

Building for the future

How a master plan can help the process **Interviewed by Chelan David**

A master plan serves as a community's guide to the future. Containing a plan, or set of various plans, along with descriptive text, graphs, charts, illustrations and pictures, the document describes what a community currently looks like and what it wants to be in the future.

"Master plans enable companies to assess, on a number of levels, whether the community it is considering for a relocation or expansion project is a good fit," explains Steven Joppich, executive partner at Secretst Wardle.

Smart Business spoke with Joppich about master plans, why they are so important in the development process and how they can aid businesses looking to relocate or expand.

What is a master plan?

To answer this, it is necessary to first understand that most communities have zoning laws or ordinances. Those ordinances adopt a zoning map and written regulations that essentially divide up the community into various districts. Each district allows certain types of uses of the property in that district and has special requirements regarding height, parking, property line setbacks and so forth.

The master plan is more of a guide for the future — sometimes it is even referred to as a future land use plan. It is usually prepared and adopted by the community's planning commission, but the city council or township board will have input in the process. Once it is completed, the city or township uses it to determine how properties might be rezoned or whether any special uses might be considered for properties throughout the community. In Michigan, each community is required to review its master plan at least once every five years to make sure that it remains up to date with changing circumstances.

Why are master plans important to the development process?

It is important to prospective developers because it is an upfront disclosure to



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them of the types of uses that the community is looking to have located within its borders. If a developer sees a piece of land that looks ripe for development, he or she would then be able to look at the zoning laws and the master plan to see if that developer's vision for the property meshes with the community's vision for the area.

It should be recognized, however, that a prospective developer may not want to solely rely on the current master plan and zoning ordinances for this assessment because the master plan is regularly reviewed and updated, and zoning ordinances can be changed. As a result, among other things, communicating directly with the planning, building and community development departments of your local government should be seriously considered, as well.

How can a community's master plan help a company that is looking for a place to relocate or expand its business?

A company looking for a place to relocate or expand will have many other concerns beyond simply meeting the requirements of the zoning laws. It may be look-

ing for a market for its goods. It may have shipping needs. It may be looking to locate close to a certain industry or a major client. It may have a number of officers and employees that will be relocating, or it may need to staff the facility with new employees. Those officers and employees may want to live close to work, they will be concerned about home values and standards of living, and they will need good schools and after-school programs for their kids, not to mention entertainment, cultural and social activities for themselves. A community's master plan is an excellent source for information regarding these types of issues.

Is there a way to deviate from a community's master plan or zoning if a company finds a property that fits its needs in all other respects?

Yes there is, but most communities are reluctant to do so. Usually, it will only be considered if it can be shown to the satisfaction of the reviewing body that the proposed use is a reasonable alternative to what is shown on the master plan and that the property cannot be used otherwise. Among other things, it will also be crucial to establish that the proposed use does not negatively impact the surrounding properties and the community's overall master plan objectives.

How soon should a company establish contact with the local government when it is in the process of seeking out a site to develop in a community?

It depends, but in most cases, it is best to establish contact as early on as possible. Some communities are looking for the right businesses to develop or redevelop areas of their communities. You can often identify this from their master plans and Web sites. <<

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