township may also consider “workable ordinances,” wherein regulatory components may exceed state requirements, but the developer may still opt to pursue certification through the township’s process. The MPSC conditions are limited to basic setbacks, height, noise, electric code compliance, and lighting. The MPSC must also consider the percentage of land in any community dedicated to energy production and find that any project “will not unreasonably diminish prime or other farmland.”

These conditions do not consider basic items that zoning would typically regulate, including glare, escrow funds for local professional reviews, decommissioning, landscaping and screening, drainage, access by emergency vehicles, and zoning districts for placement. Many of these items are included in the MPSC review process but are not required by statute.

The Planning Commission sought guidance from the Board of Trustees on how best to proceed with potential amendments to the existing solar ordinance (which constitutes a “workable” ordinance), and a new ordinance, which would establish regulations for battery energy storage facilities. The Ordinance Review Committee of the Planning Commission is currently working on these topics and expects to have recommendations to consider by early spring 2025.

Master Plan Update

The Planning Commission concluded a master plan update which began in 2021, and included a six-month pause during discussions related to a mega-development nearby. This update greatly expanded the demographic profile of the township, added a complete streets policy, and streamlined goals, objectives, and action strategies. The Future Land Use map was also updated. This master plan is intended to guide the long-range planning and development of the township.

Capital Improvements Plan review

The Capital Improvements Plan was updated in its entirety on the required six-year schedule, with updated criteria and several new projects being included in late 2019. A review of the Capital Improvements Plan was conducted in 2024, the final year of this plan. New capital projects were added, and the status of current and completed projects was updated. In 2025, the Planning Commission will consider a full update of the plan.

Other notable projects

In 2024, many township businesses expanded their facilities, including Peckham, Inc., Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 333, Myers Plumbing & Heating, BRP/Triton, and House of Promise. Expansion of these successful existing businesses shows the staying power of the township’s business community.

Two home occupations were approved in 2024, in accordance with Sec. 28-4.4 of the Zoning Ordinance.

After nearly seven years of litigation, Mattheu L. Monroe & Julie Monroe v. Watertown Charter Township, et.al was dismissed.

Staff continues to make a concerted effort to engage in local and regional outreach programs. Staff participated in many activities with the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission including the Groundwater Management Board (GMB). In 2024, Polverento was elected Chair of the GMB, and participated in the Outreach and Education Committee, which is developing private well maintenance materials to reach a wide range of audiences.

Staff serves on the Board of the Clinton Conservation District, which provides technical support and expertise to local landowners on watershed planning efforts, federal farm bill programs, and many other natural resource and agricultural programs. This knowledge base provides an opportunity to assist township residents with agricultural, forest, wetland, and wildlife habitat risk reductions, management of invasive species, and the sharing of local seminars and trainings on native plants, beekeeping, hobby farming, homesteading, cover crops, and low- or no-tillage practices.

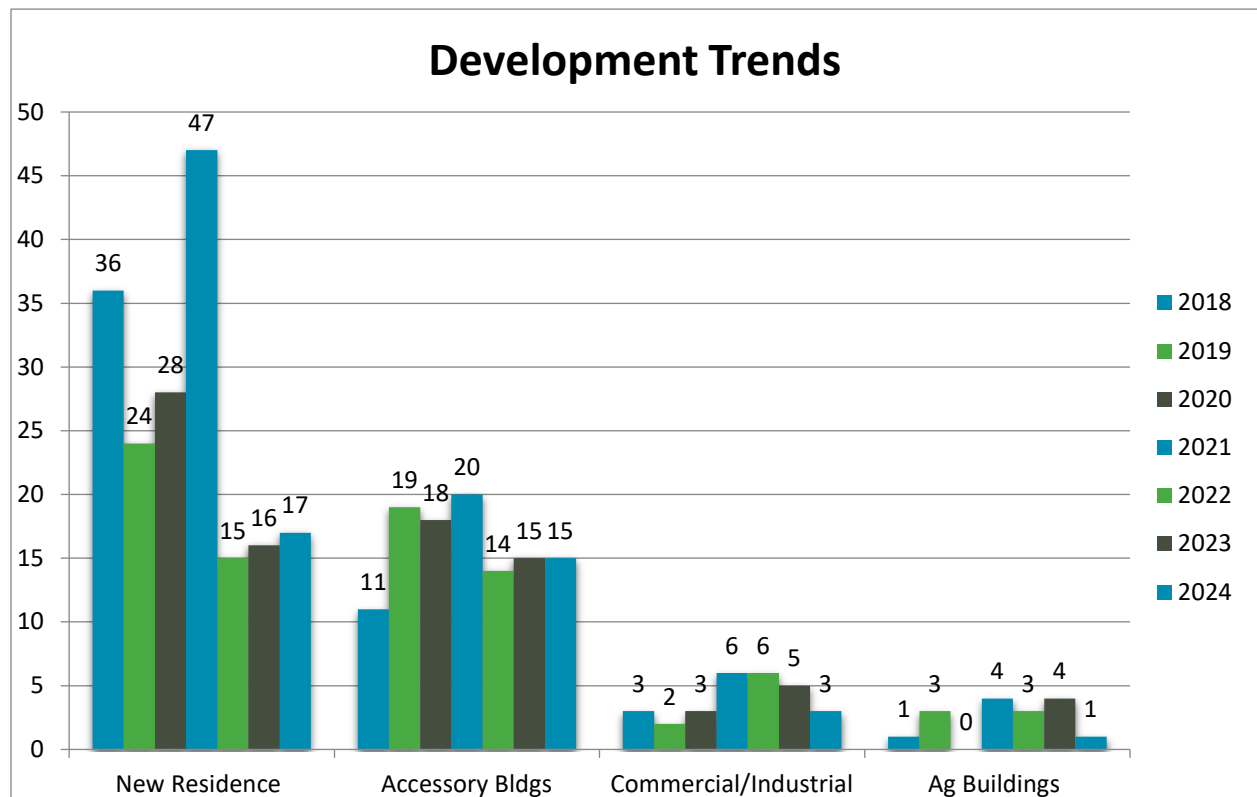
PERMITTING ACTIVITIES

Zoning Permits Issued: 63

Residential	2024
New Residences	17
Residential Additions	2
Accessory Buildings	15
Decks and Porches	12
Pools/Ponds	5
Home Occupations	2
Sign Permits	0
Residential Solar Panels	0
Commercial/Industrial	2023
New/Remodel/Additions	3
Sign Permits	3
Cell Towers and Related	0
Agricultural	2023
Ag Buildings	1

Certificates of Occupancy Issued: 16

	2024
Residential	17
Commercial/Industrial	1



Meetings:

Body	Number of Meetings
Planning Commission Regular	9
Planning Commission Special	0
Ordinance Review Committee	1
Executive Committee	1
Site Plan Review Committee	0
Master Plan Committee	0
Zoning Board of Appeals	2
Construction Board of Appeals	0

PROGRESS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

2024 Activities

With the assistance of consulting firm Giffels Webster, the Planning Commission completed an update of the Township's master plan, in compliance with the Michigan Planning Enabling Act, P.A. 33 of 2008, as amended. This plan was updated in 2016, and a required five-year update was completed in 2024. While the Commission worked to complete the master plan update, the adopted plan was an excellent working document. In 2024, the Planning Commission and department made progress on some of the goals, objectives and action items outlined in the previous and updated master plan, including:

Research, evaluate, and consider zoning ordinance amendments that provide a range of housing opportunities for an aging population.

Evaluate and amend, if necessary, the residential zoning districts to permit a range of housing choices at densities consistent with the goals and intent of the master plan.

In 2024, staff attended training hosted by the Michigan Association of Planning pertaining to housing supply, choice, and affordability. This training provided detailed methods for evaluating existing housing stock with census data, and staff intends to bring this information to the Planning Commission in 2025.

Provide educational materials regarding the importance of proper maintenance of well and septic systems.

In 2024, staff served as Chair of the Groundwater Management Board, which developed multiple materials related to this topic. These materials are shared in the front hall of the township offices, and on the township's website. Further, staff developed a resource sheet for well and septic maintenance which is shared on the township's website.

Work to recruit new and retain existing commercial, industrial, research and technology uses in the Township.

Many existing businesses are in the process of expanding or remodeling this year, including BRP (formerly Triton Industries), Peckham, the House of Promise, Myers Plumbing & Heating, and Northern Pump & Well. Flying J completed their EV charging stations in 2024.

Continue the Capital Improvements Program.

The Planning Commission conducted a full review and update of the Six-Year Capital Improvements Plan in 2019. One new project was added to the plan in 2024, statuses of current projects were updated, and the plan is well-positioned for a full update in 2025.

Allow for high-density, single-family residential growth in areas where community services, including public safety, utilities, and transportation networks are provided.

The Overall Preliminary Plat for Lakeside Preserve was renewed for an additional two years in 2024. Staff continues to work with local agencies, including the Clinton County Road Commission, Clinton County Drain Commissioner, and SCCMUA to ensure infrastructure requirements throughout the township's subdivisions are satisfied.

Foster good communication and partnerships with local agencies, utilities and other organizations to ensure full compliance with all regulations and requirements before, during and after development activities.

Staff and the Planning Commission work closely with local agencies, utilities, other organizations, and other internal and external township departments to ensure compliance with all regulations. Staff and the Building Inspector meet regularly to discuss ongoing projects, and keep open lines of communication between departments. Staff works closely with the Assessor and Treasurer (and County Register of Deeds and County Treasurer, when necessary) when approving land divisions. In 2024, the township's long-serving Building Official retired, and township staff is working to ensure the transition to a new building department staff is smooth.

Encourage low impact development stormwater management techniques, including bioretention.

Promote the use of grass swales, natural on-site detention, and native vegetation, rather than typical suburban elements, in rural residential areas.

Encourage the use of native species for landscaping and stormwater management purposes.

In 2024, staff reviewed all landscaping plans with developers, architects and engineers to determine and ensure compliance with the township's required native plant regulations. When asked, staff provided recommendations on suitable native species.

Work with developers, the Michigan Department of Transportation, and the Clinton County Road Commission to achieve safe and efficient access to properties along all roads in the Township.

The Township Manager's office handles much of the road-related concerns in the Township. Her office is working with the Clinton County Road Commission on a Safe Streets For All (SS4A) federal funding program.

Manage growth to reduce encroachment of non-farm uses into viable agricultural lands.

Discourage the premature conversion of agricultural lands into residential and suburban development. In 2024, while outside of the township's boundaries, Eagle Township effectively ended any likelihood of a megasite within its boundaries.

2025 Goals and objectives

In addition to completing the five-year master plan review and update, many goals, objectives and action strategies from the master plan are proposed for action in 2025.

At their regular meeting in December 2024, the Planning Commission reviewed and discussed the action strategies they intend to make a priority in 2025, including solar and battery facility regulations; complete streets; and housing. The Planning Commission also discussed broadband expansion, which is being addressed by the Township Manager's department.

Solar Energy & Battery Energy Storage Facilities: *Assess the Zoning Ordinance standards for alternative energy systems to ensure alignment with best practices.* The Ordinance Review Committee of the Planning Commission has been tasked with this assignment and expects to provide recommendations in Spring 2025.

Complete Streets: *Work with developers, the Michigan Department of Transportation, and the Clinton County Road Commission to achieve safe and efficient access to properties along all roads in the Township. Partner with road agencies, utilities, and public and private landowners to facilitate communication about and encourage the implementation of the Non-Motorized Transportation Plan.* The Township Manager is working closely with the Clinton County Road Commission on a Safe Streets For All (SS4A) grant.

Housing: *Research, evaluate, and consider Zoning Ordinance amendments that provide a range of housing opportunities for all age groups. Evaluate and amend, if necessary, the residential zoning districts to permit a range of housing choices at densities consistent with the goals and intent of the Master Plan.* Staff is preparing for a work session at a future Planning Commission meeting to review existing housing stock, evaluate potential options for accessory dwelling units, and discuss other opportunities for housing supply, choice, and affordability.

Broadband Access: *Encourage and plan for the extension of high-speed internet in areas not currently served.* The Township Manager's office is actively addressing this issue.

Other staff priorities for 2025 include updating and evaluating permit applications for accessibility and user-friendly experiences; developing checklists for renewable energy facilities to ensure compliance with all regulations; providing resources to new Planning Commission and Zoning Board of Appeals members to facilitate their introductions; and to work with MSU Urban and Regional Planning students on a joint project with Delhi Township to recommend updates to the township's sign ordinance.