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LEVERAGING THE PLANNING PROCESS TO CREATE A MODEL OF ENGAGEMENT FOR COMMUNITIES IN NEED

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Leveraging the Planning Process

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INTRODUCTION

Leveraging the planning process to improve the results of regulations and development for communities is the quintessential function of what municipal planners, consultants, and volunteer boards and commissions strive to accomplish. In Michigan, this process is accomplished through decades worth of empirical research combined with guidance from state statutes like the Michigan Planning Enabling Act (MPEA) (2008) and Michigan Zoning Enabling Act (MZEA) (2006). However, the process has a tendency to fail underserved communities that do not have the capacity to engage their population at the regional level. This Co-Learning Plan (CLP) seeks to create policy recommendations based on best practices and public feedback to leverage the planning process for the greatest impact in our overstretched communities.

This CLP will accomplish this by creating a review of the shortcomings of planning processes and the problems presented to decision-makers via public meetings. Furthermore, this CLP will review the shortcomings on the community's behalf, such as communication barriers, internet access, and costs. After this research is compiled each facet of the planning processes will be broken down into a matrix that highlights the best practices at each phase. This matrix will be sent out for community review, in which the most effective steps of the process will be highlighted and then standardized into a recommendation for communities to improve their planning processes.

The formal planning process can be lengthy and difficult, which includes an ample amount of public participation and volunteer action from start to finish. Ultimately, the results of the public input session of this paper focused heavily on achieving consensus, communicating effectively with difficult to reach populations, managing the timeframe and costs of the planning process, and helping to enable staff to facilitate the process. These recommendations can help local board and commission members visualize the planning process from start to finish and make recommendations for amending statutes that will help streamline planning in Michigan. This CLP is the first step towards helping communities who need ways to increase their capacity to utilize the planning process for the best results. This CLP received a high level of participation from volunteers across the state; and seeks to move forward with more outreach and research.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

One difficult aspect of addressing how to improve the planning process, which will be covered in later sections, is that planning at its core can be highly technical and full of jargon. This will be addressed for this plan by creating a definition of what the planning process entails and the steps that will be covered in more in depth as we progress. The American Planning Association (APA), defines good planning as a practice which "maximizes the health, safety, and economic well-being of all people living in our communities." However, this does not address the idea of what the process entails, just the end goal of the planner's, and community's, work. At the highest level, the planners involved in this process take the building blocks of a community; buildings, roads, parks, and more, and position them to achieve their highest and best to create lasting value for their communities long into the future.

The planning process covers a wide set of topics and involves a myriad of techniques for evaluating and distilling data. This includes merging available demographic and market data with mapping tools like Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to provide a visualization of the impacts that developments will have on their city in the long term. The role of the planner is to use these skills to create easily digestible recommendations for volunteer boards and commissions, and the public, to understand.

The simplest way to understand and evaluate what is involved in the planning process is to break down the process into phases with actionable items; then identify what action needs to be included in each step. An example of this process was created by Urban Learning (Urban Learning, 2020), a grant funded project from the European Union, which created a road map that inspired the baseline format for this report. Since Urban Learning used cities with a high financial and technical capacity to create their planning process (Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, etc.) there will be additional research necessary as we discuss this process in Michigan. As each phase of the planning process is explored in more detail this baseline will be improved into a more comprehensive planning checklist, complete with regulatory steps and recommendations based on relevant literature. Thereafter, we will begin to find opportunities for cities in Michigan with a lower capacity to build on this framework to be more streamlined and efficient for their planning processes.

Urban Learning identified the principal phases of the planning process as the following: Preparatory, Feasibility and Master Planning, Formal Planning, Design and Implementation, and Operational. This guideline begins to show the localized planning process on how this plan will begin to evaluate ways to improve it in overstretched communities. Urban Learning begins to identify different planning requirements and actors who should be a part of each step; however, this needs to be localized and fine-tuned to make recommendations for Michigan communities and communities that lack the capacity to complete each phase on their own. Using the basics provided by Urban Learning, this plan expands upon each of the phases with relevant scholarship and includes steps required by the MPEA and MZEA to identify areas to improve the recommendation of each step. Furthermore, we will be refocusing each of the phases so that we can ensure each step is streamlined, redefining the titles of each phase to avoid jargon, and increase accessibility. A summary of these phases is as follows in the following sections. For the sake of inclusivity, including all possible types of planning interventions, the phrase *solution* is used; especially since this plan is exploring data-based solutions to community problems.

PREPARATORY PLANNING PHASE

The first step is to identify the problem and analyze the data to come up with a potential solution. The data for this phase can cover a broad range of topics, including demographics, land use patterns, transportation systems, and more. The data and exploration are not beneficial for the *preparation* of the

solution without properly contextualizing it. To increase specificity, all data gathered should be location specific and properly applied at the correct geographic scope where the solution is designed to impact, whether it be city, township, region, or even statewide. Second, the data should be specific enough that the findings relate directly to all the key elements that the solution will impact. With this identification comes the preparation of a solution to put through the planning process that is well-grounded in relatable research and highly applicable within the local context. This is the highest, and broadest level, phase of the planning process, which needs to be very intentional and thoughtful for all affected parties before being evaluated more thoroughly. Ultimately, for the purpose of creating the foundational matrix of this plan, the first phase focuses primarily on the distillation of relevant community data to create a solution that is anticipated to fulfill needs within the community. The Preparatory Planning Phase sets the stage for the remainder of the planning process and should end with an evaluation of the solution on behalf of the municipality.

FEASIBILITY PHASE

After the data is gathered and a solution is hypothesized, the Feasibility Phase focuses on reviewing if the solution can be implemented within the confines of the community's established framework. Feasibility in this context refers to how the proposed solution aligns with the needs and vision of the community through a review of relevant policies, like a Master Plan. A Master Plan, according to the Michigan Association of Planning, is a "document and policy guide to help communities create a vision of what they want to look like in the future". These plans undergo rigorous review from local legislative bodies and often include a step-by-step guide for helping communities move into alignment with this vision based on a study of existing conditions.

The Feasibility Phase is vital for success, and without a thorough review at this stage there is a significant risk for moving forward with solutions that do not align with the community's vision and goals. Master Plans, as defined by the Michigan Planning Enabling Act (MPEA) advocates for plans that are, "coordinated, adjusted, harmonious, efficient, and economic and that best promotes public health, safety and general welfare" and that are based on community principles founded through existing data and community input. Unless there is a dramatic change in data or community conditions from the time of the adoption of the Master Plan to the introduction of a solution, there is a limited rationale for why a solution should stray from these principles. The MPEA helps communities safeguard against this by requiring Master Plans to be reviewed and updated every five years, however, in instances like the COVID-19 pandemic communities may experience rapid and significant change. Unfortunately, this process can be cost prohibitive and overwhelming, making the Feasibility Phase difficult.

The Master Plan may not be the only plan that needs to be considered during this process, and many communities who have a specific area targeted for redevelopment may have sub-area plans that need to be reviewed during the Feasibility Phase as well. This can include sub-area plans, for instance Grand Rapids *Viva La Avenida Area Specific Plan* (Michigan Association of Planning 2023 award winning project), a sustainability plan, similar to the City of Sterling Heights Sustainability Plan (Michigan Association of Planning 2022 award winning project), or even a plan that is heavily focused on a sensitive development area, like a waterfront or industrial park (MiPlanning, 2022). These community resources can help to refine the solution if it is currently deficient and help bring it into better alignment with what the community needs and desires, but it is important for planning solutions to be properly vetted through these community frameworks. After the feasibility is evaluated, the next phase begins; formally reviewing the plans through relevant codes, boards and commission review, and fulfilling all legal requirements.

FORMAL PLANNING PHASE

The third phase, the Formal Planning Phase, is a vital phase for the success of the proposed solution within the community. While the second phase focuses on the feasibility of a solution within the context of the community, the formal planning phase is a rigorous and technical review of the zoning compliance and relevant codes to ensure compliance within the communities' legal framework. For solutions that are rooted in land-use or development, one example of a relevant code would be the zoning ordinance, which is statutorily authorized under the MZEA. The zoning ordinance is the code based on the Master Plan, and thus provides specific technical references to many of the solutions that result from the planning process.

This phase also introduces boards and commissions at the local, or regional level, into the planning process. This includes enabling decision makers on boards, such as the planning commissions, zoning board of appeals, and even up to city council at the local municipal level, through ordinances and state statutes. These groups fill an advisory role for the planners, making decisions about proposed solutions through an evaluation of relevant facts and by providing a platform for public comments during a formal hearing. Soliciting feedback, through proper noticing procedures at a public forum, is important to ensure that the community is able to provide input on how they are impacted by decisions. The most affected and vulnerable community members should be a primary goal in this phase, which may follow a myriad of best practices outlined in the overwhelming wealth of scholarship regarding the participatory planning process; however, this process can also be a significant challenge (discussed in the next session). Under the MZEA, notices are required to be delivered to all property owners within 300 feet of a subject address for a public hearing, requiring supplies, postage, and staff time to prepare, which are all tasks that require community capacity.

Ultimately, the Formal Planning Phase helps the decision-makers conceptualize the solution and envision its application, thus leading to an informed decision through a rigorous review of applicable codes and ample public feedback. The board and review portion of this phase often leads to a final step in the approval process prior to any final administrative review; hence, this phase carries significant weight. Adherence to local codes is also crucial during this phase since volunteer boards and commissions have a significant amount of oversight of their governmental powers. They also help to provide the correct documentation and ensure that decision-makers are prepared, which is a significant step for the planner.

DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

The Design and Implementation Phase starts after the solution has been deemed feasible through plan review and after the technical ordinance requirements are met. An easy example of this phase from a theoretical and practical level is a *site plan review*. A site plan review is the "most powerful planning and natural resource protection tool", that ensures that the fully vetted solution is what will be the actual end result of the planning process. If the solution is an ordinance or an agreement (think about a Planned Unit Development), the next step towards the implementation is recording the approved documents with the local Clerk or County Register of Deeds. This ensures that all parties have signed off and that the documents are published and available for distribution and publication as needed. The MPEA and MZEA outline some of these statutory requirements as well, including requirements for filing with the local clerk following certain actions by boards and commissions. The largest burden of work for the Design and Implementation Phase generally comes to the local planners and municipality to move the solution onto the fifth, and final, phase.

OPERATIONAL PHASE

The final phase of the planning process, the *Operational Phase*, ensures the constant monitoring and improvement/evaluation of the solution after it has been implemented. This includes the monitoring of the

solution and how it functions within the context of the community. There are a great deal of planning *products/solutions*; at the same time there is scholarship that exists positing that planners rarely are able to formally evaluate their work. The MPEA helps to enforce some evaluation of plans by requiring Planning Commissions to revisit their Master Plans every five years. However, not every community has the capacity to complete this review in a thorough manner (even the Michigan Municipal League goes as far as considering this review "perfunctory").

The institutional capacity to adopt and monitor the solution allows for planners to recognize the successes of the communicative process, while also helping to increase knowledge of the planning processes. However, at its core, evaluation means completing a systematic assessment to determine the merit, or lack thereof, of the solution), but it is up to the community how they will determine what *merit* means to them. Therefore, the Operational Phase is a bit of an enigma when determining when and how to perform an evaluation of the solution and what factors to consider for this review. In an ideal scenario, best practices in the field will evolve over time as the solution continues to operate, and thus the perfect evaluation metric will become available and simplified over time. Technology can help facilitate the operational phase, such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology's research into Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which assesses the success of urban design using modeling software (MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning). Ultimately, the Operational Phase is one of the most important phases, as it may lead to a completely new revelation about where the planning process can take a community.

The Planning Process in Summary

The procedural outline in this section shows a roadmap for development, starting with a simple idea and moving it through the planning process until a solution is formed. In summary, the five phases outlined through the review of relevant literature are as follows:

1. *Preparatory Planning Phase:* The first phase includes identifying a problem and analyzing the data to come up with a proposal for a solution. This includes contextualizing the ideas within the context of the local community.

2. *Feasibility Phase:* The second phase establishes if the solution is capable of being implemented within the confines of the community's established planning framework.

3. *Formal Planning Phase:* The third phase is a rigorous and technical review of the zoning compliance and relevant codes to ensure compliance; including the legal framework. This phase also may include public meetings and gather significant public input.

4. *Design and Implementation Phase:* The fourth phase follows all approvals from boards and commissions and includes the review of the technical requirements necessary for implementation of the solution.

5. *Operational Phase:* The final phase of the process is an on-going phase of gathering data and assessing the solution over time.

COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

In an ideal world, the planning process outlined above creates a perfect roadmap for communities to follow from start to finish, but unfortunately planning in the real-world means having to deal with real challenges. The planning process requires capacity for the municipality, planners, volunteers, and for the public and community as a whole. However, a lack of community capacity is not the only barrier that we will address. Certainly, having a percentage of the population that is income-constrained or asset-limited can create challenges for a community, but the quantity of engagement does not necessarily yield better results. Below, the plan will discuss the *quality* and *variety* of engagement, along with the institutional capacity, to help gather the engagement necessary that will most effectively benefit the public.

Lack of Assets for Community Members

The planning process outlines the importance of identifying the challenges that Michigan communities are facing when attempting to operate effectively throughout the process. First, communities that have high percentages of ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) households often lack technical and institutional capacity to achieve their greatest results. ALICE refers to households that earn above the federal poverty level but are unable to afford the basic cost of living in the county where they reside. ALICE is an alternative formula that fills in the gaps in the reporting of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) threshold for determining which community members have financial shortcomings. ALICE has several measures that can be applied for to determine the minimum cost of resources that households require to survive; including housing, childcare, food, transportation, healthcare, and other contingency items that are updated on a rolling scale to account for different household types. A review into Michigan communities with the highest percentages of ALICE households will identify the urban and rural counties where there is the largest need for creating a streamlined planning process. Second, as identified in the Formal Planning Phase, participatory planning requires a high level of input to be able to create high-quality, functional results. Oftentimes research shows that communities that have a high number of ALICE households do not have this level of involvement for various reasons.

To understand this challenge, we need to break down the challenges that face communities with a high percentage of households that fall below the ALICE threshold. These groups often do not qualify for public assistance and may be overlooked when evaluating communities' needs in some budget items. This includes notable categories like housing and transportation, which often have projects reviewed by planning authorities and local governments. Using the ALICE threshold of Financial Survival will help identify communities that have a large number of unrecognized households that are facing financial hardship (United for ALICE, 2021). These communities would benefit from a streamlined planning process that has the potential to bring them quality developments like affordable housing or amenities within walking distance.

This Co-Learning Plan will be utilizing the *ALICE Threshold* for the purpose of identifying communities to participate in the Delphi Study. This number shows the minimum income level necessary, adjusted for household size and composition, for survival for a household based on the county. The most recent data provided by United for ALICE (2021), out of Michigan's 4,029,761 households, found a total of 13% of households were below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), but an astounding 26% more were below the ALICE threshold. This Co-Learning Plan will focus on the communities with the highest percentage of households that are below the FPL and ALICE threshold, a total of 39% of all Michigan households.

At the core level, the lack of assets for community members can hinder the generation of engagement due to barriers that make it difficult to attend public meetings or provide valuable feedback. During the

COVID-19 pandemic when public meetings were held virtually during Zoom or other online meeting systems, households who were unable to afford, or unable to install internet, were left without an accessible avenue for public participation. Even now many municipalities accept comments through e-mails or post their meeting agendas and notices online on their municipal websites. This problem is more significant in Michigan than some people may even imagine at first glance. For instance, River Rouge, the city in Table 2 with the highest percentage of households below the ALICE threshold, has on average 20% fewer households signed up for a broadband internet subscription than the US average (66.8% to 87.0% according to the 2021 American Community Survey). When meetings are held in person even more variables, such as access and hours of public transportation or percentage of households that own vehicles, become relevant for communities who are below the ALICE threshold.

Lack of Quality Engagement

Providing the infrastructure to get people to the table is not the only barrier to gathering sufficient engagement. A significant problem in many communities is getting people to the "table" while making sure that the "table" is large enough to accommodate a broad and diverse group of citizens whose voices should be heard. The planner's role in gathering public engagement, at least in the beginning of the process, is to ensure that the public feedback is fair and based on the facts presented by the planner. For example, historically there has been a power dynamic that inherently links developers to the public with each depending on the other to fulfill the need for housing, in a way the public does not oppose. This may be due to the perception that developers are only interested in profit, and not benefiting the community; thus, creating a notion that drives up engagement from people who are disinterested in the development and not people who are there to speak positively on behalf of the developer.

There is a great deal of scholarship available on *how* to get people to attend public meetings; however, one of the most important questions for the formal planning phase may be *who* participates. Dr. Katherine Levine Einstein, professor at Boston University, found that individuals who are older, male, longtime residents, consistent local voters, and homeowners are the most likely group to participate. On the other hand, high ALICE populations may have socio-economic factors (including but not limited to race, rental status, and duration of residency) that make finding substantial, quality engagement difficult based on Einstein's profile. This implies that communities that have a transitory population or a high level of renters, typically communities who are exploring solutions for affordable and attainable housing, are ones that also have a difficult time getting people to show up and help shape proposed solutions to better suit actual community's needs.

Ensuring adequate, quality participation is not only important for helping planners and commissioners craft quality solutions, but it has ripple effects into a wide variety of results for municipalities. Dr. Katherine Levine Einstein (along with David M. Glick and Maxwell Palmer) uncovered significant findings in the world of participatory planning where highly involved groups of locals, dubbed *neighborhood defenders*, opposed new multi-family housing projects to the extent where it actually diminished the accessibility of housing, led to a diminished housing stock, and drove up the prices of housing within their communities. This population of single-family homeowners typically meets the criteria of those who are likely to participate as previously discussed, or as Einstein says, "likely to be privileged on a variety of dimensions". This gap in participation becomes even more critical when looking into regional planning efforts, where there may be differences in capacity among local governments who are involved, and regional strategies may benefit one community more than another. In Michigan, where the system allows local governments to voluntarily follow regional plans, the communities with lower levels of engagement and less capacity may be less inclined to participate in regional planning efforts.

LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

Finally, beyond working with, and engaging the public, the community can encounter barriers that are inherently required from the land use and public participation requirements. No other local government function includes as robust of a public participation requirement as the adoption of solutions related to planning and land use law. This started in 1924, with the U.S. Department of Commerce's Standard State Zoning Enabling Act which allowed states to delegate their police powers to local governments to adopt zoning ordinances. The Standard Act requires procedural elements, including public hearing standards, which are open to all citizens and establishing powers for boards and commissions. Today, in Michigan, this is continued by the MPEA, which consolidates the State's planning rules into a singular law, and the MZEA, which is the enabling state statute for the creation of local zoning ordinances.

The MPEA and MZEA are the guiding documents for our planners and our boards and commissions throughout the state, however, they do not come without incredibly strict rules and regulations to follow. The MPEA specifically outlines the requirement for communities to comply with the Open Meetings Act, requiring the noticing of properties within a set distance, thus incurring costs for the postage, mailings, minutes transcriptions, and time for staff to spend strictly on noticing requirements. It may seem like a potentially trivial amount; however, this does add up and in communities that lack capacity the noticing requirements can be difficult to manage. Furthermore, as referenced in the sections above, during the pandemic there was a need for communities to hold meetings online which creates additional costs of finding ways to film or stream meetings and provide telecommunications software.

Perhaps the costliest barrier for communities is the need to keep up with the MPEA's requirements for updating the community Master Plan. Section 125.3845 of the MPEA requires local planning commissions to review the Master Plan every five years following the plan's initial adoption to determine if the plan needs to be amended or a new plan needs to be adopted. Many communities do not have the capacity to undergo an entire rewrite, however, the cost of amending a plan can still lead to significant costs from consultants who are able to take over the public participation and data gathering portions of the Master Planning process. Every five years may seem like a significant period in between Master Plan review, but if the amendment process takes over a year, that timeline is significantly decreased. An easy solution may be to keep the existing planning framework in place through the current Master Plan and updating the data every five years. However, with how rapidly the environment changes this is not necessarily possible to maintain (think, the first case of COVID-19 was only discovered *four years ago* at the time of the writing of this plan- that's not even long enough for one planning commission review!). Without an updated Master Plan, the entire basis of phase two the Feasibility Planning Phase, becomes difficult to accomplish since recommendations would be made on outdated data.

WHAT CAN THIS PLAN IMPROVE?

"Developing a model for organizations to use to make the planning process operate more effectively for communities who lack the technical and institutional capacity to achieve their greatest results."

The process outlined above describes the core of the planning process that this Co-Learning Plan is aiming to evaluate. There are, at a base level, five phases that help progress an idea to a solution. This plan aims to develop a new model, based on feedback from the individuals who are heavily involved in the process, to make this process operate more fluidly for communities who lack the technical and institutional capacity to achieve their greatest results. For communities in Michigan who have a significant amount of their population fall within the ALICE threshold there are inevitably going to be challenges to meet these technical requirements and difficulties in engaging all community members. The result of this review of

literature has led to the creation of the matrix below in Table 1 that merges the steps involved in each of the phases and the challenges associated with that phase, as well for evaluation through the Delphi Study process.

Table 1: An Overview of the Planning Process

Action Items	Potential Challenges	Anticipated Results
Preparatory Planning Phase Preparatory Planning is the first phase of the planning process. This step involves a diagnosis of the geographic area and the collection and analysis of data that ultimately leads to a solution being clearly defined as a proposal. For the sake of this procedural chart, a solution can refer to a project like a formal site plan development, the adoption of an ordinance to address issues like nuisances and blight or to help improve existing land uses, or the creation of a program that serves the entire geography. Therefore, this phase focuses on the distillation of relevant community data to create a solution that is anticipated to fulfill needs within the community. This stage sets the stage for the remainder of the planning process and ends with the start of the evaluation with the municipality.		
Identify a problem that the solution is going to help solve.	• Multiple uncertainties with stakeholders and the community. • Differing stakeholder values.	• Start with an idea of a potential solution that fulfills a need in the community.
Gather and distill community data to provide a background for the solution.	• Difficulty in accessing data or gathering relevant data.	• Use data-driven approaches to make decisions on fine-tuning a solution.
Contextualize the solution within the local setting to finalize the proposed solution.	• Assumption that all cities face the same challenges. • Inadequacy of "one-size-fits-all".	• Bring together the relevant information to finalize a submission to the municipality to begin the planning process.
Feasibility Phase The Feasibility Phase allows for an initial review to determine if the solution is actually capable of being implemented. Feasibility in this context refers to how the proposed solution aligns with the needs and vision of the community through a review of relevant community frameworks like a Master Plan or other formally adopted community plans. These community resources can help to refine the solution if it is currently deficient and help bring it into better alignment with what the community needs and desires.		
Using available resources, like the Master Plan, Capital Improvement	• Lack of capacity can lead to using	• The original solution proposal is fine-tuned

Plan, and others, the solution must be evaluated to ensure it meets specific targets that the defined geographic region hopes to meet.	outdated plans or data for evaluating solutions. • Lack of funding makes it difficult to update long-range plans.	based on relevant information. • Recommendations from staff can be rooted in the goals and vision outlined in long-range plans.
Generate a formal solution proposal to be reviewed administratively or to be placed on an agenda to be reviewed by boards and commissions.	• If board and commission review is required, applications often are associated with fees that can become expensive. • Staff time can be limited.	• The proposed solution enters formal review.
Formal Planning Phase The Formal Planning Phase includes compliance with goals and visions set forth in adopted plans, compliance with technical guidelines as set forth in the zoning ordinance, and adherence to the legal requirements outlined in the Michigan Planning Enabling Act and Michigan Zoning Enabling Act. A major step of this phase could even be a review from relevant boards and commissions; including but not limited to planning commissions, zoning board of appeals, and even city council or a township board.		
Complete a preliminary review of the solution to ensure that it meets the technical guidelines established by the local zoning ordinance and Master Plan. This includes outlining the approvals that may be needed from each board or commission.	• Capacity for local planners to be able to thoroughly review every project. • This is a preliminary review. • The solution may change throughout the process.	• Have a polished proposal that is ready to be viewed in a public meeting and that is open to scrutiny from boards, commissions, and the public. • Utilize all planning and legislative tools to generate a recommendation for the proposal moving forward.
If necessary, secure reviews from the relevant boards and commissions; including the proper	• The regulation for open meetings requires attention and resources.	• Gain approvals on the proposed solution after the feasibility and compliance has

noticing and reporting guidelines required by law.	• May require an extra layer of scrutiny through public hearings or review from boards and commissions. • Differing interpretations or opinions.	been reviewed and confirmed; ensuring regulatory conformance.
Design and Implementation Phase The Design and Implementation Phase should come to many as a relief, since it means that the project has passed the feasibility stage and received all relevant approvals from staff or from boards and commissions. If the solution is a development or a site plan, then a final site plan would need to be designed and submitted here based on previous approvals. If the solution is an ordinance or a plan, then this phase would include fine-tuning based on the previous approvals. Ultimately, the design and implementation phase send the solution back to staff to fulfill the remaining statutory requirements moving the solution towards implementation.		
Conduct a final review of the solution to ensure that it meets any conditions put in place by a board or commission and to ensure that no changes have been included that would require additional review.	• Lack of capacity can extend the review timeline for the review processes.	• The applicant can get their proposal on a timeline for implementation with the municipality. • The proposed solution is no longer proposed, as it is finalized from these steps in the Formal Planning Phase.
Finalize all documents that need to be signed by the approving bodies and applicants; and ensure that they are registered with local courts, clerk's office, or other public entities.	• Legal requirements can be costly or take additional review time. Steps like recording deeds or formal agreements can extend the project timeline.	• All required paperwork and documentation are made public and filed with the local clerk to ensure they are public record.
Operational Phase The final phase, the Operational Phase, is the last step of the cycle that sees the implemented solution in action in the community. This phase includes the ability for planners to gather unique and valuable data to ensure that the solution is operating as intended, and that future solutions		

can use the result of this process in their process as well. Ultimately, the result of the planning process yields a new data point that can be recorded to see what benchmarks have been achieved.		
Monitor the on-going development of the final adopted solutions.	• Lack of capacity for continual monitoring.	• The solution is implemented and operating within the community, thus achieving the desired effects.
Ensure that the final results of the planning process are completed to the standards of the municipality.	• Economic feasibility does not always line up with approved plans.	• The completion of the project aligns with the community's vision and relevant plans or technical ordinances.
Track the results of this planning process and show over time how it has helped to achieve the community needs and benchmarks established in the Preparatory Phase.	• Lack of capacity for gathering data. • Failure from an earlier stage of the planning process can lead to data that is not valuable for the community.	• The successfully implemented solution can act as a data point that helps to mold future planning decisions.

METHODOLOGY FOR EVALUATING THE PLANNING PROCESS

Following the completion of creating a framework for the phases of the planning process and identifying the relevant stakeholders and potential pitfalls of each phase, a matrix was created for evaluation (shown above in Table 1). A "Delphi" Study was selected as this Co-Learning Plan's method of evaluation to create new recommendations on leveraging the planning process. This process allows members of local communities' boards and commissions to provide input and achieve rapid consensus on the various steps outlined in the matrix. Furthermore, the Delphi Study will allow for a wide range of participants to lend their expertise in the evaluation by providing first-hand input of the challenges that their community currently faces and expressing their opinion on potential improvements. To ensure that the results of the plan are universal and recommendations in this plan can be applied by all regions in Michigan, a wide range of communities who met the relevant criteria discussed below were invited to participate.

Establishing the "Delphi" Study

Throughout this Co-Learning Plan the word Delphi will remain in quotations in large part because the methodology framework was modified. This occurred due to difficulties in gathering a series of responses from the same group of people over time. Using the planning process framework established in the Preparatory Planning Phase of the research, the matrix (Table 1) was uploaded into Qualtrics XM, a survey tool, to send out to potential participants. The survey was then sent out to volunteer board and commission members who are involved in the public planning process from the communities outlined in Table 2 below. Board and Commission members were chosen for this research due to their unique position in representing their community, but also in their role as a member of the planning process expert.

The survey instrument separated each phase from the matrix above into five question categories, one for each phase, and asked the experts a series of questions regarding what action items, challenges, anticipated outcomes, and recommendations there are related to the phase. Again, the process for gathering data was modified from a traditional Delphi Study because of the difficulty in gathering a series of responses from the same group of people from a wide grouping of municipalities, many of whom are participating on their respective Board or Commission in a volunteer capacity. Therefore, rather than gathering consensus through multiple rounds of the feedback loops, the consensus was gathered by reviewing the survey's responses over the four categories and distilling them into broad recommendations used to update the planning process matrix, ensuring that the recommendations would be beneficial and impactful. This was accomplished through the selection of phrases used in the coding of the survey results that were focused on the highest frequency of response categories.

Selecting Geographies

The municipalities that were invited to provide feedback for this plan were selected through data provided by United for ALICE which highlighted the number of households in each subcounty, place, and zip code for the state of Michigan (United For Alice). The statewide data available was generated using the 2021 American Community Survey, and showed the number of households in each place, the number of households below the federal poverty level, and the number of households below the ALICE threshold. This data was filtered by p*lace* to include only cities and villages, excluding census designated places, for ease of access for reaching out to the local boards and commissions.

After the place designations were filtered out, a threshold for inclusion was generated by determining what percentage of the households in each community fell below the ALICE Threshold. This number was calculated by applying the following formula:

(Households below the Poverty Line + Households below the ALICE threshold) / Total number of households = Percentage of total households below the ALICE Threshold

The minimum number of households (HHs) below the ALICE Threshold required for inclusion in this study was set at 60%. This limitation ensured that the results provided a wide range of municipalities throughout the state while also ensuring that a majority of the community's households were asset limited. In total, 35 cities and villages in Michigan met this criterion. A further distinction was made using the minimum qualifying threshold from the 2020 Census Urban Area Criteria, which requires at least 2,000 housing units for a place to be classified as urban. These criteria most closely align with the ALICE data provided for Michigan; therefore, when evaluating the data from the Delphi Study, the community results can be separated based on the community's classification, and recommendations can be generated accordingly. Finally, the City of Detroit was omitted from the dataset for this plan to avoid including an outlier, as its total number of households (251,729) is over ten times greater than that of the next largest city meeting the 60% ALICE threshold (Pontiac, with 24,548 households). The complete list of municipalities meeting these criteria is shown below in Table 2.

Table 2: Communities in Michigan with Over 60% of Households Below the ALICE Threshold

Municipality	Place Type	HHs	HHs Below the Poverty Line	HHs Below the ALICE Threshold	% of HHs Below the ALICE Threshold (FPL + ALICE)	HHs Above the ALICE Threshold	% of HHs Above the ALICE Threshold	Does it Meet the Definition of Urban?
River Rouge	City	2887	1252	981	77.35%	654	22.65%	Y
Highland Park	City	3976	1563	1461	76.06%	952	23.94%	Y
Benton Harbor	City	4041	1803	1260	75.80%	978	24.20%	Y
Beaverton	City	540	166	232	73.70%	142	26.30%	-
Hartford	City	899	243	400	71.52%	256	28.48%	-
Baraga	Village	528	112	261	70.64%	155	29.36%	-
Galesburg	City	853	219	375	69.64%	259	30.36%	-
Harrison	City	883	231	373	68.40%	279	31.60%	-
Grayling	City	751	224	286	67.91%	241	32.09%	-
Ypsilanti	City	8338	2227	3408	67.58%	2703	32.42%	Y
Lake Linden	Village	556	130	240	66.55%	186	33.45%	-

Mount Morris	City	1252	354	475	66.21%	423	33.79%	-
Pontiac	City	24548	6959	9158	65.66%	8431	34.34%	Y
Hamtramck	City	7035	2582	2030	65.56%	2423	34.44%	Y
Manton	City	519	104	235	65.32%	180	34.68%	-
Muskegon Heights	City	3567	1155	1174	65.29%	1238	34.71%	Y
Evart	City	663	229	200	64.71%	234	35.29%	-
Clio	City	1194	253	516	64.41%	425	35.59%	-
Gladwin	City	1211	206	571	64.16%	434	35.84%	-
Big Rapids	City	3085	1200	771	63.89%	1114	36.11%	Y
Houghton	City	2358	828	678	63.87%	852	36.13%	Y
Saginaw	City	18092	5930	5584	63.64%	6578	36.36%	Y
Ironwood	City	2579	405	1230	63.40%	944	36.60%	Y
Standish	City	678	164	262	62.83%	252	37.17%	-
Cassopolis	Village	759	171	304	62.58%	284	37.42%	-
Maple City	City	855	171	364	62.57%	320	37.43%	-
Newberry	Village	686	153	276	62.54%	257	37.46%	-
West Branch	City	972	172	433	62.24%	367	37.76%	-
Kalkaska	Village	956	230	365	62.24%	361	37.76%	-
Inkster	City	9031	2973	2626	62.00%	3432	38.00%	Y
Jackson	City	13026	3309	4706	61.53%	5011	38.47%	Y
Imlay City	City	1572	369	594	61.26%	609	38.74%	-
Muskegon	City	13776	3112	5304	61.09%	5360	38.91%	Y
Ecorse	City	3428	1048	1010	60.04%	1370	39.96%	Y

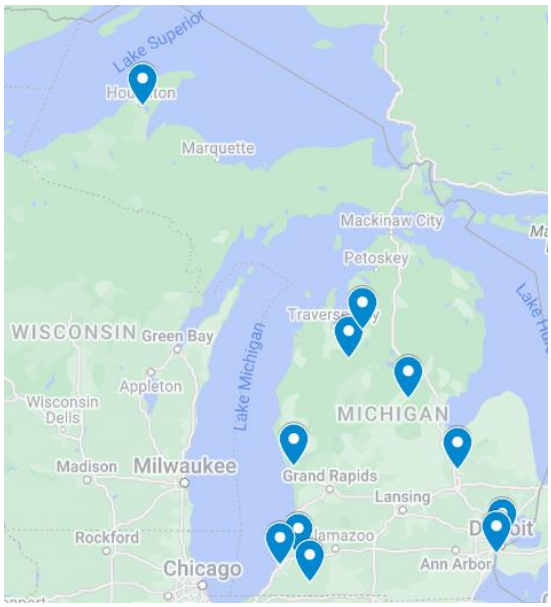
INVITING COMMUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE AND THE PARTICIPANTS

After identifying 35 communities with over 60% of their residents below the ALICE threshold, we began collecting contact information. This plan relies on input from board and commission members involved in the planning process outlined in the matrix. All publicly available emails from municipal websites,

including those of planning commissioners, zoning board of appeals members, and city council members were collected. Additionally, city managers, city clerks, and municipal planners were included on the email list. They were asked to forward the emails to commissioners whose contact details were not publicly listed. In total, 226 participants were invited through bi-weekly recruitment emails sent during June and July, ensuring extensive engagement.

In total, 33 responses were collected throughout June and July, resulting in a response rate of 14.6%. Concerns about this plan and data gathering centered on maintaining a high response rate, especially if participants were required to complete multiple review series, as in a traditional Delphi Study. Despite efforts, the response rate remained relatively low. This could be due to the time needed to review the planning process survey or the possibility of staff and commissioners being on vacation during the summer in Michigan. Nevertheless, the geographical diversity of the responses suggests that the research includes a wide variety of perspectives. In the end, eleven unique communities were represented, with twelve of the 33 respondents choosing not to identify their community. The largest single-community group was five responses from Houghton. Of the eleven named communities, five were classified as urban and six as non-urban. The distribution of responses by community is as follows: chose not to name (12), Houghton (5), Hartford (3), Cassopolis (2), Ecorse (2), Manton (2), Muskegon (2), Benton Harbor (1), Clio (1), Gladwin (1), Hamtramck (1), and Kalkaska (1), as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Survey Respondents Home Municipality



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DATA AND RESULTS

The respondents were asked to provide feedback on several aspects: identifying missing action items, outlining local challenges faced, suggesting anticipated outcomes for this phase, and offering overall recommendations for that phase. The Preparatory Phase received the most feedback and the most detailed responses, which is consistent with later survey results. A majority of respondents (five) indicated that the Preparatory Phase is the most crucial to the entire planning process. The only other phases receiving mentions were Formal Planning (three responses) and Feasibility (two responses). However, it's important

to note that this question was the last in the survey. Respondents might have experienced survey fatigue by this point, given the survey's length and the depth of review required.

The Preparatory Phase of the survey received the most responses, correlating with the results of the question about the most crucial phase. The least responded to questions in each category were “What anticipated outcomes are there?” and “What recommendations do you have?” The question that received the most responses was “Is there a challenge faced by your community?”, suggesting that identifying challenges is a primary concern in these communities' processes. Notably, between the Design and Implementation Phase and the Operational Phase, only one suggestion was recorded. At this stage, board members and commissioners, who are the primary respondents, have typically completed their most active involvement, leaving the tasks to be executed by staff.

The final question invited participants to share any final thoughts. These predominantly centered on the understanding that the process would lead to growth and change. However, a significant emphasis was placed on the necessity of achieving consensus among stakeholders, with a cautionary note that without such consensus, the entire effort could be undermined.

Five keywords were used for coding the data: “consensus”, “staff”, “costs (or a derivative of this such as funding, money, or fees)”, “time”, and “communication”. The responses were optional, with the survey instrument instructing applicants to not respond if they had no comments on that phase. Table 3 shows the number of responses per phase according to the assigned coding. Survey results reveal that the Preparatory Phase received the most responses, and the term "consensus" was the most frequently mentioned by the participants.

Table 3: Survey Responses by Coded Phrase

	Consensus	**Staff**	**Costs**	**Time**	**Communication**
Preparatory	8	2	2	4	3
Feasibility	1	1	3	2	2
Formal Planning	4	2	3	1	3
Design & Implementation	0	0	0	0	0
Operational	1	1	0	0	0
Total:	**14**	**6**	**8**	**7**	**8**

The following set of recommendations are based directly on the results of the responses from board members and commissioners who responded to the survey. This perspective is entirely focused on how to streamline the planning process and help make it more feasible and streamlined.

CONSENSUS IS KEY, BUT SO IS COMMUNICATION
(Keywords: consensus, communication)

In the survey responses, "consensus" emerged as the most frequently coded answer, particularly in the Preparatory Phase. It was also notably prevalent in the Formal Planning Phase and the concluding responses. The respondents often discussed achieving consensus within their community, typically

alongside the importance of effective communication to align community members. One respondent summarized this in the final thoughts section of the survey, stating, “Building consensus about problems and solutions is the most important work.” Clear and concise priorities at the onset of the planning process are crucial for its smooth progression.

However, as highlighted earlier in this Co-Learning Plan, engaging everyone in the consensus-building process is challenging. Many communities face difficulties in eliciting quality input from hard-to-reach populations. A significant number of respondents who identified challenges in the Preparatory Phase pointed out the difficulty in reaching certain community members. This limitation hinders the ability to work collectively, share experiences, and provide input to boards and commissions.

Herein lies the importance of adapting to modern, 21st century communications infrastructure. This would enable communities to better inform their residents about projects and gather feedback more easily. Earlier, this plan highlighted the challenge for broadband access for struggling urban communities, like River Rouge, where broadband subscription is nearly 20% lower than the national average. However, rural areas also face challenges in this regard. The Federal Communications Commission notes that nearly 25% of rural populations lack access to broadband, affecting over 12% of the population, or approximately 42 million Americans. In the Upper Peninsula, which includes five communities in this report, the 2017 Western U.P. Regional Prosperity Initiative Plan discusses the problems that arise from “mobile reception and broadband internet being deficient outside of major communities.” Therefore, to accurately build consensus through communication it is essential to ensure people can participate in the process. One approach is to address State statutes about public notices and to explore alternative methods to provide information to community members, beyond mailing notices to community members per the MPEA. Helping communities to adapt and embrace 21st century communications can help to reach difficult to access community groups. However, this necessitates first establishing the necessary infrastructure.

TIME IS MONEY, MONEY IS TIME
(Keywords: time, costs)

Communication and consensus appear most frequently in the responses, but two other responses also woven through each of the five phases (except for Design and Implementation) - “time” and “costs”. Responses indicate the importance of achieving change and identifying a direction through consensus building. However, time and costs show up most frequently in the “challenges” category of the survey, indicating that this is of large concern for board and commission members. In the initial stages of the planning processes concerns arose related to costs for maintaining and establishing direction. During the later phases of the process, predominantly during the Feasibility Phase and Formal Planning Phase, there are strong recommendations for addressing “financing and timetable”.

A recommendation to following through with these respondents' suggestions involves best practices for working within the current limitations of the communities’ ordinances and within the guidelines of the state statute. The Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) Redevelopment Ready Communities guidelines suggest that all communities should incorporate processes for reviewing their planning solutions and development standards into their ordinances. This does not establish a firm timeline, but it is advisable to recommend to communities to use the basis of the noticing guidelines from the MPEA (notices must be sent out a minimum of fifteen days prior to a public hearing). This guideline can be used to build out a framework that establishes review time so that community members, developers, and staff can provide a clear direction on when solutions will be moved through the various phases of the planning process. Furthermore, by including more participatory efforts in the Preparatory Phase, decision

makers can be more well-equipped to reduce costs later in the process by eliminating the need for subsequent public meetings (which entails less noticing) and less review time for staff.

Helping Staff to Succeed is Important
(Keywords: staff)

The board and commission members who took the survey also were thoughtful of staff's involvement in the planning process. Planning staff and municipal workers are crucial as they initiate the planning process, take in applications and draft solutions that are reviewed by boards and commissions, send out notices, and hold public hearings. Training is an important part of ensuring that staff are prepared to succeed throughout this process. In communities with limited budgets for conferences or training sessions, it's also essential to explore every available training resource. MEDC's Redevelopment Ready Communities program provides recommendations for training manuals tailored to communities. It's important for staff to be up to speed on training as well so that they are capable of facilitating Master Plan review and interpreting zoning ordinances. Board and commission members, along with staff, should ensure that resources and time should be dedicated towards training. This commitment to professional development ensures long-term success, grounded in the application of best practices.

Respondents believe that a significant challenge for a community is continuity between staff during the Operational Phase. "Changing of key personnel" has the potential to "change the direction of interpretation of plans", which can lead to significant setbacks in costs and time when gathering data for a future solution. However, survey respondents suggested a safeguard for this problem: establishing a leadership team with assigned roles during the Preparatory Phase. This approach ensures that if one person leaves during the planning process there are other vested personnel, volunteer board members, or commissioners to maintain continuity and sustained success. Staff and volunteers must be well-trained and focused on a singular goal. This is particularly important during the planning process and challenges that may occur if key personnel are absent.

It All Starts with Preparation
(Keywords: consensus)

The Preparatory Phase was the most selected answer to the question asking respondents to identify which of the five phases is the most important throughout the planning process. Board and Commission members emphasized that the foundational work of the planning process occurs at the beginning. This phase is not only about examining community problems and reviewing data but also serves as a crucial period for building consensus among community members. In fact, the keyword "consensus" dominated the coding of the data from this survey section and was overwhelmingly the most popular response for any category in the entire survey. These results suggest that the Preparatory Phase should be viewed as a comprehensive and collaborative period, essential for setting the stage for the entire planning process.

The survey results point towards the need for a more inclusive Preparatory Phase, one that involves the opinions of relevant stakeholders and uses this exploration as an educational opportunity. This feedback points more towards leveraging this process to create a forum for community members to learn through discussion, and thus "build consensus on identifying problems and potential solutions". Such an approach could make the rest of the planning process more streamlined. A poignant theme realized from the results of this section is that the Preparatory Phase can be an opportunity to "include new issues realized during this part of the [planning] process". Opening up this phase can foster a more participatory process right at

the beginning of the planning process. This inclusivity has the potential to help community groups come together and realize problems they may not have known existed. As one respondent explicitly mentioned, "community members having different problems makes it a difficult problem to solve").

This feedback can significantly enhance the planning process, particularly for communities struggling to engage traditionally non-participatory populations. Proactively seeking public input prior to Phase Three can help to make the process more inclusive and ensure that the process is conducted in "the right way, rather than applying a band-aid." Additionally, by doing smaller public outreach efforts throughout the planning process local planners and volunteers learn more about how to solve low engagement or unequal participation. Such efforts offer learning opportunities over time, rather than doing so once every five years during a Master Plan update or relying on noticing requirements outlined by the MPEA.

CONCLUSION

The planning process varies across Michigan's diverse communities. While there are best practices from resources like MEDC's RRC program and the Michigan Association of Planning, challenges remain, particularly for communities with high percentages of their population below the ALICE threshold or those lacking institutional capacity to facilitate planning.

A key takeaway from this Co-Learning Plan is the consensus among local decision-makers on the importance of finding consensus among community groups for successful outcomes. Moreover, the Preparatory Phase is identified as the most crucial, emphasizing the need for establishing strong, locally relevant foundations at the process's outset to ensure long-term success.

This plan conceptualizes the planning process in five phases, but it's vital to view it as a cyclical process where each solution generates new data for continuous improvement.

Despite reaching out to over 200 community volunteers, future efforts should aim for more comprehensive and thorough qualitative data collection from all communities within the ALICE threshold defined in this research. This broader engagement is essential for a more inclusive and effective planning process.

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