# NPU BEST PRACTICES – FINAL DRAFT AS OF 8/14/22

The Department of City Planning (DCP) provides technical support and coordinates the resources neighborhood planning units need to effectively provide input into the comprehensive development plan and other matters that affect the livability of their neighborhoods. DCP assists with preparing meeting agendas, routing NPU recommendations, collaborating on outreach initiatives, area planning, leadership and other training, meeting tools, and administering funding for small neighborhood projects.

> "The council finds that it is in the public interest for the City of Atlanta to have an organized program of neighborhood planning. It is the purpose of this article to provide an opportunity both for the citizenry formally to provide input into the comprehensive development plan of the city and to provide a means by which information concerning the operation of city government can be provided to the citizens of Atlanta. Further, it is the policy of the city to coordinate the recommendations of neighborhood planning units with the formulation of the city's budget, both capital and operating, in order that the comprehensive development plan be an effective policy guide for the orderly development of the city." — Code of Ordinances, Section 6-3011.

> NPUs "may recommend an action, a policy or a comprehensive plan to the city and to any city agency on any matter affecting the livability of the neighborhood, including, but not limited to, land use, zoning, housing, community facilities, human resources, social and recreational programs, traffic and transportation, environmental quality, open space and parks; assist city agencies in determining priority needs for the neighborhood; review items for inclusion in the city budget and make recommendations relating to budget items for neighborhood improvement; and advise the bureau of planning on the preparation of the 15 and five-year comprehensive development plans." — Code of Ordinances, Section 6-3013(c).

In response to 22-R-3414, the Department of City Planning consulted with the Atlanta Planning Advisory Board to prepare the Neighborhood Planning Unit (NPU) Best Practices Draft #2. The recommendations therein will represent the practices that have proven most effective, transparent and inclusive, and are based on an informal review of Atlanta's 25 neighborhood planning units and similarly structured citizen advisory groups in comparable cities. In short, it is designed to document "what works best" for NPUs, and should not be considered a mandate or directive. The Department of City Planning is committed to providing the technical support and resources NPUs may need to align with these practices. Any reference to NPU members includes all residents as defined by Section 6-3012 (3) of the Code of Ordinances. A copy of the Code of Ordinances — Article B and the Ethical Guidelines for NPU Officers are attached to this document for reference.

The practices recommended in this document are divided into four parts:

I.      NPU Health — this section offers recommendations that may help NPUs achieve or maintain stability, inclusion, fairness, and adherence to Sections 6-3011 through 6-3019 of the Code of Ordinances.

It is DCP's hope that this document will serve as a resource for neighborhood leaders who are seeking to strengthen their neighborhood planning units.

# I.    NPU HEALTH

A.  **Assessment.** NPUs that seek to evaluate their overall organizational health could consider performing annual internal reviews or membership polls to examine the overall health of the planning unit. Such reviews could include any or all of the following measures:

- Ability to manage conflict independently
- Number of timely, efficient meetings
- Compliance with the requirements of Sections 6-3011 through 6-3019 of the Code of Ordinances, as appropriate.
- Submitting formal recommendations for amendments to Code, as appropriate.
- Transparent, fair, timely elections
- Informed, competent, fair leadership
- Participation in the Atlanta Planning Advisory Board
- Record-keeping
- Information sharing
- Any other measures deemed appropriate by the NPU
- Clear, thorough, applicable recommendations and comments provided to the City

B.  **Participation.** NPUs that seek to maximize participation and inclusion should consider the following recommendations:

1.  Make it as easy as possible for residents (any person 18 years of age or older whose primary place of residence is within the neighborhood planning unit, or any corporation, organization, institution or agency which owns property or has a place of business or profession within the NPU) to participate in meetings, committees, and recommendations.

2.  Offer a public comment period in each meeting (may be especially useful for NPUs that use a representative model or otherwise limit commentary from the general public)

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3.  Avoid prohibiting residents of Atlanta from participating in the NPU process.

4.  Minimize barriers to participation, where possible.

C.  **Fair Elections. NPUs that seek to minimize conflict in elections should consider the importance of transparency, fairness, and inclusivity in their officer elections. The following practices will ensure members have confidence in election outcomes.**

1.  NPU bylaws clearly articulate how elections are conducted, including candidate eligibility, voter eligibility, committee work, and clearly described voting methods.

2.  NPUs requiring attendance minimums take care to maintain accurate attendance records during the year.

3.  NPUs publish and distribute voting eligibility and candidate eligibility lists no less than one month prior to any election.

4.  Elections Committees are transparent, publishing the names of the chairperson and all members at least two months prior to the election; and giving regular updates at NPU meetings.

5.  NPUs host informational sessions to allow members to learn more about elected positions from current elected officers.

6.  Elections are conducted by members who are not candidates for elected offices.

7.  Voters are required to be present without proxies.

8.  When paper ballots are used, they are retained along with NPU records and members are instructed to use ink.

9.  When there are questions about voter eligibility, NPUs accept provisional ballots and qualify/disqualify voters in question after the general body meeting where the election is conducted. Questions about eligibility do not disrupt NPU meetings.

10. Nominations are allowed from the floor, at least once during the election cycle.

11. When candidates are identified and attendance records are accurate, NPUs use Election Buddy or a similarly secure electronic voting platform.

12. Election results are announced and/or published as soon as possible.

D.  **Bylaws Review. NPUs that wish to ensure members are freely able to participate in the annual bylaws review process take some or all of the following steps to ensure transparency and inclusivity.**

1. The names of the Bylaws Committee chairperson and all members are published at least two months prior to the bylaws vote, and give regular updates at NPU meetings.

2. Clauses that do not represent the NPU's actual practice are amended to accommodate the NPU practice, or the practice is modified to comply with bylaws.

3. Amendments are presented to the general body at least one month prior to voting.

4. Residents are regularly informed of how to propose bylaws amendments.

E. **Leadership Transition. NPUs that seek to ensure stability during a change in leadership may wish to adhere to the following practices:**

1. A transition conference including outgoing and incoming officers is conducted within a reasonable time frame after the election.

2. A list of NPU assets (websites, social media, passwords, maps, records, etc) is maintained by the NPU secretary or another elected officer.

3. Incoming officers are provided any and all records, correspondence, passwords, databases, and other physical and non-physical property in the custody of outgoing officers within 30 days of the election.

4. Any relevant information or knowledge outgoing officers have that will benefit the NPU is shared with the incoming officers.

F. **Conflict Resolution. NPUs may minimize conflict by ensuring their processes are clear and fair, and that their bylaws are followed precisely. To limit conflict, NPUs may implement the practices stated above, and:**

1. Include fair and clearly defined internal grievance processes for all NPU members, including elected, appointed, and general body members.

2. Include clearly defined disciplinary processes.

3. Include an appeal process for any disciplinary action taken against members.

4. Avoid revoking members' ability to participate.

G. **Education and Training. NPUs that seek equitable access to pertinent information that will maximize their effectiveness should consider requiring elected officers to participate in relevant trainings and educational opportunities.**

1. NPUs may encourage elected officers, appointed officers and other members to participate in any educational opportunities provided by the City of Atlanta, especially Zoning Fundamentals and NPU 101.

## II.  COMMUNICATIONS

A.  **Information Sharing.** **NPUs that excel at achieving clear communication with residents, stakeholders, and the general public may do the following:**

1. Bylaws are posted on NPU websites, distributed to membership immediately upon adoption, and easily available upon request.

2. NPU chairs are encouraged to distribute relevant information to neighborhood and business organization leadership for dissemination, and to the general body, as appropriate.

3. NPU leaders disclose to the general body any meetings or events at which they represent the NPU.

4. Meeting agendas are provided and made easily accessible to the public.

5. Applicant and/or presenter expectations are clearly outlined on NPU websites, when possible, and/or clearly communicated to applicants as expeditiously as possible.

B.  **Record Keeping.**

1. At least one elected or appointed officer is charged with recording and maintaining accurate meeting minutes, recordings, and attendance. Such records are easily accessible to the public.

2. Meeting minutes are filed with the Department of City Planning for historic purposes and future reference.

3. When virtual meetings are recorded, recordings are made available to the public upon request.

4. Annually, NPUs review and update its membership eligibility roster and any required proof of residency, as appropriate.

# III. MEETINGS

## A. Transparency

1. NPUs embrace the spirit of the Georgia Open Meetings Act as much as possible.

2. NPUs begin each general body meeting by informing the body of voting eligibility and any participation rules or time limits, and make reminders during the meeting.

3. Meeting dates, times and locations are widely published at least one week in advance.

4. Any assets held by the NPU are disclosed/reported monthly.

5. Names and contact information of leadership are easily accessible.

6. NPUs publish a list of eligible voters each month, if there are attendance requirements.

7. The full meeting agenda is distributed to the general body once finalized, one week prior to the NPU meeting. Members are encouraged to review agenda items and applications prior to the meeting.

## B. Meeting Efficiency

1. Meetings begin and end on time.

2. For virtual meetings, the virtual meeting report is used to record attendance in lieu of roll call or attendance sheets.

3. NPU meeting agendas are not amended during the meeting, except by motion.

4. NPUs use timekeepers for presentations, applications, comments, and Q&As.

5. NPUs use "unanimous consent" for routine items where no opposition is anticipated (approval of agenda, minutes, consent agenda, meeting extension, adjournment, etc).

6. Consent agendas are utilized for NPUs with a high volume of applications to review. Items placed on the consent agenda are typically those supported by the impacted neighborhood and committee of purview, and members are reminded that they may request any application be removed from the consent agenda for further discussion/debate.

## C. Virtual Meetings

1. For transparency, officers turn on video cameras when speaking.

2. NPUs designate a host for the meeting, other than the chairperson.

3. NPUs designate cohosts to assist with meeting functions (waiting room, voting, chat, etc.).

4. NPUs use polling features for voting items to save time.

5. NPUs conduct roll call voting for dial-in participants.

6. Meeting participants are required to use their full names in registration forms.

7. Webinar meetings are rarely used, if ever, as they do not best reproduce the in-person meeting environment.

### D. Managing Complex Topics

1. To ensure opportunities to participate and to honor the work of the committee, residents are encouraged to attend relevant committee meetings where they will have time and opportunity to thoroughly vet projects of particular interest.

2. Committee Chairs seek answers to any questions of applicants or city officials prior to the general body meeting.

3. Roberts Rules of Order or a preferred rule of order is utilized to fairly manage discussion.

4. Before reviewing voting matters, NPUs announce any time limits for debate, questions, and presentations and that members can override any ruling of the Chair by motion.

5. Residents may submit comments and questions in advance of meetings.

## IV.  APPLICATION REVIEW AND NPU RECOMMENDATIONS

### A. Comprehensive Development Plan

1. Ensure community discussion topics include land use, transportation, housing, infrastructure, energy, nature, historic preservation, public safety, economic development, urban design and neighborhood planning.

2. Review required elements of the CDP, including the Community Work Program and Capital Improvement Element.

3. Engage and seek input from all neighborhoods and residents during the CDP update process and incorporate input into their policies.

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4. Review policies from other NPUs and coordinate with neighboring NPUs where appropriate.

5. Participate in all opportunities to receive updates from, and to give feedback to the Department of City Planning. NPUs share information and updates with residents timely.

6. Periodically review and update NPU policies.

## B. Processing Applications

1. NPUs outline, publish, and provide upon request a clear process for application review.

2. NPUs communicate clearly and timely with applicants.

3. NPUs only process zoning, event, or alcohol license applications that were sent by a representative of the Department of City Planning.

4. Applications and other relevant information are shared with the committee of purview and impacted neighborhood and business organizations immediately upon receipt.

## C. Application Review

1. Conditions or comments are clearly written and submitted in writing immediately after the NPU meeting. Minority opinions are documented and submitted along with the NPU's formal recommendation, especially for contentious issues.

2. Recommendations of non-support include an explanation or narrative recommendation in addition to the vote outcome.

3. NPUs are familiar with the codified criteria for approval or denial of a zoning, event, or alcohol license application. Recommendations and comments reference the appropriate criteria accordingly.

4. NPU leadership consults with appropriate city staff prior to meetings, when there are questions or more information is needed.

5. To inform its recommendations, NPUs consult the Comprehensive Development Plan and its NPU policies, any area plans, and the application criteria as outlined in the Code of Ordinances.

6. NPUs encourage neighborhood associations to work with applicants in good faith when developing agreements.

## D. Finalizing Recommendations

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1. All agenda items should be properly voted upon during the meeting. The recommended motions are:

   (1) Motion to recommend approval/support;

   (2) Motion to recommend approval/support with conditions or comments;

   (3) Motion to recommend denial/non-support;

   (4) Motion to request deferral; or

   (5) Motion to submit no recommendation.

2. Motions are recorded as stated.

3. Motions are repeated immediately before the vote.

4. Representative NPUs take great care to ensure the communities they represent are apprised of all voting items.

5. The NPU Chair or designee reviews the final voting report to ensure it is consistent with the intent of the NPU before signing.