

A Regional Networking for Municipal Design Review

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An urban view of the Chicago metropolitan area (iStockphoto photo)

Recent developments affecting urban design review heighten the need for inter-governmental communication. In metropolitan Chicago, the formation of the Municipal Design Review Network provides a new forum for collaboration among professionals to improve the decision-making capacity of local governments. The success of this Network suggests that it is a model for other areas countrywide.



The Municipal Design Review Network (MDRN) provides a venue for Chicago metropolitan area communities with design review boards or staff to share information regarding best practices for urban design. Elected officials, commission members, planners and designers are now meeting regularly to discuss current issues affecting local appearance and architectural review.

Regional Background

The use of discretionary review in individual suburbs has nevertheless varied with the local history and culture. Well-established towns were ambitious in using design review to complement historic preservation. Outlying communities – and smaller villages faced with rapid growth – were beginning to embrace new methods, as the accompanying chart illustrates (see lower right column).

Each of the three most common methods for design review in the Chicago region present challenges for shared inter-governmental communication.

Under the architecture review commission method, a separate board comprised of architects, or a mix of design professionals and citizens, is delegated authority for design decisions. In the Chicago metropolitan area, such entities are sometimes called “Appearance Commissions.”

Some communities use a more traditional plan commission structure to deal with urban design aspects. And some have a separate committee or subgroup of their planning board to do so. This structure allows the plan commission to apply conditions that reflect aesthetic considerations while sidestepping legal concerns associated with creating a separate entity.

A growing number of communities assign responsibilities for design review to the staff director of the municipal development department. This form has been called “administrative” design review. Consequently, greater reliance is placed upon designated staff and measurable standards.

With hundreds of separate governmental units in the Chicago metropolitan area, local character and interests vary widely. Ideally, any design review method should emphasize consistency to help assure fairness in the approval of new development on both a local and intergovernmental basis.

Architectural design review has traditionally been viewed as a local community matter and potential competitive distinction. However, the ebb and flow of real estate development has magnified these interests and challenges.

Formation of the Network

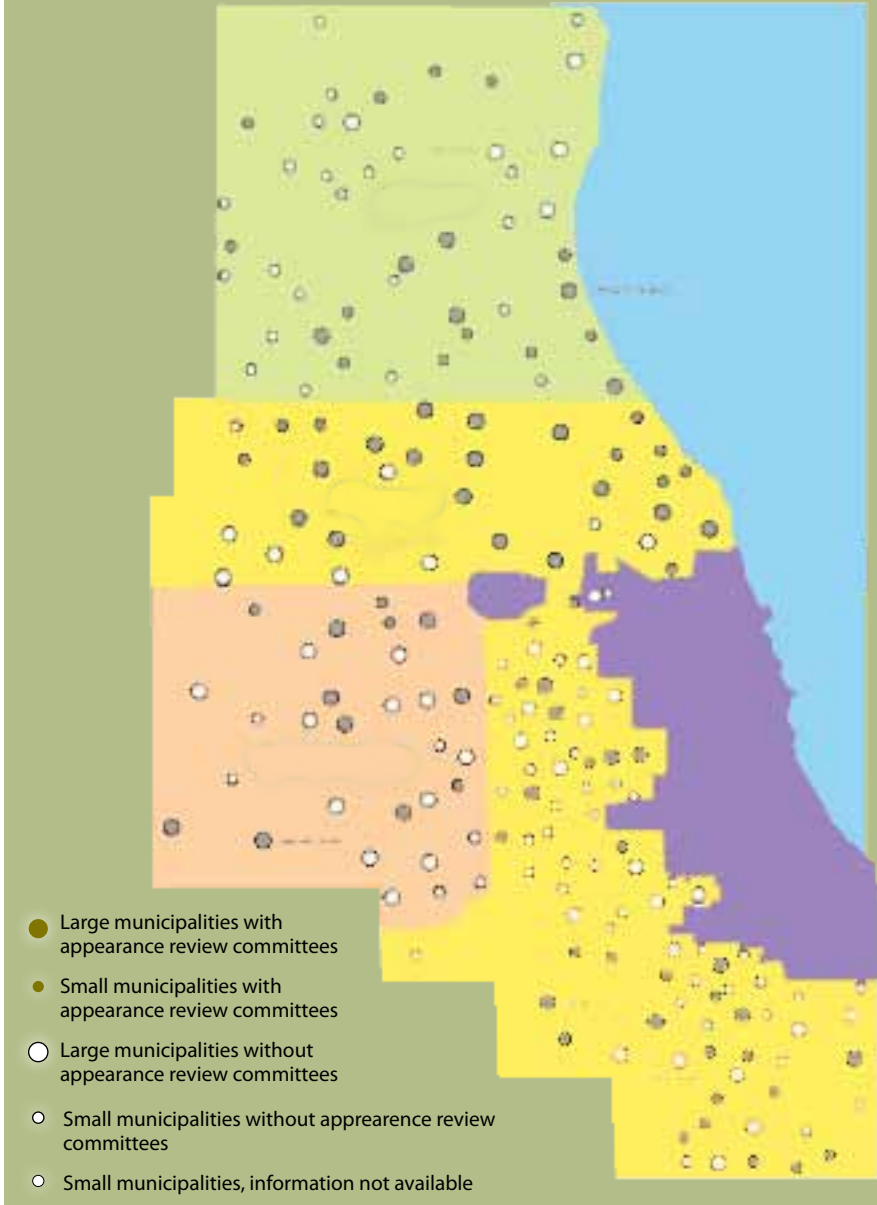
Three factors – rapid suburban development, urban design aspirations, and new legal issues – provided the impetus for formation of the Network. Considering these issues:

As a pertinent example of suburban growth, the Village of Glenview had been recognized not only for its tradition of quality development since its early formation of an “Appearance Commission, but also for dramatic growth with in-fill of adjacent greenfields -- and the redevelopment of a former airbase into a mixed-use development. In a relatively short period of years, such villages had experienced virtually all aspects of (sub)urban planning and design.

Another prominent example is Millennium Park, one of the most popular tourist destinations in downtown Chicago. Many visitors immediately recognize the innovative design features that have made this park so attractive and why it has stimulated so much redevelopment along the South Michigan Avenue corridor. Successful design in the urban core seemed to raise awareness in the surrounding suburban counties. Yet the economic pressures felt by communities due to rampant growth created a strong demand to improve design review processes.

A significant combination of legal actions helped focus the regulatory issues. In 2007, the Illinois Legislature amended the Illinois Municipal Code to expressly authorize design review commissions (Public Act 95-0475). This result of efforts by interested northern suburbs alleviated some perceived legal concerns about the underpinnings for design review, and prompted new interest in the options. Ironically, separate litigation of related landmarking

Municipal Use of Appearance Review Committees in Chicago Metropolitan Area



issues may have spurred additional interest for the growth of the network

Amid these cross-currents, a few individuals came together to provide the leadership to organize the Network.

As Chair of the Glenview Appearance Commission and founder of an affiliate of the Scenic America organization, I initiated the efforts. Previously I had organized a statewide

study of aesthetic regulations in Illinois, co-sponsored by DePaul University's Chaddick Institute, which served as a starting point.

From the beginning, participants in forming the Network worked with Chaddick Institute advisors, law firms and other professional organizations (including the APA –Chicago Metro Section) to bring together those individuals who focused on the architecture and design aspects of municipal development and regulation. The guiding concept was to complement and supplement other professional associations and programs by providing updates for this multi-*disciplinary audience*.

The Chaddick Institute, located at DePaul University in Chicago, has a mission to provide planners and developers a forum to share expertise on difficult land-use issues through workshops and policy studies. The Institute served as a resource for the advisors who set out to create our specialized Network.

Over 50 community representatives came to an initial meeting hosted by the Village of Glenview where design professionals gathered to discuss and share their interests and common concerns. From participation in these initial events, individual municipal staff members emerged to form an "Advisory Committee."

The Committee has become the "heart and soul" of what is now known as the Municipal Design Review Network (MDRN). The MDRN Advisory Committee members collaborate with the Chaddick Institute in assessing plans and topics for future meetings. The members have also volunteered their professional skills and experience to present topics and facilitate discussions.



Ongoing Events

As the “sponsor” of the Network, the Chaddick Institute currently provides meeting facilities and administrative support. It helps develop an annual schedule of events divided between downtown and suburban locations. These events include:

- Spring symposiums on the DePaul campus allowing for informal, in-depth discussion of design theories. This past year’s seminar, “Cultural Issues for Community Design”, featured a DePaul professor leading a discussion about the history and meaning of community aesthetics in the suburbs. Attendees explored the many facets of this design value through sharing municipal staff and board experiences in breakout groups.
- Summer on-site events featuring the local architecture and downtown redevelopment projects. The most recent summer on-site event in Glen Ellyn, featured local consultants and municipal staff discussing the design and public process issues involved in downtown planning. Approximately 60 representatives from over 25 municipalities participated in the meeting and the subsequent discussion. The event culminated with a guided walking tour and informal luncheon meeting
- Fall programming concluding with technical workshops – often co-sponsored with the local APA chapter – to feature regional experts on current issues. The last fall workshop at DePaul’s suburban campus focused on practical guidance for negotiating the review process, with a briefing on recent legal developments affecting design issues. Attorneys and planners from leading Chicago firms presented a range of regulatory topics.





The Chaddick Institute has also developed and is maintaining an on-line library of design guidelines for the Network, to provide a new resource for professionals. This allows elected officials and their staff to locate and compare the differing approaches employed by communities. The Institute and Network intend to use this vehicle to compile further surveys, assess best practices, and develop model guidelines.

As noted previously, recent legal issues have been a factor in shaping the Network. In July, 2009, an Illinois Appellate Court issued a decision that created confusion and concern in both the historic preservation and architectural design communities—because of the broad Commission composition issues (*Hanna v. City of Chicago*). The Appellate Court found the requirement that the Landmark Commission members have “special interest, knowledge, or experience” could be excessively vague and ambiguous. This *City of Chicago* case is being reheard and further appeals are anticipated. In any event, the Network may prove to be a greater resource in addressing such specialized issues.

With recent economic and potential legal challenges, many communities are currently reassessing their municipal governance processes for design review. Chaddick advisors to the Network have developed a prototype

presentation for municipal Boards who may be reviewing their commitments to design review in light of pressing economic interests. Recently, for example, local commission members and staff liaisons who have participated in Network meetings have helped shape the plans for “benchmarking” initiatives for their full councils and boards.

Future Possibilities

What lies ahead for the Network? Many strategic possibilities beckon such as further collaboration with regional/organization partners. A more formal membership and governance structure may be needed as participation expands. More analytical assessment of best practices and evaluation methods may need to be developed. The Network also will strive to attract a more demographically diverse mix of professionals. As the network expands, new geographic/peer Committees and connections through “COGs” could prove helpful.

The experience of the participating municipalities demonstrates how communities in other regions of the country can benefit from their own municipal design networks. The village Boards and staff shared their experience to form the Network and are now learning from others’ experience. Almost 100 separate municipalities have been connected through the Network, and approximately 200 individual government officials, staff and professionals have participated in various activities.

Given the many variations of plan commissions and architectural review boards, it is critical that there be extensive communication with the local legislative bodies and among various design review entities. Improved design review processes promote local economic development, avoid unnecessary border disputes and enhance the quality of the surrounding areas. Our experiences at “MDRN” hopefully show how inter-governmental communication can be professionally rewarding for all involved.



References

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About the Author

John Hedrick, an attorney and consultant, works with DePaul's Chaddick Institute as a Senior Advisor. He has been involved in land use issues in Illinois for over thirty years, while specializing in advertising, corporate and regulatory matters. He has also served in leadership positions for various non-profit organizations and municipal commissions.

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