Roles and Responsibilities – The Zoning Administrator

The availability of staff to assist in performing planning and zoning functions varies widely from community to community. At a minimum, every community that has adopted a zoning ordinance must have an official charged with administration of the ordinance. The zoning administrator’s responsibilities with regard to the day-to-day interpretation and administration of the ordinance are defined in the ordinance. The zoning ordinance establishes the procedures that citizens must follow any time they wish to build or alter any structure in the community. The zoning administrator is typically the first contact for citizens applying for any type of permit required by the zoning ordinance. In general, the principal duties of the administrator include:

- Assisting citizens in determining what zoning forms apply to their requested action, and answering questions about how to complete them.
- Reviewing applications and supporting documentation to determine compliance with the ordinance.
- Issuing permits when all ordinance requirements are met and involvement of the planning commission or board of adjustment is not required. These typically include zoning permits, temporary use permits, certificates of occupancy and others as specified by the ordinance.
- Advising citizens on alternatives if a proposal is not in compliance. This may mean suggesting alternative procedures (such as a variance or special exception) or advising on the appeal process should the applicant disagree with the administrator’s decision.
- Performing inspections during the building process to ensure that the development complies with site plan representations and the zoning regulations.
- Investigating alleged violations of the ordinance.
- Initiating enforcement proceedings when necessary to correct a violation.
- Monitoring nonconforming uses.
- Keeping zoning records up to date by recording all amendments.
- Staffing the planning commission and board of adjustment. Writing reports and recommendations when requested or when required by ordinance.

The most important principle for any zoning administrator to follow is to implement the ordinance as it is written. In working with the regulations the administrator has no authority to ignore a particular clause, modify procedural requirements, or apply an interpretation that is contrary to its clear, literal meaning. If an applicant disagrees with the administrator’s application of the procedures or interpretation of provisions, the applicant should be advised that the appropriate recourse is to file an appeal with the board of adjustment.

As the most visible representative of the community on land use matters, the administrator must always be courteous and professional. However, a good zoning administrator cannot afford to always be agreeable. There will constantly be some citizens seeking a break, looking for a shortcut around the procedures or asking the administrator to ignore violations. An administrator that always goes along to get along is not discharging the administrator’s duties properly and is creating legal problems for the community.
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