



Education Workgroup: Planning and Training  
Assessment

July 22, 2013

**To:** Jon Laria, Chair, Maryland Sustainable Growth Commission

**From:** Dr. Calvin Ball, Chair, Education Workgroup

**Subject:** Final Review of Report on Education Requirements for Planning Commissioners and Board of Appeals

**Date:** July 22, 2013

The Education Workgroup requests that the MSGC endorse the Planning Commission and Board of Appeals Report and the following action steps:

1. Provide a written briefing to the Maryland General Assembly that summarizes the findings and recommendations of the report by December 31, 2013.
2. Support and participate in the implementation of recommendation #4 and #5 through sharing ideas for course content.
3. Support and participate in the implementation of recommendation #7 through the identification of additional organizations or agencies.

### **Executive Summary**

The Smart and Sustainable Growth Act of 2009 passed by the Maryland General Assembly in 2009 requires members of planning commissions, planning boards, and boards of zoning appeal to complete an education course. The law applies to any jurisdiction that exercises planning and zoning authority granted under Article 25A or the Land Use Article (formerly jurisdictions affected by Article 66B or Article 28). The Maryland Department of Planning (MDP) maintains records of those who have completed the course online or its local equivalent.

The law directed MDP to create an online course for citizen planners to take, but also allows for local jurisdictions to provide their own courses. Members may also complete training at a Maryland Planning Commissioners Association, Maryland Municipal League, or Maryland Association of Counties' conference, for example. At a minimum, the course created by MDP covers the comprehensive plan, proper standards for special exceptions and variances, zoning

ordinances and regulations, subdivision ordinances, methods for land preservations and growth management tools.

The 2009 law also called for:

- Periodically evaluate educational requirements for members of planning boards, commissions and boards of appeals
- Evaluate compliance rates for the members.

### **Analysis and Findings**

Currently eight states including Maryland require training for citizen planners sitting on planning commissions or boards of appeals. Maryland's requirements are generally less stringent than the other seven states. Maryland is one of three states that do not require continuing education. Also, the consequences for non-compliance are more lenient than several states that allow for removal of members who fail to complete a course. Most states, including Maryland, also allow for some type of local flexibility, including designing their own courses or course requirements.

Maryland's course content is similar to the content required by other states, covering the basics of planning and zoning and a state's particular planning laws. States with continuing education requirements are able to move beyond the basics, but advanced content is not mandated by law except in Tennessee, Kentucky, and South Carolina. However, the Maryland Planning Commissioner Association survey results indicate that planning commissioners and board of zoning appeals members desire more advanced content and more ways to access it.

The current compliance rate (referred to as completion rate in this report) stands at 63% according to data maintained by Maryland Department of Planning. Survey results conducted on behalf of the Maryland Planning Commissioner's Association by MDP show a completion rate much higher, closer to 85%. Those results, and results from a survey of planning directors, show an underreporting of locally available courses.

The evaluation of the completion rate is hampered by two limitations in the data: (1) difficulty in obtaining timely, accurate information, particularly on commissioners who complete a local course and (2) a lack of variables collected that could be used understand differences across jurisdictions or organization types. To fix this error, this report calls for better data collection on planning commissioners and board of zoning appeals members.

The report also calls for improving accessibility and relevancy of course content to improve the desirability of completing the course. This would be achieved by making improvements to the online and live courses and the implementing a voluntary continuing education program. Maryland's educational requirements are being met by the current system, but citizen planners could be better served by better courses. Improvements to course content and structure should improve completion rates by making the training a more attractive and enjoyable option. Without strong disincentives for non-compliance, Maryland needs strong incentives for compliance.

Specific recommendations are as follows:

#### Recommendations to Better Understand the Completion Rate

1. Improve data collection at the local level
2. Create a course content feedback mechanism
3. Develop pre and post questions for each training module to measure the amount of information learned during the training

#### Recommendations to Improve Course Accessibility

4. Create a voluntary, continuing education program.
5. Develop better online content, specifically videos to make training more engaging
6. Utilize interactive elements during live presentations
7. Establish/expand partnerships among similarly oriented agencies.
8. Evaluate the success of these recommendations in two years