

Charter Township of Comstock

Planning Commission &
Community Development Department
2021 Annual Report



Summary

Although 2021 continued to present challenges due to COVID-19, development activity was steady. The Planning Commission had a busy year with applications, rezoning requests and text amendments holding 15 regular meetings. Only one meeting was held in-person, 14 were held virtually via ZOOM. Although nearly all the meetings were virtual, significant public input was received on various agenda items.

In 2021, the Planning Commission considered three applications for special exception use approval, four requests for site plan review and six rezoning proposals – four of which were conditional rezoning requests. A public hearing was held on various text amendments along with a working meeting utilized to work on the zoning language prior to the hearing.

Progress continued to be made toward Redevelopment Ready Certification (RRC); the Township has satisfied the Michigan Economic Development Corporation criteria for *Essential Path* RRC certification and is working toward *Full Certification*. The work of the Community Development Department toward RRC certification positioned the Township to receive grant assistance to complete the final steps toward full certification.

Nearly all training and continuing education opportunities were virtual in 2021. 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 Planning Commission spent considerable time on amendments to the bylaws regarding acting on rezoning and special exception use requests and the associated public hearing.

The following seven individuals made up the membership of the Comstock Charter Township Planning Commission in 2021.

Jennifer Jones-Newton, Chair
Ron Sportel, Vice Chair
Allan Faust, Secretary
Randy Beister (Liaison to Zoning Board of Appeals)
Patrick Hanna
Bob Pratt
Bub Sherwood (ex officio member from Township Board)

With staff-support from
Community Development Director Jodi Stefforia

Site Plan Review

The Planning Commission reviewed a variety of site plans from a new Valvoline Instant Oil Change on Gull Road to the establishment of a Consumers Energy substation off East ML Avenue and South 28th Street.

Miller Mini Storage – 4 additional storage buildings. *Underway.*

Kalamazoo Flower Group – a 9,600 square foot building for maintenance work on trucks and trailers. *Underway.*

Consumers Energy – Celery Substation to replace the to-be-decommissioned Morrow Substation. *Not yet underway.*

Valvoline Instant Oil Change – a 2,160 square foot 3-bay instant oil change facility. *Not yet underway.*

Road Commission of Kalamazoo County – phase one site improvements for a new campus for RCKC including a salt barn and weigh scale. *Not yet underway.*

Special Exception Use

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

Donnay Accessory Buildings - a 1,725 square foot accessory building. *Complete.*

Consumers Energy – Celery Substation to replace the to-be-decommissioned Morrow Substation. *Not yet underway.*

Valvoline Instant Oil Change – a 2,160 square foot 3-bay instant oil change facility. *Not yet underway.*

Rezoning

Six rezoning proposals were considered in 2021 by both the Planning Commission and the Township Board.

South 35th Street (Westview Capital) – request to rezone from B-3, General Business to R-1C, Cluster Housing for a single-family neighborhood. *Planning Commission recommended approval; Township Board approved the rezoning request.*

South 26th Street (Ghafari Associates) – request to conditionally rezone from AGR, Agriculture-Residential to LM, Light Manufacturing. *Planning Commission split vote on recommending approval or denial due to one member abstaining; Township Board held a separate public hearing and approved the conditional rezoning request.*

South 29th Street (Luegge) – request to rezone from R-1C, Cluster Housing to B-3, General Business District. *Planning Commission recommended approval; Township Board approved the rezoning request.*

South 26th Street (5200 East Cork Street Investors) – request to conditionally rezone from AGR, Agriculture-Residential to M, Manufacturing. *Planning Commission recommended denial; the request is pending before the Township Board at the end of 2021.*

G Avenue southeast of Sprinkle Road (Redwood Apartment Neighborhoods) – request to conditionally rezone from B-3, General Business to RM, Multiple Family Residential for a multiple family development. *Planning Commission recommended approval; Township Board conducted first reading and set second reading/adoption for January 2022.*

G Avenue at Sprinkle Road (Weathervane Mini Storage) – request to conditionally rezone from B-1, Neighborhood Business to B-3, General Business (10.3 acres) for a mini-storage facility and from B-1, Neighborhood Business to OW, Open Wetlands (5.5 acres). *Planning Commission recommended approval; Township Board approved the conditional rezoning request.*

Implementing the Master Plan

In 2021, continued progress was made on implementing the Vision 2025 Master Plan. The five-year review process kicked off in the second half of the year. As agenda space allows, the Planning Commission will study properties to rezone to match the Future Land Use Map or craft amendments to the Future Land Use Map to match existing zoning in several areas.

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.

Text Amendments

The Zoning Ordinance provisions addressed by the Planning Commission in 2021 include the following:

- Creation of a new Ordinance section to consolidate both existing and new environmental language including new provisions regarding clear cutting, stormwater management and updating the earth removal activities text.
- Increase the height limit in B-3, General Business District and eliminate a height limit in the industrial districts.
- Simply the site plan review submission process.
- Modify accessory building provisions.
- Amended language regarding vehicle wash vacuums due to decision of the ZBA.
- Various amendments addressing areas where clarification was needed to existing text.

Miscellaneous

Bylaws – the bylaws were on the agenda several times during 2021. The final version of the amended bylaws postpones acting on a special exception use or rezoning the night of the public hearing unless this provision is waived by a unanimous vote of the Planning Commissioners present and eligible to vote on the agenda item.

Administrative Review

Bells – building addition to the brewery for canning space. *Complete.*

Viasat – placement of a satellite dish in the rear yard of the Comstock Early Learning Center. *Complete.*

Taco Bell – minor addition including exterior and interior renovations on Sprinkle Road. *Complete.*

Meijer – exterior renovation and expansion of vestibules; relocate pharmacy drive through to side of building with addition of second lane. *Planned to begin after Christmas.*

Hickory Ridge Golf Course – placement of a pole building and removal of an existing barn. *Underway.*

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 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 customer-oriented practices 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 2021 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.

In 2021, Comstock Township achieved *Essential Path Certification* with completion of 4 of 6 best practice areas of the program. The Township became eligible for grant funding and technical assistance from the MEDC to complete the balance of the items for certification – an economic development strategy and a marketing strategy.

The Community Development Director worked with the Downtown Development Authority Board to finalize a scope of services and select a consultant 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.

When the strategies are done the Township will have *Full Certification*. The MEDC will then work with the Township in the identification of and national-level marketing of three soon-to-be-selected priority redevelopment sites in the Township.

The remaining task toward full certification has been and will continue to be an exciting undertaking for the Planning Commission, Downtown Development Authority and Township stakeholders with coordination of the effort by the Community Development Department.

Public Engagement

The Township adopted a Public Participation Plan in 2019 as part of Best Practice 1 of the Redevelopment Ready Community certification process. An annual summary to the Township Board on public engagement undertaken in the previous year is a RRC 2.0 requirement. Inclusion of this summary is included in the Planning Commission & Community Development Department Annual Report.

The year 2021 was similar to 2020 in that nearly all meetings were held virtually due to COVID-19.

- Meetings of the Boards and Commissions remained accessible to view and participate in via ZOOM. Township Board and Planning Commission meetings were broadcast live on Public Media Network. ZOOM was the virtual platform used by all the boards with the exception of the Park Board. Use of ZOOM allowed for the public to participate via a computer or phone.
- On the Township's webpage, members of the public are able to sign up to receive email notification of and a direct link to agendas of the Boards of their interest as agendas are published.
- Social media was heavily used to announce meetings and other items of interest.
- NIXLE was utilized for important time-sensitive alerts.
- The Township's newsletter and inserts with the assessment notice and tax bills were used to share relevant information.

Many residents chose email to send their comments to the various boards. These emails were shared with the board members and became part of the public record.

Michigan Association of Planning Award

In October, the Township received the 2021 Planning Excellence Award for Economic Development & Planning from the Michigan Association of Planning for the Comstock Center Place Plan for Prosperity and Redevelopment. The Place Plan was prepared in 2018 and led to the formation of the Downtown Development Authority to focus on implementing it. The Place Plan was judged by a panel of out-of-state planning professionals. The Jurors noted that the award was granted to the Township due to the implementation efforts – i.e., it is not a plan that sits on the shelf. It was crafted based upon a RFP tailored to the Comstock Center area prepared by the Community Development Department and Planning Commission in 2018.

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.

Downtown Development Authority

Unofficially serving as the Director of the Comstock Center Downtown Development Authority (DDA) since establishment of the DDA, the Community Development Director's responsibilities work toward implementation of the Downtown Development Plan adopted by the Township Board in 2019 and the Comstock Center Place Plan for Prosperity and Redevelopment. The DDA is a large board with 8 members in 2021, 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 Director may undertake or encourage the DDA to pursue toward making Comstock Center a more vital area for investors, businesses and the residents. In 2022, the DDA will formally select a Director and fix compensation subject to Township Board approval.



Training and Continuing Education

The Community Development Director registered for and watched various sessions of the Michigan Association of Planning 2021 annual conference in October. She also attended the Michigan Downtown Association annual conference in November.

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 2021 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 2022 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 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 two of the organization's subcommittees and various other committees in the Kalamazoo area as the topic warrants.