

Charter Township of Comstock

Planning Commission &
Community Development Department
2020 Annual Report



Summary

Despite being a very challenging time due to COVID-19, development activity did not slow down in 2020. The Planning Commission had a busy year with applications and text amendments holding 14 regular meetings. Four meetings were held in-person, 10 held virtually via ZOOM with one of the 14 meetings was held both in-person and virtually.

In 2020, the Planning Commission considered six applications for special exception use approval, nine requests for site plan review and six rezoning proposals. Four public hearings were held on various text amendments along with several meetings being utilized to work on the zoning language prior to the hearing.

Progress continued to be made toward Redevelopment Ready Certification including the development of an applicant feedback survey. The work of the Community Development Director positioned the Township to be eligible for grant assistance to complete the final steps toward certification. When awarded, the Redevelopment Ready Certification will allow the Township to have priority sites marketed by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) to a national audience. Certification will also open up opportunities for site-specific grants and low-cost loans to business and property owners in the Township.

Nearly all training and continuing education opportunities were virtual in 2020. Although networking opportunities were diminished, the virtual nature of many conferences and workshops made educational opportunities more readily available and at much reduced cost to the Township.

The following seven individuals made up the membership of the Comstock Charter Township Planning Commission in 2020.

Jennifer Jones-Newton, Chair

Ron Sportel, Vice Chair

Allan Faust, Secretary

Randy Beister (Liaison to Zoning Board of Appeals)

Patrick Hanna

Bob Pratt (ex officio member from Township Board through November)

Bub Sherwood (ex officio member from Township Board beginning in December)

With staff-support from

Community Development Director Jodi Stefforia

Site Plan Review

The Planning Commission reviewed a variety of site plans from a new Drive & Shine vehicle wash and quick lube on Gull Road to the establishment of a new location for the Dorrance Ford dealership on Miller Drive.

Midwest V, LLC – new 9,100 square foot Dollar General on River Street. *Complete.*

TecNiq, Inc. – a 24,053 square foot building addition on Michigan Avenue. *Underway.*

Utility Contractors – equipment yard for cable utility contracting company. *No longer pursuing this site.*

Parfet – new 40,000 square industrial building on Miller Drive. *Not yet underway.*

McDonald's Towing – new 10,855 square foot industrial building on Interstate Parkway. *Not yet underway.*

R.W. LaPine – new 19,200 square foot industrial building on South Sprinkle Road. *Not yet underway.*

Drive & Shine – new 81,000 square foot (approx.) vehicle wash, detail and quick lube facility on Gull Road. *Not yet underway.*

Dorrance Ford – new 30,000 square foot (approx.) automobile dealership with service on Miller Drive. *Not yet underway.*

Kalsee Credit Union – new 2,790 square foot branch location on Gull Road. *Not yet underway.*

Special Exception Use

The Planning Commission reviewed six applications for special exception use approval. Some of the applications were directly tied to a site plan review.

Gilbert – request for an accessory building that exceeds height and area limitations (a tree house). *Not yet underway.*

Utility Contractors – request for an equipment yard for cable utility contracting company. *No longer pursuing this site.*

Qdoba Mexican Grill – request for a drive-up service window. *Not yet underway.*

Panera Bread – request for a drive-up service window. *Not yet underway.*

Drive & Shine – request for a vehicle wash, detail and quick lube facility on Gull Road. *Not yet underway.*

Dorrance Ford – request for an automobile dealership with service on Miller Drive. *Not yet underway.*

Rezoning

Six rezoning proposals were considered in 2020 by both the Planning Commission and the Township Board.

Rosemont Drive – request to conditionally rezone two lots from R-1B, Single Family to B-3, General Business. *Planning Commission tabled public hearing on February 13, 2020.*

Comstock Center – township-initiated rezoning of 163 properties from various zoning districts to the new CC, Comstock Center zoning district. *Planning Commission recommended rezoning of 160 properties; approved by the Township Board.*

ML Avenue – request to rezone a parcel from O-1, Office to LM, Light Manufacturing. *Planning Commission recommended denial; Township Board denied.*

Gull Road – request to rezone additional 100 feet to 200 feet of depth from B-1, Neighborhood Business to B-2, Community Business. *Planning Commission recommended denial; Township Board approved.*

South Sprinkle Road – request to rezone a parcel from B-3, General Business District to LM, Light Manufacturing. *Planning Commission recommended approval; Township Board approved.*

Miller Drive – request to rezone a parcel and part of an abutting parcel from O-1, Office to B-3, General Business. *Planning Commission recommended approval; Township Board approved.*

Text Amendments

The Zoning Ordinance provisions addressed by the Community Development Director and Planning Commission in 2020 include the following:

- Complete re-write of the parking and loading provisions.
- Creation of a new zoning district called Comstock Center.
- Significant overhaul to the sign provisions.
- Various amendments addressing areas where clarification was needed to existing text.

Miscellaneous

Capital Improvement Program – adopted the 2021-2026 CIP. Commissioner Beister served as the Planning Commission liaison on the Township’s CIP Work Group.

Conceptual Review – reviewed a conceptual plan for a possible tree removal business with related storage and sale of wood products on Wynn Road.

Administrative Review

Comstock Public Schools – approval to modify buildings and campuses for the middle school and the elementary school. *Underway.*

Implementing the Master Plan

In 2020, continued progress was made on implementing the Vision 2025 Master Plan. A new zoning district called Comstock Center was crafted toward the vision of the Comstock Center Sub Area Plan. Further, 160 properties in the Town Center area on the Future Land Use Map were rezoned to the new CC, Comstock Center zoning district.

A new parking and loading ordinance was prepared as called for in the Master Plan. The updated rules are flexible, allow for less overall parking and include rewarding shared parking. The changes result in less impervious areas and reduced development expense to the land owner.

A Capital Improvement Program (CIP) – an annual requirement identified in both the Planning Enabling Act and the Vision 2025 Master Plan – was prepared by a subcommittee of the Township Board, Planning Commission and Township staff and adopted by the Township Board.

Redevelopment Ready Communities

The Community Development Director began pursuing Redevelopment Ready Community Certification from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) in late 2018. This is an arduous program where the community works to streamline the development approval process by integrating transparency, predictability and efficiency into the daily development practices. The Redevelopment Ready Community (RRC) process is a statewide program that certifies communities that actively engage stakeholders and plan for the future. The RRC certification signals that that the community has clear development policies and procedures, a community-supported vision and a predictable review process.

Through the RRC certification process, numerous new policies and guides have been created that reflect existing best practices – Comstock’s current practices that are quite customer-oriented were formalized through this process. The guides bring together relevant development information in a single location on the webpage and reflect the Township’s redevelopment readiness. The most often viewed include the Development Process Overview and the Conceptual Review Checklist.

Undertaken as group effort over several years in most communities, in Comstock Township significant progress was made in 2019 with the balance of work completed in 2020 by the Community Development Director. Many of the tasks undertaken toward certification were reviewed by the Planning Commission and the Township Board with the balance by the administrative team. Comstock Township is now through the first 4 of 6 best practice areas of the program and eligible for grant funding and technical assistance from the MEDC to complete the balance of the items for certification – an economic development strategy, a marketing strategy and identification of and national-level marketing of three yet-to-be-selected priority redevelopment sites in the Township.

The Community Development Director is working the Downtown Development Authority Board to finalize a scope of services for grant funding of a single initiative to prepare both the economic development strategy and the marketing strategy in 2021 to be sure that the final products reflect the Comstock Center area as unique when compared to the balance of the Township. This way, separate yet complementary strategies for Comstock Center are crafted during this Township-wide initiative.

These remaining tasks toward certification should be an exciting undertaking for the Planning Commission, Downtown Development Authority and Township stakeholders with coordination of the effort by the Community Development Director.



Downtown Development Authority

As Executive Director of the Comstock Center Downtown Development Authority (DDA), Ms. Stefforia's responsibilities work toward implementation of the Downtown Development Plan adopted by the Township Board in 2019. The DDA is a large board with 10 members in 2020, to be more efficient, the DDA formed committees to work on specific areas such as *Beautification, Marketing & Outreach, Events* and an *Executive Committee*. The Executive Committee, among other tasks, serves as the sounding board for initiatives the Executive Director may undertake or encourage the DDA to pursue toward making Comstock Center a more vital area for investors, businesses and the residents.

Applicant Feedback

As part of the Redevelopment Read Communities program, the Township initiated a feedback survey for applicants. The survey is sent to former applicants and asks about their experience with the development process, Township Staff and Boards and the nature of their request before the Township.

Feedback from applicants has been positive about the Community Development Director's assistance with the process and scheduling of reviews as well as the Planning Commission's review and approval process.

Training and Continuing Education

Immediately prior to COVID, Patrick Hanna attended a Planning & Zoning Essential workshop put on the Michigan Association of Planning in March.

Several members of the Planning Commission and the Community Development Director were registered for and watched various sessions of the Michigan Association of Planning 2020 Annual Conference beginning in October. The members were Jennifer Jones-Newton, Allan Faust and Patrick Hanna.

In 2020, Comstock Township upgraded its membership with the Michigan Townships Association (MTA) allowing all staff, board and commission members to obtain online training through live and/or pre-recorded webinars on a variety of topics at no cost per attendee. Which members took advantage of this opportunity in 2020 is not reported, however, the Community Development Director did remind the Planning Commission of the opportunity as a regular agenda item. The training opportunity will remain available in 2021 and it is anticipated that MTA will add new content. As the Community Development Director becomes aware of relevant topics being presented, the opportunity is shared.

Per Township policy, appointed board and commission members seeking re-appointment must have attended at least one hour of training per year of term length. For example, Planning Commission terms are three years long; it is expected that within her/his term, the individual member attend at least three hours of training on land use and/or zoning topics.

Day to Day

The Community Development Director fields numerous inquiries each day from developers, engineers, residents, and more. To reduce the disruptions that these inquiries of often- common themes create, many documents have been placed in logical locations on the web page so that individuals can readily find information and then reach out to the Township if they have further questions.

The Community Development Director serves as staff support to the Planning Commission and Zoning Board of Appeals and as the Executive Director to the Downtown Development Authority. She schedules the agendas, prepares the notices and staff reports and attends the meetings to share reports and then follows up each meeting. She also presents to the Township Board on land use and zoning matters and activities of the Downtown Development Authority.

Coordination occurs daily within the Township departments as well as with the Kalamazoo Area Building Authority to allow for streamlined and prompt reviews and approvals or simply an answer to an inquiry.

The Community Development Director serves on the Kalamazoo Area Transportation Study Technical Committee and the Southwest Michigan Bikeway Committee as well as various committees in the Greater Kalamazoo area as the topic warrants.