

# EMPOWERING LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

IMPACTS OF  
MSU EXTENSION'S  
ZONING ADMINISTRATOR  
CERTIFICATE PROGRAM



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# Acknowledgements

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# Executive Summary

**Michigan State University Extension’s Zoning Administrator Certificate Program (ZAC), launched in 2009, addresses a critical gap in training for zoning administrators – key staff responsible for land use decisions across Michigan’s 1,856 local governments.**

These roles lack statutory education requirements, leaving communities vulnerable to legal risk and inefficiencies. ZAC was designed to raise professionalism, ensure competency and reduce municipal liability through a structured curriculum blending Michigan law with best practices.

In 2024, MSU Extension conducted a long-term evaluation comparing past ZAC participants with a control sample of nonparticipants. Findings confirm ZAC’s enduring impact: participants rated themselves significantly higher in 10 of 12 core areas of zoning administration, with the greatest gains in legal responsibilities and permit review. **Nearly 70% reported increased job satisfaction, two-thirds noted career advancement opportunities and 73% assumed greater leadership roles.**

Community-level benefits are equally compelling. **Three-quarters of respondents reported changes to plans, policies or ordinances, and 71% improved application and review processes. Half reported reduced legal risk through proactive measures such as ordinance updates and improved documentation.** Additional improvements included stronger inter-agency collaboration, enhanced public engagement and improved environmental protection.

## RESPONDENTS REPORTED:



## INCREASED JOB SATISFACTION



## CAREER ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES



## NEW LEADERSHIP ROLES

### REPORTED COMMUNITY-LEVEL BENEFITS



**CHANGES TO  
PLANS, POLICIES  
OR ORDINANCES**

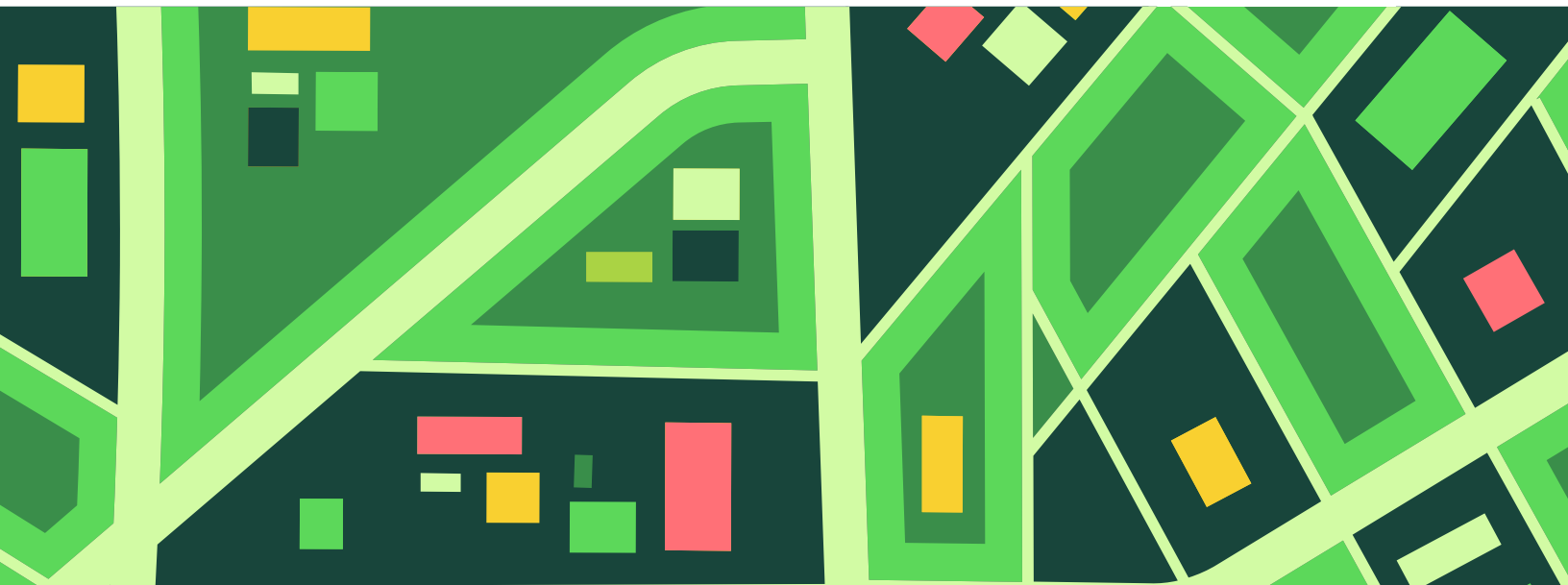


**REDUCED  
LEGAL  
RISK**



**IMPROVED  
APPLICATION AND  
REVIEW PROCESSES**

The Zoning Administrator Certificate Program demonstrates proven outcomes and sustained demand. Since 2009, the program has delivered measurable value — empowering local leaders, improving governance and reducing risk — making it a cornerstone for shaping Michigan's land use future.






# Introduction

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Michigan State University Extension has over one hundred years of experience providing training and resources to land use decision-makers across Michigan. The MSU Extension Zoning Administrator Certificate (ZAC) Program is one example of a signature Extension program in this space. Since 2009, ZAC has increased the knowledge, skills and confidence of local zoning officials. The program has also led to broad community impacts because of officials' participation in the program.

In 2024, a team of MSU Extension faculty and staff completed a long-term evaluation of ZAC to better understand the program's impact on local zoning administration and the careers of zoning administrators. The evaluation is based on a sample of local officials who successfully completed the program in years past, and a second sample of zoning administrators from communities who have not participated in the program. Respondents from each sample were surveyed about their skill level, confidence in their work, policy changes and more, to provide a comparison between program participants and non-participants.



**Overall, the results show that in the long-term, ZAC successfully prepares participants with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to make meaningful changes to local governmental practices, policies and ordinances that ultimately result in reduced legal risk to their communities.**

Compared to non-ZAC participants, those who completed the program reported higher-than-average scores across 10 of 12 key areas for zoning administration. Program participants demonstrated improved understanding of core responsibilities of their work, including site plan review and site inspections, managing records, processing applications, interpreting zoning laws, and working effectively with other local officials, outside agencies and the public.

This report provides details about the need for this type of training, the program's history, the survey process, results of the evaluation, and recommendations for MSU Extension to improve or maintain program content and delivery.

# Needs Assessment

**About 95% of Michigan’s 1,856 local units of government have adopted zoning (University of Michigan Center for Empowering Communities, n.d.).**

The statutory authority to adopt a zoning ordinance does not include training requirements for local officials or staff who administer zoning ordinances, or make decisions based on local and state law.

In 2003, the bipartisan Michigan Land Use Leadership Council articulated the need for education and training of local planning and zoning officials to realize a stronger and more prosperous Michigan future. In its report, ***Michigan’s Land, Michigan’s Future***, the Council recommended that 60 percent of planning and zoning officials complete basic land use planning, zoning, and Smart Growth<sup>1</sup> educational programs by 2010 (Michigan Land Use Leadership Council, 2003).

In the early 2000s, existing training programs for appointed and elected officials serving on local planning commissions and zoning boards included those offered by private consultants, the Michigan Chapter of the American Planning Association, municipal associations, and MSU Extension.

Generally, these training programs were for those serving their communities as volunteers. Focus was given to foundational knowledge of roles, responsibilities, best practices in planning and zoning, and making policy decisions that help realize a community’s long-term goals.

Michigan zoning administrators (ZAs), on the other hand, who often work as staff to local government commissions and boards, lacked a specific educational program developed to meet their educational needs and job demands. The position of a ZA is required by state zoning enabling laws and plays a vital role in local land use decisions (Michigan Zoning Enabling Act, 2006).

**1,773**



**Units of government have adopted zoning in Michigan**

<sup>1</sup>Smart Growth America is a national organization focused on land use and transportation issues that “helps create healthy, prosperous, and resilient places to live for all people through research, advocacy, and direct community support” (Smart Growth America, n.d.).

## Zoning administrators are typically responsible for:

-  Accepting development applications
-  Reviewing applications against ordinance standards
-  Researching property records
-  Writing detailed reports for applications that must be reviewed and approved by local government boards
-  Inspecting construction projects for zoning compliance
-  Enforcing ordinance standards



These vital roles, if poorly performed — for example, approving a permit that runs counter to the local ordinance requirements, or upholding an unconstitutional process or ordinance requirement — can result in lawsuits that are costly to local governments (*Paeth, et al. v Worth Township, et al., 2010*).

As created by law, the ZA position has great responsibility, but state law does not include a requirement for formal training or certification for someone holding a ZA position in Michigan. The ZA has historically been a position that is learned “on the job” and often without the benefit of a mentor or training from an experienced ZA.

Unfortunately, no statewide organization had adequately addressed the educational needs of ZAs, nor did university degrees in urban and regional planning in Michigan go to the level of detail on zoning administration necessary to do the job effectively. The need for training for these important positions continues to exist.



**In 2017, a survey of Michigan local governments found that a third of all respondents reported having insufficient staff capacity for planning and zoning (Center for Local State and Urban Policy, 2018).**

Other surveys of Michigan local governments found that staff training was desired on specific planning and zoning topics such as energy issues (Center for Local State and Urban Policy, 2024) and coastal development (Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, 2021). This is further supported by past short-term evaluations of ZAC where a high level of respondents recommend that all zoning administrators participate in ZAC (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, 2025).

ZAC was designed to fill that training need for zoning administrators — blending Michigan law, examples and experiences with best practice frameworks like the Smart Growth Tenets. To understand how this innovative approach came to be, it's helpful to look at the origins and evolution of ZAC — how it was developed to meet the growing need for zoning expertise across Michigan communities.



# Program Background and History

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ZAC launched in 2009 following a rigorous review of similar training programs offered in other states. The program was initially developed under the guidance of faculty affiliated with the MSU Land Policy Institute. MSU graduate students and faculty identified eleven training programs nationwide intended for local government zoning administrators and/or building code inspectors.<sup>2</sup> These programs not only provided evidence of the general need for such training, but they also served as references for important content to include when developing curriculum outlines and program learning objectives.

## The original goals for ZAC were to:



Ensure zoning administrators that successfully complete the program have a minimum level of knowledge to competently perform their job;



Raise the level of professionalism of zoning administrators in Michigan;



Improve the timeliness, accuracy and completeness of zoning administrator decisions in Michigan;

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<sup>2</sup>City of Grand Rapids; Connecticut Association of Zoning Enforcement Officials; State of Maine - State Planning Office; State of New York - Department of State; North Carolina Association of Zoning Officials and the University of North Carolina - Institute of Government; Pennsylvania Municipal Planning Education Institute; Vermont Secretary of State; Virginia Association of Zoning Officials and Virginia Tech; Center for Government Services at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey; and the International Code Council practice for the Zoning Inspector exam (utilizing the International Zoning Code; and Legal Aspects of Code Administration).



Provide opportunities for advancement in knowledge and professionalism for zoning administrators by providing a three-level certification program;



Create the standard by which zoning administrators will be hired by local units of government;



Help stimulate the creation of an organization dedicated to zoning administrators;



Reduce municipal liability created by poor zoning administrator decisions;



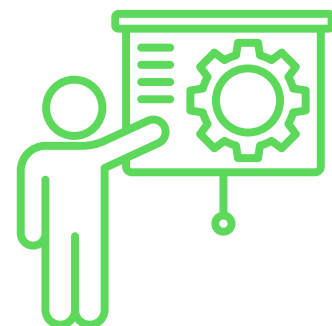
Improve the potential for stimulating local planning commissioner and zoning board of appeals training by newly certified zoning administrators; and

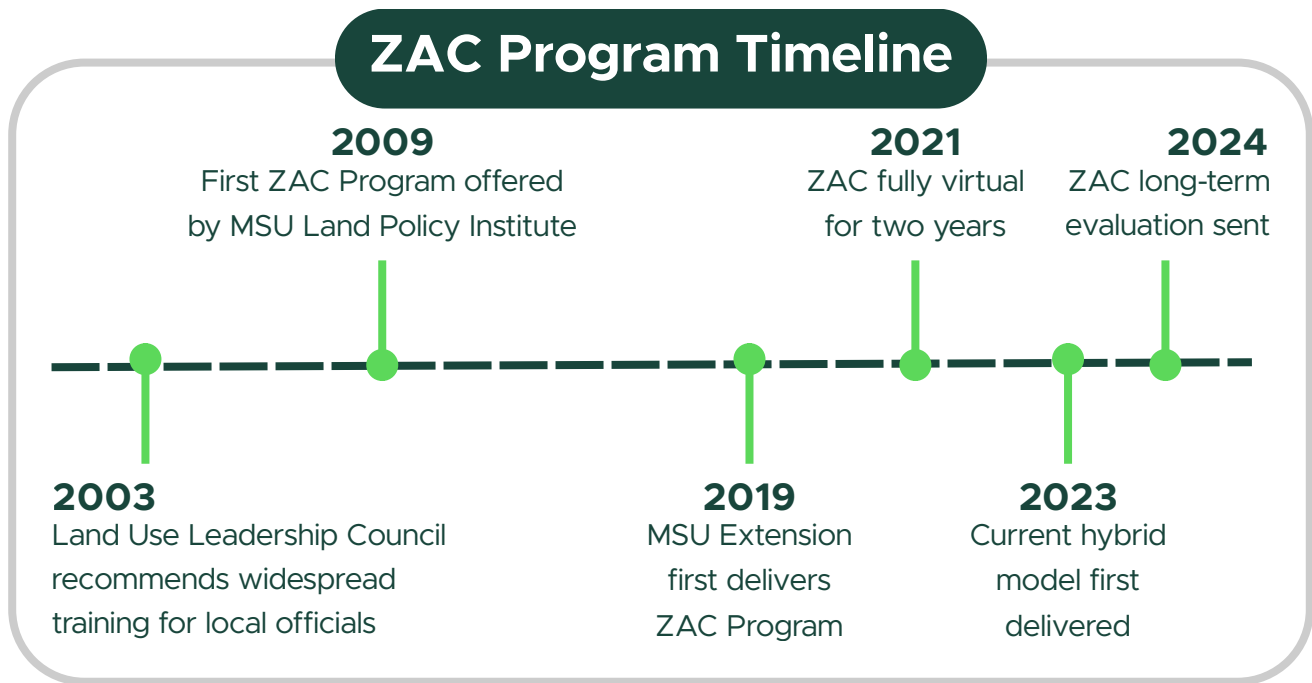


Improve the quality of zoning administration throughout Michigan and the nation.

At launch in 2009, ZAC was offered at three locations in the spring and three in the fall. From 2010 to 2014, the program was conducted twice annually, with the exception of 2012, when it was held once. From 2015 through 2018, the program continued on an annual basis. In 2019, custodianship of ZAC transitioned from the Land Policy Institute to MSU Extension.

**Extension educators, who had been involved in the program's development and delivery since its inception, have since taken the lead in updating, organizing and delivering the program annually.**





ZAC was initially designed as a three-day, in-person intensive training experience. Since first launched, content and delivery improvements have been made incrementally to the program, but the core learning objectives have remained the same. The current format of ZAC is a blend of webinars, self-paced online modules and 1.5 days of in-person training.



To ensure that ZAC participants have the necessary background knowledge to make the most of the training and fully engage with instructors and other participants, they are required to complete MSU Extension's Citizen Planner Program or be certified by the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) of the American Planning Association.

The Citizen Planner Program is an 18-hour certificate program that teaches local officials and staff about planning and zoning roles, responsibilities, and best practices (Michigan State University Extension, n.d.).

ZAC offerings regularly reach capacity with approximately 60 participants attending from across Michigan each year. It also attracts a small number of tribal officials and out-of-state ZAs. The current ZAC curriculum consists of eight modules listed in **Table 1**.

<b>Table 1: Current ZAC Modules</b>
<b>Job Description, Responsibilities and Basic Ethics</b>
<b>Preparing Files, Reports and Record Keeping</b>
<b>Interactions with Other Professionals, Agencies and Departmental Duties</b>
<b>Legal Issues</b>
<b>Reviewing Applications</b>
<b>Customer Service and Counter Behavior</b>
<b>Reviewing Plot Plans and Site Plans</b>
<b>Inspections and Violations</b>

Each year, ZAC is evaluated through immediate (post-program) and medium-term (12-18 months post-program) surveys. These evaluations consistently show that ZAC improves participants' knowledge, skills and confidence in key areas related to zoning administration.



**Short-term evaluations show that over 90% of participants in the last five years (2021-2025) found the program valuable to their professional development.**



Medium-term evaluations document changes in community plans and policies as a result of ZAC. For the 2024 program, a majority of medium-term evaluation respondents, 84% ( $n=19$ ), were more likely to suggest ordinance or process improvements, and almost all, 94% ( $n=19$ ), reported adopting best practices because of participation in ZAC. With documented impact in both the short- and medium-term, similar effects on individuals and the communities in the long-term were expected by the ZAC team.



# Methods

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The goals of this evaluation project were to assess the long-term impact of the Zoning Administrator Certificate Program on past program participants and on communities who have had officials participate in the training, in comparison to nonparticipants and their communities.

**Specifically, the project had two goals with ten associated metrics:**



## **Goal 1**

*Assess the long-term impact of the Zoning Administrator Certificate Program on past program participants, specifically around:*

- ***Feelings of competence and confidence in the job***
- ***Job satisfaction***
- ***Job retention***
- ***Access to employment opportunities***
- ***Access to leadership opportunities***



## **Goal 2**

*Assess the long-term impact of the Zoning Administrator Certificate Program on communities who have had officials participate in the training, specifically around:*

- ***Reduction of a community's legal risk***
- ***Changes to plans, policies or ordinances***
- ***Changes to public engagement efforts***
- ***Effectiveness of boards/commissions***
- ***Quality of life for residents***

These specific areas of impact on individuals and communities were taken from the learning objectives of the program (see **Appendix B** for a full list), common elements of zoning administrator job descriptions and previous evaluation instruments used in MSU Extension land use programs.

Several impacts also align with key indicators shared across MSU Extension, such as access to employment opportunities, access to leadership opportunities, and changes to plans and policies (MSU Extension, 2024).

To assess the long-term impact of ZAC, two surveys were conducted. One survey was developed for program participants, and a second survey was developed for a control group (a random sample of non-participant communities). The two surveys shared a common set of questions as well as some unique items specific to each sample. The survey was conducted in partnership with the MSU Office for Survey Research.

## Survey Instruments

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Respondents in both past participant and control samples were asked to rate their current knowledge or skill level in 12 key areas of zoning administration. They were also asked to provide demographic information such as their current position, community type (large city, suburb near a large city, small city or town, rural area, other area) and the Michigan organizations through which they access professional development. Additional needs assessment questions were also included to inform future land use training programs.

Past program participants were asked a series of questions focused on how ZAC had impacted them and their community. The first question was how much of an impact the program had on their current knowledge or skill level in the 12 key areas of zoning administration. Participants were also asked about the change(s) in their office and/or community that can be linked to ZAC and given an opportunity to qualitatively describe those changes. Lastly, past participants were asked what other topics should be included in ZAC.

The instrument for the control group of non-participants included one unique question describing ZAC and asked respondents about their interest in attending (See **Appendix A** for the survey instrument).

## Study Samples

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The first study sample is made up of past ZAC participants, drawn from ZAC registration data from the 2009-2023 programs. The sample had a total of 545 participants, after removing duplicates and those without current contact information. The initial email inviting past participants to complete the survey was sent on March 27, 2024. Up to four additional reminder emails were sent to this sample (April 10, April 17, April 23, May 6). In total, 148 individuals completed the survey. The overall response rate for past participants was 27.2% (n=545). The past participant sample is also broken down by year of participation in **Table 2**.

**Table 2: ZAC Participation by Year**

ZAC Year	Total ZAC Participants	Sample Respondents	% of Past Participant Sample	% of Past ZAC Cohort Completing Survey
2009	75	13	8.8%	17.3%
2010	18	3	2%	16.6%
2011	26	7	4.7%	26.9%
2012	15	2	1.4%	13.3%
2013	26	7	4.7%	26.9%
2014	27	5	3.4%	18.5%
2015	45	8	5.4%	17.7%
2016	48	12	8.1%	25%
2017	24	7	4.7%	29.1%
2018	34	6	4.1%	17.6%
2019	40	11	7.4%	27.5%
2020	57	11	7.4%	19.3%
2021	43	15	10.1%	34.9%
2022	50	14	9.5%	28%
2023	58	27	18.2%	46.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>586</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>-</b>

The second sample, or control group, was drawn from a list of Michigan local governments with the authority to adopt zoning as defined under the Michigan Zoning Enabling Act that had never sent a participant to ZAC. This list was created by modifying a list of Michigan local governments (counties, townships, villages and cities).

Communities who had sent participants to ZAC in 2009-2023 were then removed (313), leaving a total of 1,543 Michigan communities that had not sent a participant to ZAC.

MSU's Office for Survey Research then drew a random sample of 525 communities from that list and attempted to identify the zoning administrator or person authorized with administering the zoning ordinance (such as a township supervisor, village president, city clerk or city manager) to be the point of contact for the survey. When that individual could not be identified, the survey contact was the highest-ranking elected official in the community if available. This resulted in a control contact list of 503.

The Office for Survey Research sent initial letters on March 26, 2024, to the 503 communities explaining the evaluation project with a web address and QR code to the survey. Communities who had not responded, and for which emails were available, were sent three reminder emails with links to the survey (April 17, April 23, May 6). In total, 126 individuals completed the survey for the overall response rate for the nonparticipant, or control, sample of 25% (n=503).

Both the past participant and control samples were asked to select the role that best describes their current position. These responses are presented in **Table 3**. Overall, the sample of past participants had a greater proportion of zoning related positions (Zoning Administrator, Public Sector Planning, Planning Official, Building Inspector Code Official, Enforcement Role, Other Zoning Official) than the control sample. Conversely, the control sample consisted of a higher proportion of other government officials and a much higher proportion of city managers/township supervisors.

To better understand where a respondent's community generally fits along the rural-to-urban transect (Center for Applied Transect Studies, n.d.), both the past participant and the control samples were asked to self-identify their community type (large city, suburb near a large city, small city or town, rural area, or other). The responses for both are summarized in **Table 4**.

Majorities of both the past participant and control sample respondents identified as rural or small city or town, 72.1% and 85.4%, respectively. The past participant sample included slightly more urban and suburban respondents, 15.7%, than the control sample, 6.4%.

**Table 3: Current Position by Past Participants and Control Group**

Which of the following describes your current position?	Past Participants			Control Group		
	Responses		Percent of Cases	Responses		Percent of Cases
	n	Percent		n	Percent	
Zoning Administrator	90	43%	63%	70	38%	57%
Public Sector Planner, Planning Official	24	12%	17%	12	7%	10%
Other Government Official (Clerk, Trustee, Downtown Development Authority)	23	11%	16%	26	14%	21%
City Manager/Township Supervisor	18	9%	13%	52	28%	42%
Building Inspector/Code Official	17	8%	11%	10	5%	8%
Enforcement Role	15	7%	11%	8	4%	7%
Other Zoning Official	11	5%	8%	0	0%	0%
Other Position	8	4%	6%	2	1%	2%
Private Sector Planner	2	1%	1%	4	2%	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>146%</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>150%</b>

*Continued onto Page 19.*

**Table 4: Community Type by Past Participants and Control Sample**

Which of the following best describes the area where you currently serve?	Past Participants		Control Sample	
	n	%	n	%
Large city	6.0	4.3%	1.0	0.8%
Suburb near a large city	16.0	11.4%	7.0	5.6%
Small city or town	45.0	32.1%	38.0	30.6%
Rural area	56.0	40%	68.0	54.8%
Other area (please specify)	17.0	12.1%	10.0	8.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Analysis

Descriptive statistics were generated for the quantitative data from both samples. Many of the key variables were categorically measured using a five-point scale (1-5, where 1=low and 5=high; or 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree). Qualitative survey responses were inductively coded by two team members independently who then developed a shared common set of categories and themes to apply to responses.

To compare self-reported knowledge and skill levels between the past participant and the control sample, an independent sample t-test was used and statistical significance was calculated at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

# Results and Discussion



## Impact on Program Participants

The first goal for the evaluation was to assess the long-term impact of ZAC on past participants as individuals, specifically around feelings of competence and confidence in the job, job satisfaction and retention, and career and leadership opportunities.

### Competence and Confidence

Past participants were asked to rate their current knowledge or skill level on a 5-point scale (1=Low, 5=High) across 12 key program areas. The responses are summarized in **Table 5**. The mean score was highest for the legal role and responsibilities of zoning administrators (4.48) and lowest for laws and court cases relevant to zoning (3.64).

On average, past participants rated their current knowledge and skills high across all 12 areas, showing that past participants view themselves as competent and confident in performing the role of a zoning administrator.

Across 11 of 12 categories, a high proportion of past participants rated their knowledge or skill as high (5), from 41.3% in developing and maintaining record keeping systems to 58% in reviewing and issuing land use permits by right.

**Table 5:**

#### **Past Participants Assessment Skills/Knowledge in Key Program Areas**

*“Using the scale below, how would you rate your current knowledge or skill level in each of the following areas?”*

	Low 1	2	3	4	High 5	N	Mean	Std. Dev
<b>Conducting field/site visits and inspections.</b>	1.4%	6.3%	12%	35.9%	44.4%	142	4.15	0.96
<b>Developing and maintaining systems for accurate record keeping.</b>	0%	2.1%	14%	42.7%	41.3%	143	4.23	0.77

**Table 5 Contd.**

	Low 1	2	3	4	High 5	N	Mean	Std. Dev
<b>Effectively manage interactions with local government units, external agencies, and stakeholders.</b>	0.7%	0.7%	12.1%	36.2%	50.4%	141	4.35	0.77
<b>Effectively working with elected and appointed boards resulting in productive interactions.</b>	0%	2.8%	9.9%	32.4%	54.9%	142	4.39	0.78
<b>Following appropriate procedures to resolve a zoning violation.</b>	0.7%	2.8%	12.6%	37.1%	46.9%	143	4.27	0.84
<b>Laws and court cases relevant to zoning.</b>	2.1%	9.7%	29%	40.7%	18.6%	145	3.64	0.96
<b>Preparing forms/applications.</b>	0%	2.8%	9.7%	31.9%	55.6%	144	4.4	0.78
<b>Processing applications for board decisions (i.e., special land uses, variances, zoning amendments).</b>	0.7%	4.2%	9.7%	34%	51.4%	144	4.31	0.86
<b>Providing responsive customer support for all stages of the zoning and development process.</b>	0%	0.7%	9.8%	34.3%	55.2%	143	4.44	0.7
<b>Reviewing and issuing land use permits by right.</b>	0.7%	2.9%	8.7%	29.7%	58%	138	4.41	0.83
<b>Reviewing site plans.</b>	0%	3.5%	10.4%	37.5%	48.6%	144	4.31	0.8
<b>The legal role and responsibilities of zoning administrators.</b>	0%	0.7%	4.8%	40.4%	54.1%	146	4.48	0.62

Past participants were then asked to rate how much of an impact their participation in the program had on their current knowledge or skill. The results are summarized in **Table 6** showing that across all 12 areas, ZAC contributed significantly to current knowledge and skills of practicing ZAs.

When looking at how many respondents reported a 4 or 5 impact score, approximately 60-80% of participants reported a high level of impact across the skill sets, with mean scores ranging from 3.73 (conducting field/site visits and inspections) to 4.93 (the legal role and responsibilities of zoning administrators). **The greatest impact was reported in the legal role and responsibilities of zoning administrators, law and court cases relevant to zoning, and reviewing and issuing land use permits by right.**

**Table 6: Contribution of ZAC to Current Knowledge and Skills**

*“How much of an impact did participating in the ZAC Program contribute to your knowledge or skill in each of the following areas?”*

	No Impact 1	2	3	4	Significant Impact 5	Total	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b>Conducting field/site visits and inspections.</b>	5.2%	11.1%	20%	32.6%	31.1%	135	3.73	1.17
<b>Developing and maintaining systems for accurate record keeping.</b>	2.9%	7.2%	20.3%	35.5%	34.1%	138	3.91	1.05
<b>Effectively manage interactions with local government units, external agencies, and stakeholders.</b>	3%	9%	23.9%	38.1%	26.1%	134	3.75	1.04
<b>Effectively working with elected and appointed boards resulting in productive interactions.</b>	3%	9.6%	23.7%	35.6%	28.1%	135	3.76	1.06

**Table 6 Contd.**

	No Impact 1	2	3	4	Significant Impact 5	Total	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b>Following appropriate procedures to resolve a zoning violation.</b>	2.2%	5.8%	22.5%	29.7%	39.9%	138	3.99	1.03
<b>Laws and court cases relevant to zoning.</b>	0.7%	8.7%	15.2%	33.3%	42%	138	4.07	0.99
<b>Preparing forms/applications.</b>	2.9%	5%	20.1%	33.8%	38.1%	139	3.99	1.03
<b>Processing applications for board decisions (i.e., special land uses, variances, zoning amendments).</b>	1.5%	8%	19.7%	32.1%	38.7%	137	3.99	1.02
<b>Providing responsive customer support for all stages of the zoning and development process.</b>	2.9%	7.2%	21%	36.2%	32.6%	138	3.88	1.04
<b>Reviewing and issuing land use permits by right.</b>	1.5%	8.9%	16.3%	33.3%	40%	135	4.01	1.03
<b>Reviewing site plans.</b>	2.9%	5.1%	22.8%	30.1%	39%	136	3.97	1.05
<b>The legal role and responsibilities of zoning administrators.</b>	0.7%	3.6%	9.5%	27.7%	58.4%	137	4.39	0.86

## Job Satisfaction and Retention

Past participants were asked directly if, as a result of the ZAC Program, their overall job satisfaction had increased (1=Strongly disagree to 5=Strongly agree). Of the respondents, 69.3% (n=140) somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that ZAC resulted in increased job satisfaction, with a mean response of 3.96.

A question about ZAC's impact on job retention was not asked directly, but past participants were asked what year they participated in the program. Those results are shown in **Table 2**. The sample is skewed slightly towards more recent program cohorts with 52.6% of the sample having participated in the five years prior to the survey (2019-2023).

That means nearly half of the sample had participated more than 5 years ago and remains engaged enough in planning and zoning to respond to the survey. A full 21.6% of past participants sampled participated more than 10 years before the survey (2009-2013), with 8.8% coming from 2009 — the inaugural year of ZAC and indicating long term retention for ZAC participants in their zoning roles.

## Career and Leadership Opportunities

The evaluation also asked past participants about their opportunities for career advancement. On a scale from one to five (1=Strongly disagree to 5=Strongly agree), 68.3% (n=139) of past participants agreed or strongly agreed that because of ZAC they have had increased opportunities for career advancement.

The career opportunities that ZAC can unlock are further evidenced by communities throughout the state that include completion of the program as a requirement in their zoning administrator job descriptions. ZAC emphasizes the zoning administrator's role as a local leader, in local land use and even more broadly. That point has resonated with past program participants.

**73%**  
OF RESPONDENTS  
(N=141) SAID...

*“As a result of the ZAC program I have taken on more leadership responsibilities in my position and/or in outside organizations/causes I am involved with.”*

## Comparison of Skills and Knowledge Between ZAC Past Participants and Nonparticipants

To further document the impact of ZAC, the self-reported knowledge and skill levels of past program participants were compared to the levels reported by the control sample of nonparticipants. A Mann-Whitney U Test was used to test for any statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the two groups. The results of that analysis are presented in **Table 7**.

Across 10 of the 12 areas, ZAC participants rate their knowledge and confidence statistically significantly higher than the control sample of nonparticipants. The difference in self-reported skill and knowledge levels was largest in the legal roles and responsibilities of zoning administrators, law and court cases relevant to zoning, and reviewing and issuing land use permits by right — all core aspects of a zoning administrator’s role and key to reducing a community’s legal risks. Other areas such as those related to record keeping, resolving zoning violations and reviewing site plans also showed higher self-reported skills among ZAC participants than the control sample.

The two areas where a statistically significant difference was not observed are the areas related to relationships with others, effectively managing interactions with local government units, external agencies and stakeholders, and effectively working with elected and appointed boards resulting in productive interactions.

**Table 7: Comparison between Past Participants and Control Sample for Current Knowledge and Skills**

*“How would you rate your current knowledge or skill level in each of the following areas?”*

	Sample		P Value
	Past Participants n = 148	Control Sample n = 126	
<b>Conducting field/site visits and inspections.</b>	4.15	3.76	0.045*
<b>Developing and maintaining systems for accurate record keeping.</b>	4.23	3.85	0.014*
<b>Effectively manage interactions with local government units, external agencies and stakeholders.</b>	4.35	4.06	0.124

**Table 7 Contd.**

	Sample		P Value
	Past Participants n = 148	Control Sample n = 126	
Effectively working with elected and appointed boards resulting in productive interactions.	4.39	4.19	0.058
Following appropriate procedures to resolve a zoning violation.	4.27	3.86	0.030*
Laws and court cases relevant to zoning.	3.64	3.11	<0.001**
Preparing forms/applications.	4.4	4.01	0.003**
Processing applications for board decisions (i.e., special land uses, variances, zoning amendments).	4.31	4	0.045*
Providing responsive customer support for all stages of the zoning and development process.	4.44	4.09	0.049*
Reviewing and issuing land use permits by right.	4.41	3.91	<0.001**
Reviewing site plans.	4.31	3.89	0.015*
The legal role and responsibilities of zoning administrators.	4.48	3.9	<0.001**

*Means are calculated on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 represents Low and 5 represents High.*

*\*=Significant at the 0.05 level*

*\*\*=Significant at the 0.01 level*

## Impact on Communities

A second area of focus for the evaluation was on broader community-level impacts that might result from better trained zoning administrators. If ZAC increased the knowledge, skills and confidence of local land use leaders, then community level impacts should be visible over the history of the program.

At the community level, the evaluation sought to answer the question: **“Did communities who had officials participate in the ZAC training see changes to community legal risk, plans/policies/ordinances, and public engagement efforts?”**

To assess community level impacts, past program participants selected from a list of possible changes occurring in their office or community as a direct result of their participation in the ZAC Program. Those results are presented in **Table 8**, showing that ZAC has positively impacted Michigan communities by educating zoning administrators.



Three quarters of respondents reported changes in their plans, policies and ordinances, and almost the same amount reported improvements to their local zoning application, review and development process.

About half of respondents indicated that their local government legal risk had been reduced, and that relationships improved with other departments, agencies and the public.



Nearly half of participants also reported more effective meetings as a result of ZAC.



Notably, just over eight percent, or 11 respondents, reported making no changes as a result of attending ZAC. It is not known if those communities needed to make changes or not to decrease legal risk or improve their processes.

**Table 8: Community Changes as a Result of Participation in ZAC**

*“Which of the following, if any, occurred in your community as a direct result of your participation in the ZAC Program?”*

	Responses (n=136)	Percent
<b>Changes in plans, policies, and/or ordinances have been made</b>	102	75%
<b>The application, review and development process has improved</b>	97	71.3%
<b>Legal risk to my community has been reduced in at least one instance</b>	68	50%
<b>Relationships with local government units, external agencies and stakeholders have improved</b>	67	49.3%
<b>Relationships with community members have improved</b>	66	48.5%
<b>Meetings are more effective due to staff leadership and guidance</b>	64	47.1%
<b>We have implemented improvements to protect the environment</b>	31	22.8%
<b>None</b>	11	8.1%
<b>Other impacts</b>	10	8%

## Reduction in Legal Risk



**Half of past participants responded that as a direct result of ZAC, legal risk to the community had been reduced in at least one instance.**

If a past program participant responded that their community had seen a reduction in legal risk or a change in plans/policies because of the program, they were given an opportunity to describe a specific instance of risk reduction or specific change in plans/policies. Three major themes, or categories, were identified through inductive coding and are described in **Table 9**.

**Table 9: Qualitative Response Categories on Reduced Legal Risk**

*“Tell us about an instance in which legal risk to your community was reduced, including any court cases won because of your participation in the ZAC Program.”*

Category	Description	Responses (n=43)	Percent
<b>Took proactive measures to reduce risk</b>	<i>Prevented a lawsuit from occurring, revised zoning ordinance, updated procedures, worked with attorney</i>	32	74.4%
<b>Improved enforcement procedures or effectiveness</b>	<i>Effectively dealt with violations, improved methods and enforcement procedures</i>	7	16.3%
<b>Prevailed in lawsuit or enforcement action</b>	<i>Applied knowledge contributing to successful litigation or enforcement action</i>	4	9.3%

Most responses, 74.4%, were related to proactive actions to reduce a community’s legal risk. **As a result of ZAC, participants reported changes like updating an ordinance, training the Zoning Board of Appeals, better documentation of nonconformities, or more detailed reports that now include findings of fact.**



For example, one respondent reported that their community’s Zoning Board of Appeals was sued over a decision they made, though the case was dismissed with prejudice because of the strong local processes in place because of ZAC. Additional selected responses that describe proactive measures, enforcement, or prevailing in enforcement or lawsuit are shown in **Table 10**.

A smaller group of respondents referenced successful enforcement actions (16.3%), with an emphasis on proactive procedures to reduce legal risk and timely consultation with an attorney. A smaller percentage of respondents indicated they were involved in court action, 9.3%, with all responses indicating they prevailed in court. **Table 10** includes selected qualitative responses demonstrating how participants reduced legal risk through proactive measures, improved enforcement, or prevailing in a lawsuit or enforcement action.

**Table 10:**

**Selected Qualitative Responses on Reduced Legal Risk by Category**

“Tell us about an instance in which legal risk to your community was reduced, including any court cases won because of your participation in the ZAC Program.”

Category	Selected Responses
 <p><b>Took proactive measures to reduce risk</b></p> 	<p><i>Three lawsuits were negated due to ZAC program.</i></p>
	<p><i>Insertion of approval standards to ensure defensible decisions.</i></p>
	<p><i>Proper preparation of Findings of Facts has been important in several contentious issues and have been incorporated in court cases.</i></p>
	<p><i>We have revised our ordinance to remove inconsistencies.</i></p>
	<p><i>Being up to date on laws, makes [it] easier to stay out of court.</i></p>
<p><i>We recently implemented a cluster housing ordinance. This ordinance was untested at the time I took the ZAC Program. We have had our first application, and it was approved, and now we are getting sued. The legal risk was reduced by ZAC instruction on when and how to work with legal counsel.</i></p>	

**Table 10: Contd.**

Category	Selected Responses
<p><b>Improved enforcement procedures or effectiveness</b></p>	<p><i>Because of my ZAC training, I had the knowledge to consult with the local attorney on a matter involving a home being constructed without a permit on a lake. With my knowledge gained from the training and working with the attorney, we reduced the legal risk and resolved the situation regarding a \$1.5 million home.</i></p>
	<p><i>The ability to present cases in an effective manner in which to show that a violation did indeed occur.</i></p>
<p><b>Prevailed in lawsuit or enforcement action</b></p>	<p><i>A resident was using property zoning R-1 as commercial property and operating a junk yard. A court case was initiated and won as a result of zoning ordinances and communication with the resident.</i></p>
	<p><i>The build was different than the site plan had indicated and that I had seen and discussed at the site visit. Resulted in a court case and modification to the build.</i></p>

## Changes in Plans, Practices, Policies and Behaviors

Past participants reporting changes in plans, policies, practices or behaviors as result of ZAC were prompted to provide a specific example. The evaluation team coded the responses into six categories summarized in **Table 11**.



**Improvements to process, policy and procedure were reported most, 30.3%, followed by enhanced communication and engagement, 18%.**

**Table 12** presents selected qualitative responses on changes made to plans, practices, policies and behaviors. For instance, one respondent noted, **“We have just updated the zoning ordinance that was in place for 40 years,”** highlighting an ordinance or master plan update. Another response illustrates a shift in policies and procedures: **“We changed the dynamics of our Zoning Board of Appeals, our zoning application, and criteria that we require for permit applications all while making it as easy as possible for our property owners.”**

**Table 11: Qualitative Response Categories for Changes in Plans, Practices, Policies, and Behaviors**

*“Tell us about a change (e.g., plans, practices, behavior, policy, etc.) that took place because of your participation in the ZAC Program.”*

Category	Description	# (n=89)	%
<b>Process, Policy, Procedure</b>	Improved site plan review process, documentation of policies and procedures, updated job descriptions, streamlined zoning process	27	30.3%
<b>Communication, Engagement</b>	Improved verbal, written, or website communications with landowners, applicants, the public, boards. Prompt communication.	16	18%
<b>Forms, Applications, Checklists</b>	Updated permit applications, permit forms, checklists	13	14.6%
<b>Ordinance or Master Plan Updates</b>	Updated or revised zoning ordinance, updated Master Plan, compliance with the Michigan Zoning Enabling Act (MZEA)	13	14.6%
<b>Record Keeping</b>	Improved record keeping, file organization, cross-referencing of records, spreadsheets, documentation	11	12.4%
<b>Enforcement</b>	Improved enforcement procedures, expanded code enforcement, stopped trespassing, consistency, communication with violators	9	10.1%

**Table 12: Selected Qualitative Responses on Changes in Plans, Practices, Policies and Behaviors**

*“Tell us about a change (e.g., plans, practices, behavior, policy, etc.) that took place because of your participation in the ZAC Program.”*

Category	Selected Responses
<p><b>Process, Policy, Procedure</b></p>	<p><i>Revised the site plan application process.</i></p>
	<p><i>We changed the dynamics of our Zoning Board of Appeals, our zoning application and criteria that we require for permit applications, all while making it as easy as possible for our property owners.</i></p>
<p><b>Communication, Engagement</b></p>	<p><i>Practices to return phone calls ASAP regardless of the issue, working with people.</i></p>
	<p><i>I gained confidence to assert my knowledge of the ordinances and not get steam rolled by applicants or board members.</i></p>
	<p><i>I [started] doing a pretty detailed staff report for all special land uses that has gotten a lot of positive feedback from the Planning Commission.</i></p>
<p><b>Forms, Applications, Checklists</b></p>	<p><i>All permit applications have been redone — our old permits didn't contain most of the relevant information needed to make a decision. Created checklists to make inspections fair for common zoning permits. Our entire zoning ordinances is being redone and everything is being questioned for intent and purpose.</i></p>
<p><b>Ordinance or Master Plan Updates</b></p>	<p><i>Master Plan reviewed and updated. Planning Commission members attended training after seeing the benefits of 'knowing what we are REALLY doing.'</i></p>
	<p><i>We have just updated the zoning ordinance that was in place for 40 years.</i></p>
<p><b>Record Keeping</b></p>	<p><i>Better applications and file organization and improved process were the main result of the training.</i></p>
<p><b>Enforcement</b></p>	<p><i>Consistently enforcing ordinances has not been done in the past. Realizing the importance of consistency is paying off.</i></p>

# Conclusion

**Zoning administrators serve a unique and vital role in Michigan’s local governments. Since first being offered in 2009, the Zoning Administrator Certificate Program (ZAC) has delivered high-impact professional development tailored to this audience.**

Short- and medium-term impacts of ZAC on individual learning and behavior changes are well-documented with annual participant evaluations. This retrospective evaluation demonstrates that, in addition, ZAC has long-term impacts on participants themselves and for the communities they serve.

Specifically, ZAC participants rated their knowledge and skills significantly higher in 10 of 12 key areas of zoning administration, as compared to those who had not attended the program.



**Past program participants rated their knowledge the highest in a fundamental area of zoning administration – the legal role and responsibilities of zoning administrators – and attributed that knowledge gain to the program.**

Half of the past ZAC participants surveyed reported reducing legal risk for their community. This risk reduction primarily came through new, proactive actions to reduce risk like:



**KEEPING  
ORDINANCES  
UP TO DATE**



**PROPERLY  
DOCUMENTING  
DECISIONS**



**BASING  
DECISIONS ON  
STANDARDS**

Individual knowledge, skill and confidence outcomes result in community-level impacts, too. Three-quarters of past participants reported changes in plans, policies, practices, or behaviors as a result of ZAC.

## Impacts of MSU Extension's Zoning Administrator Certificate Program

Over 71% (n=97) reported improvements to the application, review and development process because of the program. Other changes range from providing better customer service and creating new forms to fully rewriting zoning ordinances.

While this evaluation documents the impact of ZAC, it does have several limitations. Chief among them are the limitations inherent in long-term analysis, especially for municipal officials. There is frequently turnover in zoning administrator positions, making contacting all past participants a challenge.

This evaluation serves as clear evidence of the impact of ZAC on land use decision makers and their communities. If areas for growth were to be identified for the program, the results seem to indicate that more focus needs to be paid to how zoning administrators can improve working relationships with elected officials and other agencies and departments. This survey also highlights how many communities in Michigan have not had staff participate in ZAC, but there is interest in the program after reading a description. In the years ahead, the ZAC team will be looking into ways to expand the capacity and reach of this program.



**This retrospective evaluation shows a continuing need for programs like ZAC in Michigan. Among the control sample who had not participated in ZAC, 62.7% (n=118) were highly interested in attending a future program.**

**With proven outcomes and sustained interest, MSU Extension's Zoning Administrator Certificate Program provides enduring value for local leadership to positively shape the future of Michigan communities.**





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