

Public Decisions—Why Planning & Zoning?

Why are public decisions made on many land use issues? Purdue Extension Educator Mark Spelbring helps explain the “why” behind planning and zoning, the mechanism local governments use to address land use issues.

“Government may pass laws to protect the health, safety, and welfare of citizens, and planning and zoning regulations are based on that power,” Spelbring says. He notes that two critical concepts are paramount.



One is that planning must come first. Zoning is simply a tool to help implement a plan. “The community must plan its future,” says Spelbring. “With no plan, there is no reason for zoning and no legal basis for zoning.” Indiana law requires local governments to adopt a plan before a zoning ordinance can be passed.



The second is that zoning regulations must relate to the public good. Spelbring notes that the phrase “It’s my land and I can do anything I want” is not true, because what you do may harm your neighbors. However, he says zoning authorities can only restrict private use of land for public reasons. “For example, zoning rules may ban buildings from street corners so drivers can see traffic coming and avoid accidents,” Spelbring explains.

Zoning regulations can protect water quality by requiring sewer or septic systems. They may seek to protect property values by not allowing certain land uses in zones where they might be destructive to the neighborhood. With planning and zoning, individuals do give up some rights, but, in return, everyone receives a public protection benefit.

