

Frequently Asked Questions about the Subdivision and Land Development Approval Process in the City of Altoona

The City of Altoona's subdivision and land development review and approval process may seem daunting at first to those who are not used to dividing up land, merging lots, or building commercial projects. The City understands this and has prepared this short guide to the process.

What are subdivision and land development regulations?

Subdivision regulations are rules that address how parcels of land may be broken into pieces or merged together. Our subdivision regulations can be found in Sections 640-1 through 640-33 of the Code of the City of Altoona. Meanwhile, land development regulations are rules that address how a commercial or residential facility should be designed. Land development regulations attempt to minimize neighborhood conflicts and maximize the impact of private and public investment. Land development regulations address lot layout, traffic generation, parking, pedestrian infrastructure, landscaping, lighting, drainage, ingress, egress, and noise. Our land development regulations can be found in Sections 640-34 through 640-66 of the Code of the City of Altoona.

When is subdivision and land development review required?

Subdivision review is required whenever parcels of land are to be broken into pieces or merged together. In general, land development review is required when an improvement is made that could have a significant impact on public infrastructure. More specifically, the *Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code* (Act of 1968, P.L. 805, No. 247, as reenacted and amended) defines land development as follows.

- (1) The improvement of one lot or two or more contiguous lots, tracts or parcels of land for any purpose involving:
 - (i) a group of two or more residential or nonresidential buildings, whether proposed initially or cumulatively, or a single nonresidential building on a lot or lots regardless of the number of occupants or tenure; or
 - (ii) the division or allocation of land or space, whether initially or cumulatively, between or
 - (iii) among two or more existing or prospective occupants by means of, or for the purpose of streets, common areas, leaseholds, condominiums, building groups or other features.
- (2) A subdivision of land
- (3) Development in accordance with section 503 (1.1)...

Section 503 (1.1) is below.

- (i) the conversion of an existing single-family detached dwelling or single family semi-detached dwelling into not more than three residential units, unless such units are intended to be a condominium;
- (ii) the addition of an accessory building, including farm buildings, on a lot or lots subordinate to an existing principal building; or
- (iii) the addition or conversion of buildings or rides within the confines of an enterprise which would be considered an amusement park...

Many development projects require both subdivision and land development review, and this can be done at the same time. If you want help in determining if a particular project requires subdivision and/or land development review and approval, please contact the City's Department of Community Development at 814-949-2470 or planning@altoonapa.gov.

How does subdivision and land development review relate to zoning?

Before applying for subdivision and/or land development approval, one should determine if his or her project is feasible given the current zoning. Zoning establishes districts and limits what activities are permitted in each. Zoning provides setbacks and other dimensional regulations for each zoning district. Zoning also governs signs. Our zoning regulations can be found in Chapter 800 of the [Code of the City of Altoona](#). Although our zoning was designed with some flexibility, some activities are simply not permitted in certain zones, and some parcels are simply too small for some projects. Questions about zoning should be directed to the City's Department of Community Development at [814-949-2470](tel:814-949-2470) or planning@altoonapa.gov.

What is the subdivision and land development review and approval process?

In the City of Altoona, the subdivision and land development review and approval process has seven steps as follows.

Step 1, hire a design professional

The first step is to hire a qualified, licensed design professional or designer to prepare the plans for you. Due to the complexity of today's local, state, and Federal surveys and environmental regulations, plans cannot be created by laymen. Depending on the project, an appropriate designer could be a registered surveyor, landscape architect, architect, or engineer. The City of Altoona does not maintain a list of qualified design professionals and, out of fairness to our business community, we cannot recommend one.

Once hired, we highly recommend that you and your designer contact the Department of Community Development to discuss our submission requirements, your project, and any general concerns that the City may have about it. Meetings

and informal “sketch” plan discussions before the plans are officially submitted can avoid edits, changes, delays, and costs later.

Step 2, submit plans

The second step is for your designer to prepare and submit plans for your project on your behalf. We require that seven sets of plans be submitted to the Department of Community Development as well as an electronic copy, such as a PDF. The specific requirements for these plans can be found in the Altoona City Code.

Once we receive those plans, we will distribute them to the City’s Department of Public Works, Fire Department, Codes and Inspections Department, Altoona Water Authority, and our own review staff – including the City’s consultant engineer. Any concerns or deficiencies found by our team are sent to the City’s consultant engineer. Our engineer then incorporates these comments with his or her own, and the City returns all comments to you and your designer. Any requests for waivers from our regulations should be made in writing with the application. The reviewers will then make recommendations on whether or not the waivers should be granted. Note that an additional set of plans must be sent by the applicant to the Blair County Planning Commission, which is not part of City government.

The City’s review fees must be paid at the time of submission, but our consultant engineer’s fees will be billed to the applicant later and must be paid before final approval.

Step 3: respond to the comments of City staff

The third step is for your designer to address the comments created in step two. This is done by replying in writing and, if necessary, amending your plans. Waivers from our regulations can be requested. If substantial changes must be made to the original design, then seven sets of the revised plans must be submitted to the Department of Community Development. In this case, the second and third steps of the process would repeat.

This process may repeat a few times before the project is ready to be presented to the Altoona City Planning Commission. However, Section 508 of the *Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code* limits the City’s review time to 90 days past the date of the City Planning Commission meeting that immediately followed the date of application.

Step 4: present before the Altoona City Planning Commission

The fourth step is presentation before the Altoona City Planning Commission for review and approval or denial. Unlike any other municipality in Blair County, the City's Planning Commission has final approval power for subdivisions and land development applications. Because our governing body (Altoona City Council) is not involved, our review and approval process is significantly shorter than that of any other Blair County municipality.

The Altoona City Planning Commission typically meets on the first Tuesday of each month at 3:00 PM in the 4th Floor Conference Room of Altoona City Hall. You and your designer must attend the meeting at which your project will be discussed. The meetings are public, so any concerned neighbors may attend as well. At this meeting, you and your designer will present the project. City staff will make recommendations on the approval of the plan and on any requested waivers. Staff, the Planning Commission, and/or the public may ask you and your designer questions. The Commission then decides by a majority vote whether or not to approve your subdivision and/or land development. Altoona City Council appoints the members of the Planning Commission, who must be City residents.

Note that very simple subdivisions and land developments can be approved by the staff of the Department of Community Development without the direct involvement of the Planning Commission. In this case, staff reports their activity to the Altoona City Planning Commission at their next public meeting. However, most substantial subdivision and/or land development projects go before the Planning Commission in a public meeting so that the community has an opportunity to review and address them.

Step 5: submit signed final approved plans to the Department of Community Development

After the Altoona City Planning Commission approves the plans, the fifth step is that seven sets of the final plans must be signed and notarized by you, and submitted to the City's Department of Community Development. We will have the Altoona City Planning Commission officials sign the final plans, notarize them, and return two copies of the final plans to you for recording. Note that notary publics are available for free in Altoona City Hall, although we recommend calling before stopping in to make sure that they will be here at that time.

Step 6: approve, sign, and record the developer's agreement

After final plans are submitted, the Department of Community Development, the Department of Public Works, and the City Solicitor will use one of the signed copies of the final approved plans to prepare a developer's agreement. The

developer's agreement details the terms of the approval, and thus protects all parties involved. We will then send you a copy of the developer's agreement. If it is acceptable to you, then you must again (1) sign and notarize a copy, (2) return it to us so that we can have the City Planning Commission officials sign and notarize it, (3) record the developer's agreement at the Blair County Courthouse, and (4) return the recorder's slip to the City Department of Community Development as proof of the recording. Any required surety is handled through the developer's agreement.

Step 7: record the signed, final approved plans

The last step is that one of these copies of the final plans, signed and notarized by both you and the Planning Commission, must be recorded at the Blair County Courthouse. We require that you record one set of final approved plans so that a permanent record of the project is created. You must bring a copy of the Recorder's slip back to the Department of Community Development afterwards to prove that the recording was completed. Note that the County may not record the final approved plans unless the Blair County Planning Commission has also signed them.

When may building or grading permits be issued?

By City ordinance, any building or grading permits cannot be issued until this seven step process is completed. However, staff has some flexibility in this. Building permits are issued by the City's Department of Codes and Inspections, which is located on the first floor of Altoona City Hall.