

Introduction

The authority for a city or town to establish a board with planning functions has existed in the Commonwealth for over 70 years.

In 1907 towns were authorized to establish boards of survey, and in 1916, cities were given similar authorization. Boards of survey were required to prepare plans of the municipality to show the location of streets or ways, including those which were already laid out and those which the board felt were needed to serve the future public. The plans had to show the direction, width and grades of each street or way, and in cities such plans also had to show drainage. The contents of these early plans appear to be similar to what is now required to be shown on an official map. These early plans should not, however, be considered as an official map unless your city or town has adopted such map in accordance with the provisions of M.G.L., Ch. 41, S. 81-E.

Planning boards were first established in 1913, and the Act which provided for such boards became M.G.L., Ch. 41, S. 70. These section 70 planning boards were required to make careful studies of the resources, possibilities and needs of the municipality, particularly with respect to conditions which may have been injurious to the public health or otherwise injurious in and about rented dwellings. The board also had to make plans for development of the municipality with special reference to the proper housing of its people. These plans appear to be the beginnings of what we now consider master plans.

In 1936, the legislature improved local planning by authorizing municipalities to establish a planning board under the provisions of section 81-A of M.G.L., Ch. 41. Such boards were responsible for all planning functions within the municipality. All boards, which previously had planning powers, were to cease to exist once a municipality established an 81-A planning board and the board members took office.

The duties of such 81-A planning boards, as set forth in the 1936 Act, are basically as they exist today and include the following:

- To make careful studies;
- To prepare plans of the resources, possibilities and needs of the city or town;
- To report annually to the town meeting or city council regarding the condition of the city or town;
- To act as park commissioners in a town if so authorized;
- To make a master or study plan;
- To have an official map prepared if authorized by city council or town meeting; and
- To review and submit a report regarding the layout, alteration, relocation or discontinuance of public ways.