

Story County Interagency Review Team – Conceptual Review Meetings Story County, Iowa

Application for 2008 Excellence in Action Awards – Iowa State Association of Counties

AWARD CATEGORY: County Inter-Office

Submitted by:

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1. Abstract of the program

In approximately 200 words or less, summarize your program. Abstracts of award winning programs will be published, so please be sure that what you have written is comprehensive, but concise (approximately ¼ page).

Formally established by the Story County Board of Supervisors in 2006 with the adoption of the *Story County Land Development Regulations*, Conceptual Review Meetings conducted by the Interagency Review Team (IART) combines staff members from various County departments – and outside jurisdictions – to collaboratively review potential development issues. Scheduled monthly, Conceptual Review Meetings establish an interdisciplinary approach to review development concepts such as rezonings, conditional use permit applications, land use plan amendments, and subdivision plats, as well as variance requests, waiver applications and text amendments, along with applicants and property owners actively engaged in the dialogue. These meetings are designed to occur very early in the exploration and design phases, prior to substantial investment in fees for surveying, planning, legal and engineering costs, as well as others experienced by the County and/or applicant.

2. The problem/need for the program

Discuss the problem/need that prompted the development of the program and the county's legal obligation, if any, to take action (approximately ¾ page).

For a great number of years, members of the Story County Auditor's Office, Assessor's Office, Engineer's Office, Health Department and Planning and Zoning Department collectively reviewed applications for subdivision plats. Over time, this review process, which happened only after an official application for a development proposal had been submitted to the Story County Planning and Zoning Department (with fees paid and substantial costs incurred already by the applicant for surveying, engineering and other work completed for the application), began to include discussions of potential rezoning requests.

Comments raised by these staff members were communicated back to the applicants – or their representatives – and, often times, detailed revisions to subdivision plats (and rezoning requests) were required. Once these revisions were completed, they were submitted for second review, and again reviewed by the parties previously identified. In some (worst case) scenarios, initial comments were not adequately addressed and yet another round of revisions necessitated even prior to review by the respective boards and commissions.

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As this continued, staff members involved in the process, as well as applicants, surveyors, attorneys and engineers began to express the problematic nature of this approach. In response, the idea was brought forward to establish a process wherein all these affected parties would meet prior to substantial design and monetary investment had occurred – at a conceptual level.

In 2006, after nearly a year of internal staff work to develop a unified development code, the Story County Board of Supervisors adopted the *Story County Land Development Regulations*. In the regulations, the formation of the Interagency Team Review (and membership) was clearly defined and process for Conceptual Review Meetings outlined in administrative procedures, as well as applicable development concepts required to be brought forth indicated within text of the regulations.

3. Description of the program

Provide a description of the nominated program, including: the objectives; the time frame for development and implementation; the cliental being served; the county's role in devising and implementing the program; and the contribution, if any, of other partners (e.g., state and federal government, consultants, private partner(s) (approximately 2 to 3 pages).

Members of several Story County departments comprising the IART include representatives for the Assessor's Office, Auditor's Office, Conservation, Engineer's Department, Health Department, and the Planning and Zoning Department. In instances wherein applications are located within two miles of the cities of Ames, Gilbert or Nevada, representatives from those communities are invited to participate as well. Representatives from the Iowa Department of Transportation (IDOT) and USDA's Natural Resource and Conservation Service (NRCS) are invited to participate as well when proposals lie along State or Federal transportation routes or natural resource features are dominant on a property.

Conceptual Review meetings discuss development concepts and explore alternative solutions for development proposals. Conceptual Review is free of charge to the applicant, and is required before application of a

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conditional use permit, official zoning map amendment, or subdivision. In 2007, 14 Conceptual Review meetings were held in which the Interagency Review Team reviewed 39 conceptual plans, of which 24 of those conceptual plans were submitted for review by the Planning and Zoning Commission.

Before the end of each year, the Planning and Zoning Commission and the Board of Adjustment discuss and adopt a calendar for the upcoming year, in which they adopt deadlines and meeting dates for the Interagency Review Team. Because of the intensity in development applications that Story County typically sees, these meetings are scheduled to take place on a monthly basis. After the calendar is adopted, the Planning and Zoning Department is responsible for gathering applications and materials each month by the established deadline, and forwarding those materials around to the members of the Interagency Review Team for review. Application materials include an application form which gives contact information for the applicant and the property owner if the two are different. The application also includes a description of what is to be achieved by the proposed development, and requires a detailed site plan to be reviewed by the Interagency Review Team. Once applications are reviewed by the Interagency Review Team, a formal meeting is held with team members, the applicant and other interested parties.

These meetings, which take place on Friday afternoons, typically last between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on the type of development proposal that is submitted. In some situations, if there is an excess in applications submitted in a particular month, these meetings can be scheduled for two days. During the meetings, the Interagency Review Team first will introduce themselves, and will explain in what way their respective department will be involved before, during, and after the proposed development proposal is submitted for approval. After introductions, the applicant explains, in detail, their development proposal to the Interagency Review Team, including asking any questions about specific requirements of the Interagency Review Team. Once the applicant has finished with his/her presentation, members of the Interagency Review Team are allowed to ask questions and/or provide alternatives or recommendations to the applicant. A hard copy summary of the concerns, recommendations and comments are provided to the applicant by each member of the Interagency Review Team, and a copy of each department's summary is kept by the Planning and Zoning Department. It is imperative that the applicant completely understands the process that is involved once the development proposal is submitted for final approval, and that they do not leave their session with the Interagency Review Team with any questions, and these meetings have been found to be very successful in that aspect.

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After this meeting takes place, the applicant is allowed to submit their final application for approval by the Board of Supervisors or Board of Adjustment. Once that final application is received, copies are once again distributed to members of the Interagency Review Team for a final review, in which the team will make sure that all previous concerns have been addressed, and provide final comments. Once the Interagency Review Team has given the application their final review, the application is forwarded on to the Planning and Zoning Commission with final comments provided by the Interagency Review Team. These comments, which are typically included with a detailed staff report prepared and presented by the Planning and Zoning Department, are used by the Planning and Zoning Commission in their review and formulation of a recommendation to either the Board of Supervisors or Board of Adjustment.

4. Use of technology

Describe all items of technology that your program utilizes in its implementation. This could include intranet, internet, website, GIS, GPS, cable, kiosks, software, LAN, WAN, databases, etc. You may provide this information in a list or paragraph form. This information will be useful in helping ISAC highlight how big a role information technology plays in local community programs (approximately 1/4 page).

As the evolution of technology has progressed, so has the manner in which information is forwarded to members of the IART for Conceptual Review Meetings. In order for staff (and other team) members to have an opportunity to review a property in advance, an email notification is sent out at least one week prior to the meeting outlining the applications and various details about each item scheduled for the Conceptual Review Meeting. In addition, the application materials submitted by the applicant are scanned in (if not electronically submitted) and posted on the Story County website, and IART members are forwarded links to these materials.

This process represents a transition from an earlier practice (prior to the beginning of 2007) where IART members were forwarded “packets” of paper materials submitted (and copied by the Planning and Zoning Department as needed). In order to “green” the process as well as increase on-line submissions of applications, the paperless approach was employed in January 2008, and has been successfully implemented.

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Story County has an extensive GIS developed over a great number of years. Each of the participating departments utilizes GIS to a great extent in their review and comment of Conceptual Review applications. As necessitated by a particular application – such as instances wherein a great number of natural resource features exist on a parcel – the Planning and Zoning Department will plug in to the County’s GIS and perform “on the fly” analyses and reviews of a property as IART members raise individual questions wherein GIS provides an answer or adds to the comprehensive review of the proposal.

5. The cost of the program

Describe both the operating and capital costs incurred in developing and implementing the program (list all costs that would be incurred by a county attempting to replicate the program) (approximately 3/4 page to 1 page).

Upfront costs incurred by the Story County Planning and Zoning Department to successfully implement the Conceptual Review Meetings are relatively minimal, when not factoring in staff time. The greatest expenditure, other than the staff time involved in the monthly meetings and preparations thereof, was the purchase of two-part carbonless copies used by all members of the IART to provide written comments immediately (at the meeting) back to the party(ies) present at the meeting. Purchased through a local printing company, these two-part forms cost a little under \$350 for 1,000 forms, or \$0.35 per unit cost.

Staff time is likely the largest costs to Story County and includes the following activities:

- **Developing the yearly calendar outlining the dates and times of the meetings;**
- **Presenting the yearly calendar to the respective boards and commission;**
- **Copying and distribution of the yearly calendar to the various surveyors, engineers, attorneys and other development professionals (Story County does this in conjunction with a yearly mailing to these individuals notifying them of changes in fee structures and regulatory changes, if any (as such, in preparing this application, these costs were not figured – if this process is transferred to another jurisdiction, costs of such notification, whether through the USPS or digitally, should be determined and built in the budget.)**
- **Discussing conceptual review process with potential applicants;**

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- In-take of conceptual review application and preliminary review;
- Preparation of meeting agenda, scanning-in of information, dissemination of agenda and links to website, and website updates;
- Notification of applicant as to time and date of Conceptual Review Meeting; and
- Staff attendance at the Conceptual Review Meeting and follow-up with applicant as needed.

6. The results/success of the program

Provide a description of the results and the success of the program in meeting its objectives (provide specific examples and measurements of that success) (approximately 3/4 to 1 page).

The primary objective of the implementation of the Conceptual Review Meeting process by Story County was to provide an avenue for an open dialogue and means for Story County staff members to collaboratively discuss development concepts at a very early, conceptual phase. This objective was two fold:

- **One, as a cost savings to property owners and applicants so that they could establish designs and application materials after meeting with County (and other) staff members with defined expectations given them; and**
- **Two, as a means to reduce staff and commission and board review of applications not designed to the requirements and necessitating on-going staff review, thereby, ultimately saving taxpayer funds.**

The interdisciplinary approached employed by Story County has been successful in improving understanding of various Story County regulations and how they interact (and, occasionally, contradict) with each other. This understanding has assisted the Planning and Zoning Department (and other departments) as they annually review the *Story County Land Development Regulations* to ensure planning trends and local issues are being addressed thoroughly. In addition, official applications for rezonings, subdivisions, conditional use permits, and other development proposals are more complete and designed to meet the comments provided at the Conceptual Review Meeting and requirements of the various regulations and policies adopted by Story County.

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A substantial decrease in the numbers of revisions submitted following the initial application has been experienced, and, in addition, the number of applications remanded by the respective boards and commission specifically related to an incomplete nature of an application has reduced significantly.

7. Worthiness of an Award

Give justification for why this program meets outlined criteria and should be awarded a 2008 ISAC Excellence in Action Award (approximately 1/4 to 1/2 page).

The successful implementation of Conceptual Review Meetings by the Story County Planning and Zoning Department with cooperative from the Interagency Review Team members has led to additional collaborative efforts and initiatives, such as the recently formed Story County Go Green Team, a new committee to review potential green initiatives and investments by Story County. The cooperative nature of the efforts on the part of the various departments involved in the IART has been instrumental in many of the successes and the greatly-improved customer service for those with potential development proposals. Staff time and related costs savings have been realized with the implementation of the Conceptual Review meetings, as well as the manner in which comments are communicated effectively and efficiently back to applicants, property owners, other staff, as well as respective boards and commission members. The entire process employed by Story County is easy to replicate for other jurisdictions, and initial investments are minimal to begin to achieve results as experience by Story County.