

Summary of a Sampling of Statewide Planning Assistance Programs

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In response to interest in statewide community planning assistance, the Land Use Clinic at the University of Montana School of Law researched land use planning assistance programs in selected states. The purpose of the research is to provide insight into how other states are providing assistance to communities and to inform the development of proposals for a local planning assistance program for Montana. At the outset, we will note that our research was not exhaustive, as we did not attempt to study the programs in all 50 states. We focused our attention on western and midwestern states, although we did examine a couple of programs elsewhere based on suggestions from persons with familiarity with state programs.

A preliminary review of planning assistance programs revealed that each state's approach is unique, although there appear to be three predominant general approaches and there are some common elements. The three predominant approaches include: programs run by a state agency, programs headquartered at a university, and programs involving both a state agency and one or more universities in the state. In general (but not exclusively), the programs that were run by a state agency were in states where the state approach to planning is more state-centered than Montana; i.e., states in which communities are required to engage in planning and in which they are held to state-mandated standards in their planning. The common elements we identified were that all programs included significant educational components consisting of published handbooks on planning processes and techniques, some form of communication (hard-copy or Web-based) to distribute educational materials and to inform about recent developments and upcoming events, and training seminars for citizens involved as board or commission members and local government leaders. Some programs also develop model ordinances and regulations, some programs provide project-specific planning services to communities, and a few provide "hotline" type responses to planning questions.

Based on our preliminary review, we selected programs in Colorado, Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan for more detailed study. These particular states were chosen because they seem typical of well-regarded programs providing planning assistance of the types sought by Montana communities. Information on these programs was gleaned from their Websites, email inquiries sent to each program, and a two-day visit to Wisconsin to learn about their program in depth. Attached to this memo is our summary of the programs in each of these states. The Colorado program is a joint effort of the state Department of Local Affairs and two state universities. The Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana programs are largely university-centered. The Michigan program is conducted by an independent, non-profit organization that focuses primarily on SmartGrowth advocacy largely through the publication of articles and the organization of grassroots community groups.

Although the level of planning assistance provided varies among the programs according to the available funding, each utilizes a team-based approach to develop effective strategies. In each of the program summaries that follow, the functions provided are broken down into education (which includes publications and training seminars), communication, model ordinances and

codes, and hotline resources. Information about personnel and funding for the programs are included as well. Some states provided more detail on personnel and finances than others. At this point, all of the financial information is sketchy.

The primary focus common to all of the programs was assistance through the education of citizens and elected officials about community planning and other substantive land use topics. Much of the educational material is in the form of publications available to the public on-line. Most programs offer training programs and workshops for government officials and other professionals who participate in planning efforts.

Each program has developed communication functions, although the degree of assistance through communication varies. Quarterly newsletters are widely utilized to keep the public informed of current land use trends and topics. Each program has a current Website that offers extensive links to publications and other valuable resources. However, few programs serve as a clearinghouse for state land use information. Similarly, few provide model ordinances and regulations and none provide a telephone hotline for case specific inquiries, although correspondence through email and writing is generally available.