

## Section 10

### Municipal Department/Board Relationships

#### PURPOSE

The purpose of this section is to evaluate the current communication practices among the municipal departments that directly regulate development and to identify potential areas for improved communication and more efficient project review.

#### INTRODUCTION

In April 1, 2000, the residents of West Springfield voted to change the municipal government from a Representative Town Meeting to a City form of government. The West Springfield Home Rule Charter, which became effective on January 1, 2001, established a strong mayor form of government, with nine councilors, five of whom are at-large representatives. The mayor is elected at-large every two years. Prior to 2001, most municipal departments operated independent of each other as most department reported to separately elected boards. Since West Springfield adopted the City form of government, all municipal departments, with the exception of the Office of the Town Clerk, report to the mayor.



Source: Town Seal, [www.west-springfield.ma.us](http://www.west-springfield.ma.us)

#### PAST PLANNING/WEST SPRINGFIELD TODAY

Municipal department coordination has improved since the change to a City form of government. Efforts taken to coordinate activities include department head meetings where developers can present proposed projects and elicit feedback from Town staff. These meetings also work to foster communication among the various departments. In addition, the various permitting departments (Planning, Building, Health, Conservation and Public Works) meet on a weekly basis to review new and ongoing projects.

The West Springfield Home Rule Charter, which established the City form of government, continues to be implemented in stages. Section 6-4 of the Charter calls for the establishment of a new Department of Planning and Development, under the supervision of a Director of Planning and Development.

Chapter 3 of the Administrative Code further defines this new department. The Department of Planning and Development will include the following divisions:

- Planning Division (currently Planning Department)
- Appeals Division (currently Board of Appeals)
- Conservation Division (includes the Conservation Commission)
- Community Development Division (currently Office of Community Development)
- Economic Development Division (new)
- Building Division (currently Building Department)
- Records Division (new)

The new Department of Planning and Development is specifically tasked with:

- Coordination of all planning and development activities so as to streamline planning, development and applications
- Avoidance of undue administrative requirements in planning and development
- Assistance to private and government applicants in obtaining and complying with development requirements
- Economic development planning

According to Chapter 3 of the Administrative Code, the members of the boards, including the Conservation Commission, Planning Board, Board of Appeals and the Planning and Construction of Building and Other Facilities Committee will be special municipal employees.

It should be noted that other departments, not incorporated into the new Department of Planning and Development, also play a role in project reviews. These departments include: Health Department, Department of Public Works, Fire Department, Licensing Commission, Assessor's Office and Town Clerk. It will be the responsibility of the Director of Planning and Development to coordinate with these departments to incorporate their concerns in application review and to streamline the permitting processes.

West Springfield currently has a Development Guide which provides information on potential department review and permitting required for new projects. The Development Guide identifies the roles and responsibilities of the municipal departments and boards and includes a brief description of the most common permits and approvals, which include:

- General Zoning
- Wetlands Protection
- Subdivision Approval
- Board of Health Permits
- Zoning Variances
- Special Permits
- Site Plan Review
- Sign Permits
- Building Permits
- Work Within a Public Way
- Business Certificate
- Licenses
- Other State and Federal Permits

West Springfield has also taken advantage of technology for public information and outreach. Virtual Town Hall web site provides links to Town departments, news and announcements and information on meetings. Bylaws and regulations are available and residents can pay bills on the website. West Springfield also offers an email-based notification service, notifying subscribers of meeting agendas, public hearing notices, and meeting minutes.

### **MUNICIPAL DEPARTMENT CHALLENGES/NEEDS**

The various departments in West Springfield operate under different local, state and federal regulations. The continued challenge is to bring the departments together to create an environment for open communication regarding ongoing and proposed activities, to provide for a coordinated review of new developments and to make better use of resources by incorporating various needs and planning goals into municipal projects. Enhanced coordination among the various municipal departments can make the development review and permitting processes more efficient. Establishing regular communication among municipal staff also creates better working relationships which can lead to more opportunities to combine efforts to meet common or related goals.

### **PUBLIC INPUT**

#### **Public Forum**

The Master Plan public forum held in July 2008 included a break out group discussion of Public Facilities. In general, the

group was generally happy with the current level of Town services and indicated that town staff and officials were accessible and helpful.

#### **Townwide Survey**

In addition, a Survey was conducted during the Master Plan process that asked residents about housing, land use, open space, public facilities, economic development, transportation and the municipal government. See Appendix A for a copy of the Survey, a detailed memorandum describing the responses and a summary of the participants and distribution. The following summarizes responses related to municipal services

Respondents were generally satisfied with their ability to access Town services and offices. Commenters wanted to have information on the outcome of board meetings; have extended office hours in the evening to accommodate people who work during the day; and hire additional staff.

In general, the majority of the residents who completed the survey rated the town's services as "Good". The development-related departments, including the Community Development Department, GIS & Mapping, Planning Department and Board of Health were most often rated as "Not Applicable". It is likely that many residents have not directly sought the services of these departments.

### **WEST SPRINGFIELD TOMORROW**

The Department of Planning and Development, as defined under Section 6-4 of the West Springfield Home Rule Charter

and Chapter 3 of the Administrative Code, is anticipated to be created within the near future. This will require appointment of a Director, and consolidation of various departments. Additional planning staff will be needed, including the appointment of a Director, Economic Development Planner and Records Division staff. Additional planning department staff is also needed to fulfill the goals and responsibilities of this new Department. Under the umbrella of the Department of Planning and Development, the various divisions will continue to work together to review projects and develop priorities for future development within West Springfield. This new department will need to continue to work with other town departments including, the Department of Public Works and the Information Technology staff to continue to coordinate project review and department needs.

The Town is in the process of implementing a new permit tracking software (GeoTMS) and anticipates eventual coordination with the Town's GIS system.

In addition, the new Department should develop their capital funding needs. As the existing current capital planning process serves as a fiscal planning tool, the new department should work with other municipal departments to create a comprehensive Capital Improvement program which identifies needs for the upcoming fiscal year, and projections for the next five years. The Department of Planning and Development should play an active role in the town-wide Capital Improvement Plan to incorporate planning needs within the ongoing Town budgeting.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Goals and strategies to improve communication among the development-related municipal departments are summarized below.

**Goal 1: Continue to** Implement Section 6-4 of the Home Rule Charter and Chapter 3 of the Administrative Code.

1. Relocate affected departments to be in physical proximity to each other.
2. Hire new staff as needed, including town planning staff and an economic development planner.

**Measurement of Progress:** Creation of a complete Department of Planning and Development.

**Goal 2:** Formalize a permit review committee for larger projects and continue to hold weekly department meetings to facilitate coordinated development review.

1. Establish process and guidelines for multi-department review of major projects.
2. Continue Department Head meetings including Department of Planning and Development staff, Department of Public Works and others departments as needed.
3. Revise the Development Guide.

4. Review and revised regulations and ordinance to address new department and coordinate reviews.
5. Establish process to review completed projects prior to the issuance of a Certificate of Occupancy.

**Measurement of Progress:** Efficient development reviews, minimization of back and forth between departments and boards to address overlapping issues.

**Goal 3:** Develop Capital Improvement Plan for all departments.

1. Coordinate department needs of the different divisions projecting out for a five-year timeframe.
2. Work with Information Technology staff to address electronic needs, such as GIS, GPS, and permit tracking.

**Measurement of Progress:** Development of a Capital Improvement Plan, and comparison of funds expended versus fiscal planning.

**Goal 4:** Improve public outreach and education

1. Improve web site with updated forms, information and frequently asked questions.
2. Enhance public feedback with a customer service survey.

3. Review opportunities for electronic application and plan submission

**Measurement of Progress:** Updated web site for all permitting agencies; customer service survey utilized by all permitting agencies.