

Planning Board

RESIDENT GUIDE

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Reviews and approves site plans, subdivisions, and conditional use permits

★ START HERE — TALK TO PLANNING FIRST

The best thing you can do is reach out **before** you design or apply. One short conversation confirms exactly which approvals you need and how to prepare — and it's free.

Peter Stith, Assistant Planning Director · (603) 610-4188 · pmstith@portsmouthnh.gov

WHAT THIS BOARD DOES

The Planning Board decides whether larger development and land-division proposals meet the City's Site Plan Review and Subdivision Regulations — how a site handles access and traffic, parking, stormwater, landscaping, lighting, utilities, and fits within the surrounding neighborhood. After a public hearing, it votes to approve, approve with conditions, or deny. The Board also reviews and approves **Conditional Use Permits (CUPs)** — for example, for work within wetland buffers or for certain uses.

YOU COME HERE WHEN

- You're creating **3 or more dwelling units**
- You're **subdividing or merging land**, or changing lot lines
- A commercial project adds building area or **5+ parking spaces**
- Your project needs a **Conditional Use Permit** (e.g., work in a wetland buffer or certain uses)
- Any project that triggers formal “site plan review”

WHAT THE BOARD IS DECIDING

Safe access and circulation; adequate parking; stormwater and erosion control; landscaping and screening; lighting; utility capacity; fire safety; protection of wetlands and historic features; and overall compliance with the Zoning Ordinance.

HOW TO PREPARE

1. **Contact Planning staff first** to confirm you need site plan review and what to submit.
2. **Hire a NH-licensed civil engineer** — full-size plans must be stamped; wetlands need a certified scientist.
3. **Expect the TAC step first** — your plans go to the Technical Advisory Committee before the Planning Board.
4. **Large project?** (30,000+ sq ft, 20+ units, or more than one main building) start with a non-binding “conceptual consultation.”
5. **Submit via OpenGov** according to the deadlines on the [meeting calendar](#); pay fees and abutter-notice costs, and confirm your abutter list.

BRING TO YOUR HEARING

Stamped site plans · stormwater/drainage calculations · landscaping, lighting & parking plans · green-building (LEED) checklist · digital PDFs of everything.

TIPS & COMMON PITFALLS

- A **waiver** from a regulation takes **six Board Member votes** — flag any needed waiver with staff early.
- Approval **expires in one year** unless you pull a building permit — plan your timeline.
- Resolve TAC's technical comments before the hearing — unresolved issues are the #1 cause of delay.

Planning & Sustainability Department

City Hall — 1 Junkins Ave, 3rd Floor · (603) 610-7216
Staff & emails: portsmouthnh.gov/planportsmouth/contact

Do it online

Apply & track: [OpenGov](#) · Look up zoning, districts & buffers: [MapGeo](#)

Meetings & forms

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Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)

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The City's technical staff review — the checkpoint before the Planning Board

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Peter Stith, Assistant Planning Director / TAC Chair · (603) 610-4188 · pmstith@portsmouthnh.gov

WHAT THIS COMMITTEE DOES

Most applicants go through the TAC in **two steps**. First is an informal **TAC Work Session**, where City department staff — Planning, Public Works, Inspection, Fire, and Police — give early feedback on a preliminary submission. Then comes the formal **TAC Meeting**, where the committee reviews the revised plans and makes its recommendation to the Planning Board. It's the technical checkpoint designed to catch problems before your public hearing.

YOU COME HERE WHEN

- **Any project headed to the Planning Board** for subdivision or site plan review goes through the TAC first
- Plan on **two steps** — a Work Session first, then a formal TAC Meeting
- It is a **required step**, not optional

WHAT THE COMMITTEE REVIEWS

Drainage and stormwater; driveways, access and sight distance; internal circulation, parking, lighting, and fire lanes; water and sewer capacity; utilities; construction and erosion control; **zoning compliance**; and consistency with City standards.

HOW TO PREPARE

1. **Start at the Work Session.** Bring a preliminary plan set and use staff's early feedback to shape your design.
2. **Have your engineer available** to answer detailed technical questions in the room.
3. **Address the department comments** from the Work Session, then return for the formal **TAC Meeting**.
4. **Treat it as a free dry run** — resolving issues here means a smoother Planning Board hearing.
5. **Revise and resubmit promptly** — your Planning Board date depends on a recommendation from TAC to the Planning Board.

BRING TO YOUR HEARING

Full plan set · stormwater and traffic details · water/sewer and utility information · fire-access details.

TIPS & COMMON PITFALLS

- Expect **both** a Work Session and a Meeting — the Work Session comes first and is the time to work through concerns.
- The **more complete your submission**, the fewer review cycles you'll need.
- Ask **which department has a concern** and resolve it directly before the Planning Board meeting.

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Board of Adjustment (BOA)

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Grants relief from the strict letter of the Zoning Ordinance

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WHAT THIS BOARD DOES

The Board of Adjustment (BOA) — Portsmouth's zoning appeals board, also known elsewhere as the Zoning Board of Adjustment — hears requests that don't fit the zoning rules exactly. It can grant a **variance** (permission to deviate from a rule), a **special exception** (a use the ordinance allows in that zone if set conditions are met), an **equitable waiver** of a dimensional violation, or decide an **appeal** of a staff zoning decision.

YOU COME HERE WHEN

- Your plan doesn't meet a zoning standard — setback, height, coverage, lot size, or an unpermitted use → **variance**
- Your use is allowed only “by **special exception**” in that district
- You disagree with a zoning determination by City staff → **administrative appeal**

WHAT THE BOARD IS DECIDING

For a variance, all five legal tests must be met: (1) not contrary to the public interest; (2) the spirit of the ordinance is observed; (3) substantial justice is done; (4) surrounding property values are not diminished; and (5) denial would cause an unnecessary hardship due to the property's special conditions.

HOW TO PREPARE

1. **Confirm which relief you need** — variance vs. special exception vs. appeal (Planning can tell you).
2. **Build your case around the criteria** — the five variance tests, or the ordinance's listed conditions for a special exception.
3. **Focus hardship on the property**, not personal circumstances — what makes this lot unique?
4. **Bring a plot plan, photos, and measurements** showing the exact relief requested.
5. **Notify abutters and submit before the deadline** via OpenGov.

BRING TO YOUR HEARING

A written statement addressing each criterion · plot plan or survey · photos · measurements of the proposed relief.

TIPS & COMMON PITFALLS

- A variance is a **legal test, not a popularity contest** — organize your evidence around the five criteria.
- **Special exceptions are more predictable**: meet every listed condition and the standard is clearer.
- **Appeal deadlines are short** (often a 30-day window) — act quickly and confirm the deadline with Planning.

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Historic District Commission (HDC)

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Reviews exterior changes in the City's historic districts

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WHAT THIS COMMISSION DOES

The HDC reviews the appearance of exterior work on properties within Portsmouth's historic districts and issues a **Certificate of Approval** before that work can proceed. Its goal is to protect the character that makes the historic neighborhoods distinctive, while allowing owners to make reasonable changes.

YOU COME HERE WHEN

- Your property is **in a historic district** and the work is visible from a public way
- Additions, new construction, or **demolition**
- Windows, doors, siding, roofing, trim, or regulated paint colors
- **Accessory structures** (garages, sheds), signs, fences, and decks

WHAT THE COMMISSION IS DECIDING

Whether the design, scale, materials, and details are appropriate to the building and the district — guided by the City's historic design guidelines. Interior-only work generally is not reviewed.

HOW TO PREPARE

1. **Confirm you're in a district first** (check MapGeo or ask Planning) — don't assume.
2. **Document existing conditions** with clear photos of the building and its context.
3. **Prepare scaled elevations or drawings** and specify materials, window types, and colors.
4. **Read the design guidelines** and show how your proposal respects the district's character.
5. **Consider an informal work session** before your formal hearing to get early feedback.

BRING TO YOUR HEARING

Photos · scaled elevations/drawings · material and product specifications · physical samples where helpful.

TIPS & COMMON PITFALLS

- **"Like-for-like"** repairs are easier to approve than visible changes in material or design.
- **Reversibility and matching historic detail** go a long way with the Commission.
- Planning an **ADU or solar** in a historic district? Those exterior elements are reviewed here too.

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Conservation Commission

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Protects wetlands, the shoreline, and tidal buffers

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WHAT THIS COMMISSION DOES

The Conservation Commission reviews work in or near wetlands, surface waters, and their protective buffers, and it reviews state wetlands-permit applications for projects in Portsmouth. In a tidal city, its focus is water quality, natural buffers, the health of the estuary, and conservation land protection. It is advisory to the Planning Board on Wetland Conditional Use Permit applications.

YOU COME HERE WHEN

- You're **building, filling, grading, or clearing** in or near a wetland, the shoreline, or a protected buffer
- Your project needs a **NH DES wetlands permit**
- Work is proposed **within a regulated wetland buffer**

WHAT THE COMMISSION IS DECIDING

Avoiding and minimizing disturbance to wetlands and buffers; protecting water quality and stormwater function; preserving vegetation and natural features; and mitigating any unavoidable impacts.

HOW TO PREPARE

1. **Find out early** whether wetlands or buffers affect your lot — use the City's Wetland Buffer map or ask Planning.
2. **Have a certified wetland scientist** delineate wetlands and mark the buffers.
3. **Design to stay out of buffers** where possible — show how you avoid, then minimize, impacts.
4. **Prepare a plan** showing existing conditions, buffers, proposed work, and erosion controls.
5. **Coordinate any state (NH DES) permit** — those timelines can run in parallel.

BRING TO YOUR HEARING

Wetland delineation · site plan stamped by a wetland scientist showing buffers and disturbance limits · erosion-control and planting details.

TIPS & COMMON PITFALLS

- Portsmouth takes **tidal and wetland buffers seriously** — confirm buffer lines before you design.
- The cheapest path is almost always to **keep work outside the buffer** entirely.
- Ask whether your buffer work needs a **Conditional Use Permit** under the Zoning Ordinance.

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