

1000 Friends of Iowa

A Citizen Guide to
Land Management

Table of Contents

I.	Opening	3
II.	Smart What?	4
III.	Development: Plan Early, Plan Often	6
IV.	You Know You Want to Change Something, Now What?	8
V.	Taking on Development...at Your Home	15

I. Welcome!

1000 Friends of Iowa educates citizens about how to get involved in promoting responsible land use and shaping the future of their community. 1000 Friends was created with the notion that **one person can make a difference** and that public involvement in land use planning is a vital component of a sustainable community.

In our work across Iowa, we find that **most Iowans are concerned with where development goes, how it is designed and how it relates to everything around it.**

Many times our job is simply to help people articulate their concerns and hopes to decision makers about what kind of community they want to live in. Other times, **we help citizens find common ground with neighbors or others in their community that have similar concerns or goals.** We teach citizens about smart growth principles and model practices that can inform decision-makers about how to build better communities. Our work would be quite difficult without the help of engaged citizens across the state.

When citizens are left out of the planning process, or their input is completely disregarded as decisions are made, policymakers lose a valuable connection with constituents and future growth policies can lead to unhealthy, unsustainable communities.

If growth reflects a community's own sense of how and where it wants to grow, citizens are likely to feel a stronger sense of community pride and be more involved with forming *innovated* strategies for sustainable development.

This citizen tool kit is designed to help individuals work together to influence policymakers and development. By working together, being informed, and informing others, citizens make a difference and help their communities develop in a sustainable manner. Iowa communities have a long history of working with and appreciating our land. As development continues across the state, this kit gives communities the tools to be stewards of the land and ensure a lasting and healthy relationship with their communal space.

II. Smart What?

With the current environmental movement, certain buzzwords have become common in land use lingo. For example, once you start learning about development, you are sure to stumble upon words such as **smart growth, balanced growth, planned growth, smart planning, and sustainable planning**. The different language can be confusing at times, but the good news is these words mean essentially the same thing! In order to understand why current development is looking at different ways of planning, it is important to understand how American mobility has changed throughout history.

How did we get here?

When American cities were first settled, movement was by walking. Everything a person needed, groceries, fabric, iron work--you name it, had to be within walking distance. This meant that there was very dense development. **Dense development** or **mixed-use development** means people live, work, and entertain themselves within the same space. Shopping, living, and working areas were not separated. Out of necessity, they developed within the same space. In one map of Des Moines' downtown from the late 1800s, boarding houses, drug stores, blacksmiths, and farm implement dealers were all situated within a three block radius. This dense development enabled people to walk to whatever they needed.

Soon, horses made their way to the cities. Horses allowed more distance from homes to places of work. Some of the first "mass transportation" was used during this time in the form of omnibuses. Omnibuses were horse-drawn wagons that could fit many people. However, when the waste from horses dried, it would become dusty and get into the air, creating a dirty environment.

With the development of the cable car, electric trolley, subway, and elevated line, people were able to move out of the city center into "green cities." Green cities were the beginning of suburbs, and cities became less dense because people could move farther out due to increased mobility.

The biggest change to American city planning and development was the car. Cars enabled citizens to travel farther distances in a shorter amount of time. Along with this mobility came the suburbs and segregation of living spaces. People no longer had to live where they worked and shopped. Instead, we for all of our needs. This is not a dense-style of development because in order to function in modern American cities, people must travel long distances. Sometimes this type of development is referred to as **sprawl**.

Growing smart

Smart growth attempts to change this sprawl development as well as encourage mixed-use redevelopment. According to The National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT), principles of smart growth include:

- Provide quality housing for people of all income levels

- Create walkable communities with desirable traits. Communities where people are able to live, work, learn, worship and play within a walkable distance.
- Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration—people who work, play, and live in the same area have a greater interest in their community
- Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place—smart growth encourages communities to craft a vision and set standards for development and construction which respond to community values of architectural beauty and distinctiveness, as well as expand choices in housing and transportation
- Make development decisions predictable, fair and cost effective
- Support mix land uses
- Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas
- Provide a variety of transportation choices
- Strengthen and direct development towards existing communities—instead of building new communities, smart growth works with already existing infrastructure and communities
- Take advantage of compact building design—instead of creating separate spaces to live, work and play, smart growth incorporates space where people can do all three.

Understanding the principles of smart growth as well as the history of development in the United States helps you to be an informed citizen armed with enough knowledge to make good land use decisions. The rest of this toolkit will help further your knowledge of land use, development, and how to organize your community

III. Development: Plan Early, Plan Often

In order to understand development in your area, you must first understand how development occurs and the decisions that were made prior to building. To help cities and areas develop in an organized way that will benefit the city and its citizens, the local government are required to develop a comprehensive plan. A **comprehensive plan** states the city's long-term development goals.

Comprehensive plans may look twenty to thirty years into the future and are revised every five to seven years. If your plan hasn't been revised lately, talk to your board of supervisors or local planner. Be sure to be a part of the planning process when revisions are made. If development occurs in your area, you can find the comprehensive plan at your local planning and zoning office.

The Building of a City: Zoning

Once you've read the comprehensive plan, the big question is how does a city work towards that plan? The answer lies in zoning. **Zoning** is the process that labels land usage and assigns it a type of land use such as residential, industry, commercial, agriculture, combination, or even historic zoning statuses. Based on the zoning status of an area, certain types of building may or may not be allowed. This can vary from area to area so it is difficult to make a blanket statement about zoning laws.

The language in zoning laws can be difficult to understand. The Iowa State Extension website has a document entitled "County Zoning in Iowa: An explanation of Chapter 335 of the Iowa Code" that has a side-by-side explanation of county zoning laws in Iowa. This may be a helpful read to help get acquainted with zoning language. According to the article, zoning power is given to the counties. Counties then have the power to decide whether or not they would like to have a zoning commission. For those counties that adopt zoning policies, the board of supervisors has the power over various details about lots.

Zoning laws can affect:

- the height of buildings
- the number of buildings
- the size of buildings on a lot, and
- how much open space must remain on the lot.

Through zoning, population density is affected by regulating the size of lots. While developing these zoning laws, the zoning commission keeps certain goals in mind such as preserving agriculture land, protection from erosion, and encouraging efficient urban development patterns.

In order to enforce zoning requirements, the board of supervisors appoints a zoning administrator. The zoning administrator's responsibilities also include explaining zoning ordinances to citizens. So, **if you have a question about a zoning ordinance**, contact your local zoning administrator.

If you live in a city, city zoning boards are structured in a similar manner. Instead of a board of supervisors, the organization may be called the Planning and Zoning Commission. In some cities, the Planning and Zoning Commission acts as a recommendation agency to the City Council, who has the final say in zoning matters. However, in others, the Planning and Zoning Commission may report to the Zoning Board of Adjustment. The **Zoning Board of Adjustment** is like the judicial system of zoning. The members of the board have the power to enforce an ordinance for a project or allow the project a variance. A **variance** is permission to not follow a zoning law. To learn how zoning works in your area, some city websites will have the information online, or you can contact your local government.

Just how did that mall get there?

Development just doesn't sprout up over night. Instead, many months of planning and meeting were involved before permits were given and ground was broken. Before the developer presents their application to the planning commission, they sometimes will sit down with a community planner to discuss preliminary planning. These meetings help the developer know and understand the zoning ordinances and comprehensive plan so they can better follow it.

After the developer has submitted his application and paid any fees, planning staff will then visit the place of proposed development and prepare a report with recommendations. Before the developer can bring their application before the planning committee, notices will be sent out to people within a certain distance from the development, often within a half-mile. It may also be helpful to **check the monthly agendas for your local planning and zoning committee**. Some planning committees have begun posting the agendas online. After the planning commission has read the report, they will then approve or deny the application.

Citizens can become involved in the planning process and affect development before it even begins. By helping with the comprehensive plan, you can let the zoning board know what citizens want for your community. Later in the manual, we will discuss how to work with government officials.

IV. You Know You Want to Change Something, Now What?

Herman Melville once said, "We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men." The fibers Melville speaks of are what makes and keeps a community together and gives that community power. If you want to change and affect development in your area, you will need to tap into your community's power through organizing.

Power comes from many places. Every individual has their own personal power. By simply looking for development information such as this guide, you are acknowledging your own power and wanting to use it for change. By getting your community involved and organizing together, you create more power.

Getting Started: Democratically Organizing

In order for an organization to build power and create a strong membership base, some structure is needed. These ingredients are:

1) Making information open to all members

While unintentional, in organizations, some members have more access to information than others. For example, if an organization has paid staff, those staff members have access to more information than non-staff members. Members in leadership positions are also likely to have a greater amount of information available to them. In order to allow the organization to make a democratic choice, everyone needs to have access to information. By being open with information and distributing it throughout the membership base, your organization, as a whole, will be better informed and make better decisions.

2) Formal and Informal Structures

If you have five members sitting around a table discussing issues and different visions for the organization, this is an informal structure. No one has the responsibility of structuring the meeting, and there are no rules for addressing the other members. Now imagine this informal meeting with ten members. Twenty members. Thirty members. The more people who are involved with the organization and attend the meetings, the crazier meetings can get. By introducing a formal structure to meetings, the organization can ensure that everyone has had a fair chance at expressing their opinion. One way to organize a meeting is through Robert's Rule of Order. Organizations are not required to follow every rule of order, but the general structure may help to organize a meeting.

3) Communication

As stated in point one, communication ensures that information is distributed throughout the organization. However, communication also ensures accountability. If a

leader or volunteer says they will do something, communicating their commitment makes them accountable.

4) Shared Work and Responsibility

In order to accomplish the group's goals, members need to work together. Since everyone's values, schedules, and skills are different, offering different ways to volunteer and help out ensures more members can be involved.

5) Conflict Happens

When people work together on an important issue, conflict is bound to happen. However, conflict does not have to drive a group apart. By handling disagreements openly and with purpose, organizations can work with the diversity within the group as well as handle inevitable conflict and change from outside of the organization.

6) Addressing Differences

Organizations and members of organizations have countless differences. Some may be based on race, gender, age, education, or background. Due to these differences, members may view issues differently and may have different expectations concerning how the group is organized and what qualities are ideal. These differences give the group an opportunity to integrate various ideologies and work on communication. Instead of viewing differences as problematic, look at differences as opportunities.

7) Community and Celebration

It can be a long, hard, and laborious experience to work for an organization pushing for change in its community. In order to enhance the organization's sense of community and togetherness, members should gather to celebrate and spend leisure time away from the structured feel of the organization. By simply getting together and having fun, groups will foster a sense of togetherness that will help the organization when times get tough.

8) Relationships Equal Respect

Democratic structures such only work when members work together. Without mutual respect, these structures do not work. Respect is fostered from responsibility, understanding, and openness.

9) Reflection and Evaluation

Much like looking through old pictures, organizations need to reflect on what they have accomplished. By reflecting and evaluating past actions and responses, organizations can ask themselves: what could have been done better? What would we change for the future? Did we accomplish our goals?

[Adapted from Wellstone Action's "Camp Wellstone Training Program Guide: Citizen Activism, Power, and Social Change"]

Organization=Power

Everyone has some form of power. Whether you're a good public speaker, a good researcher, or a good listener, you have power. Successful organizations are built on this power. By bringing together many different sources of personal power, your organization will succeed. Think of an organization as a complex recipe. It needs a little of everything to make it work. Some sources of power you may need are:

- Vision
- Ability to plan
- Confidence
- Preparation
- Organization
- Follow-through
- Persistence
- Accountability
- Willingness to learn
- Moral courage
- Sense of humor
- Communication skills
- Ability to work in a team
- Nerve
- Compassion/ ability to relate
- Imagination/ creativity.

By using and integrating all of these components from different people, your organization will be well-rounded and able to handle whatever comes your way.

[Wellstone Action's "Camp Wellstone Training Program Guide: Citizen Activism, Power, and Social Change"]

The Other Fish in the Sea

As you become more involved in the issue of land development, you will come into contact with other organizations that have similar (or opposing) goals. Sometimes you will work with these organizations in order to strengthen your position or to further a goal. Oftentimes by working or speaking with one organization, you will come into contact with more agencies that can help you or vice versa.

DNR

In Iowa, state agencies may have some information you need. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has information regarding air quality, forestry, field services such as handling spills, the Iowa State Parks, Iowa State Preserves, and Keepers of the Land. Keepers of the Land is a volunteer section of the DNR that allows Iowans to service Iowa's natural resources. The DNR also works with water quality, watershed improvement, and wildlife. Information can be found on their website or by contacting your local DNR office.

IDALS

The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship office is a state-run office that focuses on how Iowans use and protect their land. IDALS works with farmers to improve soil conservation in order to protect waterways and protect the valuable resource. The State climatology (the study of climate), entomology (the study of bugs), and veterinary areas of focus are also part of the IDALS. IDALS also recognizes farms that have been in the same family for 100 or 150 years.

IADA

The Iowa Agricultural Development Authority was established to assist financially Iowa's grain and livestock producers. One of their programs is the Beginning Farmer Loan Program which helps new farmers acquire farmland. These loans are given to new farmers at a lower interest rate.

Beginning Farmers Center

The Beginning Farmers Center is part of Iowa State University Extension and can be seen as a farmer matching organization. They connect young people looking to start farming with an experienced farmer. The new farmer then learns valuable farming skills from an experienced farmer. Land owners who are not farmers can also get involved by working with the center to help a beginning farmer start a small farm.

Ready, Set, Now What?

Now you have your organization, you know where to find information, and you know what you want to change. The question is how? How do you go about making change? In what ways can you impact your community? There are many ways to work for change. It all depends on how you want to make change and what resources are available to you. Some change-making options are:

Direct Service and Charitable Volunteering

Goal: Provide assistance and support to those in need

Examples: Donating food to food pantries, tutoring/mentoring programs, teaching a class on community gardens, cleaning up a local river

Strengths: Allows group to work together and show community support, gives organization a face in the community

Challenges: Often fails to address underlying social and economic causes of individual problems, can lead to unequal power relationship between *helper* and *helpee*

Advocacy

Goal: Using organization's power and system to respond to the needs of people with little organized power through the effective use of information, expertise, and knowledge

Examples: Public interest lobby groups, campaigns to help pass or defeat a law, researching an issue

Strengths: Can effectively represent non-affiliated people in complex political and bureaucratic environments

Challenges: Sometimes speaks *for* rather than *with* those who have the problem, can lack the power-base to defeat established interests (for example, seed companies)

Citizen Organizing

Goal: Bring people together to exercise collective power to achieve common goals

Examples: Neighborhood organizing, citizen empowerment through local campaigns (getting the information out to help the community decide what is best for area)

Strengths: Builds the power and effectiveness of often marginalized groups in society, nurtures new leadership, influences institutional change

Challenges: May not respond to immediate needs of people in crises, can be limited to small-scale reforms rather than systemic change

Electoral Politics

Goal: Elect people to public office who will effectively fight for the interests of their constituents

Examples: Work with progressive elected officials and coalitions that help elect progressive politicians

Strengths: Progressive electoral campaigns educate and mobilize voters, elected officials advance a positive agenda in government

Challenges: Over-reliance on elected officials to *do for* rather than *do with*, tension between electoral mobilizing and a slower organizing approach to relationship and base-building

[Adapted from Wellstone Action's "Camp Wellstone Training Program Guide: Citizen Activism, Power, and Social Change"]

Environmental Reviews

Often, information from the previous organizations is not enough. Sometimes more detailed information regarding the area under development is needed. One way to find specifics on geographic location of the proposal or project is through environmental reviews. Iowa's flower and fauna diversity is declining. In fact, some have been placed on endangered, threatened, or special concern lists. The DNR offers **environmental reviews** to check and see if the land in the development area contains these special plants and animals. According to Iowa Administrative Code 481A and 481B, "a person shall not take, possess, kill, trap or ensnare, transport, import, export, process, sell or offer for sale, buy or offer to buy, nor shall a common or contract carrier transport or receive for shipment, any species plant or animal on the state [endangered, threatened, and special concern] list." Environment reviews can be used to stop or halt development due to the location of these protected species.

Just a Few Extras

You're organized, have a game plan, and are ready to go. Before you take on the issue, remember these few tips to keep you ahead of the game.

- **Organize your community before a crisis forces you to work together.** Form a neighborhood association or land development association. Get to know each other before someone needs to start barking out orders to meet deadlines associated with a development application.
- **It's never too early to develop mutually respectful relationships with local elected and appointed officials.** Meet with them personally. Go where they are; don't ask them to come to you. If possible, find someone they trust and ask they go to the first meeting with you. Don't immediately try and educate them; just have a conversation. The goal of this meeting is to develop a lasting relationship. Once the person begins to know you, become a resource for them. Let them know you are not asking them to vote a certain way; you are helping them gather information to make a more informed decision. Find out what they care about and connect those issues to your own. Most importantly, follow through on anything to which you commit.
- **Know where developers may one day strike in your community.** Find out where the large undeveloped tracts of land are. These may be family farms, areas currently zoned as agricultural lands, or green space. Check a local plat book to find out where they are, who owns them, and what the development potential is.
- **Talk with landowners just as you would with local elected and appointed officials.** Be a "developer" by developing mutually respectful relationships with the property owners decide if, when, and how their property will be developed. If development is inevitable, help the landowner connect with a responsible developer who wants to work closely with the property owner and the neighbors to create a development everyone supports.

- **Set up an early warning system.** This system would alert the community to prospective developments before they reach the planning commission. This requires a communications network. People talk. Other people hear things. Take advantage of that! Basically, be proactive!
- **Get involved in local government.** Run for public office. Citizen groups should identify units of government that impact their priorities and then work to get their citizen group members appointed to serve. Be prepared with potential, willing candidates waiting in the wings for future openings.

[1000 Friends of Minnesota and Minnesota Waters in their “A Citizen’s Guide to Influencing Local Land-Use Decisions]

Someone Has to Do It: Public Speaking

Somewhere along the way, you may be required to speak before a board or community. One of the best ways to show your passion for an issue is to publicly stand up and state your opinion and reasoning. When these situations present themselves, make sure to remember a few things so your message shines through.

Rules for Going Before Boards and Councils:

- 1) Leave your emotions at home.
- 2) Present only substantiated facts about the situation.
- 3) Don’t be nice. Be civil, but remember you are fighting for your way of life and expressing an opinion that they likely won’t agree with. You can agree to disagree.
- 4) This isn’t a popularity contest for you. They don’t have to like you. *They* have to win the popularity contest and get re-elected.
- 5) Ask probing questions during the hearing. You only have one chance. Don’t lose then say, “I should have brought out my secret weapon; I waited too long.”
- 6) If you have children, clean and polish them and set them in the front row. Make them act like they are porcelain on display. Remind these people whose lives are being affected by their poor decisions.
- 7) Don’t talk about only farmland; talk about natural resources and wildlife needing a home and the impact on them as well as the need to preserve natural areas for future generations.
- 8) Call your group members if you need help.
- 9) Include everyone imaginable in your dispute. Walk door to door with a petition. Have factual handouts to give.

V. Taking on Development...at Your Home

It can take a while to make a visible change in your community regarding land development. Between meetings, speeches, and research, the whole process may seem like it drags on. Fortunately, changes in land development do not have to start in the open field down the street. Instead, it can start in your own backyard. Urban conservation efforts have shifted some focus from large land development tracts to areas as small as the recurring wet corner of your backyard. Due to the increasing methods of modifying urban landscapes to be more environmentally friendly, this guide cannot include every option. Research is what will work for you and provide you with the most information. A great resource is the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship's Urban Conservation Program.

Native Landscaping

When Iowa's land was made up of prairie, the native plants and soil were able to hold more water. This soil proved to be a great place to grow row crops such as corn and soybeans. However, while profitable, these crops are not able to hold the same amount of water. By using landscaping that features native plants such as prairie grasses, home owners can improve soil quality and increase infiltration (the amount of water getting into the ground) to reduce runoff. Native plants are weather tolerant, don't need fertilizer or pesticide, and create a habitat for wildlife.

Permeable Pavement

Look at your drive way the next time it rains. What happens to the water? For the majority of us, the water that lands on cement structures such as driveways and sidewalks runs straight into the nearest river, courtesy of city storm drains. This water is hot (because of the heated surfaces) and polluted due to various car wastes that sit on the surface. Permeable pavement is pavement that is designed to have some space in it. Instead of building bricks right next to each other, permeable pavement leaves space between the bricks and fills it with medium-sized gravel. Water then seeps through the gravel and into the soil or into a perforated drain pipe that lies under the pavement (much like tile in agriculture land). The water that flows into the drain pipe has been cooled off and cleaned due to the natural filtering system of the soil.

Rain Gardens

During a rainfall, walk around your property and notice where the runoff goes. A large volume of water during a rainfall runs straight into the closest river, causing the river level to increase drastically. These sudden changes make it harder for wildlife to live in that river. A rain garden is designed to trap that water for 12 to 24 hours after a rainfall event. This stops some of the water from entering the river at the same time and detracts from the dramatic increase in water level.

Rain Barrels

Rain Barrels are another way to deal with rain from your roof. Rain is collected in barrels that can hold between 40 and 80 gallons of water. This collected water can be used to water gardens, indoor plants, flush toilets, wash cars, or many other uses. Rain barrels can lower your water usage and therefore your water bill.